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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 7 February 2024

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

Portfolio Question Time

Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time. The first portfolio is the wellbeing economy, fair work and energy. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. There is quite a bit of interest in supplementaries, so I make the usual plea for brevity in questions and in responses.

Business Confidence and Promotion of Entrepreneurship

1. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it will take in the next financial year to boost the confidence of those operating in the business sector and to promote entrepreneurship. (S6O-03054)

I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I own shares in commercial properties, from which I receive no remuneration. I have no running businesses.

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government is fully committed to boosting the confidence of our business sector by establishing Scotland as a world-class entrepreneurial nation, which is underpinned by our 10-year economic strategy.

We absolutely believe in the potential for Scotland to be recognised as one of the best countries in which to start and grow a business. We continue to support entrepreneurship, with more than £13 million of funding allocated in the next financial year, and we have also provided £307 million to our enterprise agencies.

Pam Gosal: Research carried out by Survation found that many Scots are increasingly looking beyond Scotland for job opportunities, thanks to the Scottish National Party's higher taxes. Self-employed people and business owners were the most likely to think about the shift, with 47 per cent saying that they would consider relocating.

Does the minister accept that the First Minister's vaunted new deal for business is not working? What action will the minister take to make Scotland an attractive location to live and work in?

Richard Lochhead: In the past few days, I have spoken to a number of businesses in Scotland that are expanding and recruiting more people. They are very confident about the future, particularly in many of the tech sectors and in energy transition areas of the economy. It is an exciting time just now in parts of the Scottish economy, and I do not think that we should talk Scotland down as an attractive location for people to live and work in.

We are also finding that many people are relocating to Scotland, particularly from London. I have spoken to companies that are recruiting well from London because people want to move to Scotland for the quality of life and for the other benefits of Scottish Government policies.

Of course, we must pay close attention to the issues that the member has raised and to the views of the business community. Our new deal for business is the best forum for doing that at the current time, and we are listening carefully to what businesses are saying.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): In the next financial year, businesses in the hospitality sector south of the border in the United Kingdom will receive 75 per cent rates relief; here, they will receive zero relief. Given that those businesses—including hotels, pubs, restaurants and some visitor attractions such as bingo clubs in my constituency—incur major debt to survive the lockdown during Covid, that is a serious competitive disadvantage. Will the minister urge the Scottish Government, in the forthcoming budget, to match that lifeline rates relief for Scotland's hospitality sector?

Richard Lochhead: I thank Fergus Ewing for highlighting the challenges that many hospitality businesses in Scotland face at the moment. It is a mixed picture. I have spoken to many hospitality businesses that are expanding and are investing significant amounts of resource for the future. I have just returned from a tourism summit in Islay, where I spoke to many local businesses. There are many challenges on Islay, and throughout the whole country, in the hospitality sector. However, under Scottish Government policy, we estimate that 63 per cent of hospitality businesses will not pay any rates whatsoever. Of course, as part of the current arrangements, the budget extends to relief for island hospitality businesses, to help to address the particular challenges that many of our islands are facing.

We continue to look at all those issues, but we face a very difficult budget settlement from the UK

Government, so we cannot achieve everything that we would like to achieve in the draft budget. Many of the factors that the hospitality sector has expressed to me relate to increased raw material costs due to inflation, increased interest rates and increased energy bills, so the source of the problem is very much at the UK level. We continue to bring those matters to the UK Government's attention, as well.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for briefer supplementary questions and responses.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): There is a good deal of concern about the impact that the draft budget will have on our enterprise agencies. Will the minister outline how many businesses were supported by enterprise agencies in the past year as compared with pre-Covid times?

Richard Lochhead: I am happy to look into that. As I am sure that the member would have expected, I do not have the figures to hand. However, I met enterprise agencies this morning and they were pointing to some of the significant success of companies that they have been supporting over the past year. I expect official statistics for that to be released in the coming weeks.

Our enterprise companies are carrying out a great deal of fantastic work supporting our business community in Scotland. That is why our exports and inward investment projects in Scotland are doing very well compared with the rest of the UK. The enterprise companies are doing a fine job supporting the business community.

Energy Networks (Discussions with United Kingdom Government)

2. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding actions that can be taken to preserve energy networks following periods of bad weather. (S6O-03055)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): As the member rightly outlines, policy and regulation of energy networks in the UK, including their operation, maintenance and resilience, are reserved to the UK Government.

Scottish Government officials maintain regular contact with UK Government counterparts on energy network resilience topics. Last week, Scottish Government resilience division officials attended a UK Department for Energy Security and Net Zero meeting at which winter energy risk and disruption contingency planning were discussed.

We are also working with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, the National Grid electricity system operator and the industry on reforms to and expansion of the electricity grid, so that electricity networks are robust, effective and work for Scotland.

Foyso Choudhury: Storm Isha saw thousands across Scotland lose power, with some people not being reconnected for more than a day. That greatly impacted those with disabilities or mobility issues who require electrical equipment to live and complete tasks in their homes. What discussion has the Scottish Government had with the energy networks in Scotland regarding additional help and reimbursement for those who have additional needs, when they are left without power due to energy disruption and blackouts?

Gillian Martin: Foyso Choudhury outlined a situation that I brought up as a back bencher following the aftermath of storm Arwen, when many thousands of people in my constituency had no power for seven days. I am always keen to pick up that issue with the operators. We had a constructive meeting with SSE plc and Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks—I think that that was last week—on their rolling maintenance programmes for lines, and for preventing damage to those lines in storms, which includes tree cutting, as well as on their work to update their vulnerable customer registers so that they know when to step in and help people who have vulnerabilities such as those that the member outlined.

Great work is being done by local authorities, police services, fire services, healthcare services, and response and resilience services working with electricity suppliers to learn lessons from storm Arwen and subsequent storms. Furthermore, last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing, Fair Work and Energy and I had a discussion with the electricity system operator on reforms and expansion of the network.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sarah Boyack to ask a very brief supplementary.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): The minister did not mention our railway network. Given its increasing electrification, what work is being done to have a cross-UK discussion to ensure that the electricity supply to our railway network is reliable and resilient?

Gillian Martin: I am happy to refer that question to Fiona Hyslop, who has responsibility for transport. However, Sarah Boyack makes a good point. Increasingly, as we move towards further electrification of our network, we need to take resilience planning into account.

Town Centres (Support)

3. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): First, I declare an interest: I am a trustee of the charity Spirit of Springburn, which is currently active in its efforts to develop a local place plan for the area that will help to boost town centre regeneration, which is relevant to the question that I am asking.

To ask the Scottish Government how its cities strategy supports town centres within cities to be vibrant destinations, which offer a range of services and amenities to support the community. (S6O-03056)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): We are committed to supporting the vibrancy of our towns within cities as we continue to implement the world-leading town centre first principle and support progress through the town centre action plan. That plan is our call to action, locally and nationally, to revitalise our towns and support the delivery of enterprising communities and town centre living.

In collaboration with Scotland's Town Partnership, we support the Scotland Loves Local campaign, which aims to encourage people back into local towns, to increase footfall and, ultimately, to support businesses to offer diverse services and amenities for local communities, which is an economic multiplier.

Bob Doris: I welcome that, but for city-based town centres the pull of city centres and the lure of out-of-town shopping create a significant double challenge, particularly in areas with high levels of deprivation. What account does the city strategy take of the challenges that are faced by town centres within cities, such as in Springburn in my constituency? Are dedicated funds available to support them, such as the former town centre regeneration fund, which previously benefited Maryhill in my constituency?

Neil Gray: I recognise Bob Doris's long-standing interest in the issue, given his work for the Maryhill Burgh Halls and the continuing programmes of work that he supports in his constituency.

As I have said, we continue to support our world-leading town centre first principle as a joint commitment to encourage people back into towns and to put the health of our town centres at the heart of decision making. That is underpinned by the fourth national planning framework, which recognises towns within our cities as national assets and seeks to promote and facilitate development. I understand that Glasgow City Council has established a local place plan development fund to support communities to develop local place plans. That will be ever more

important as the role and usage of town centres change with people's changing shopping habits.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am deeply disappointed to learn today that the latest round of the regeneration capital grant fund has been put on hold due to the announced cut in capital spending on that fund from £62 million to £45 million. That will affect four projects in Glasgow, including one that I chair, the Springburn Winter Gardens Trust, which has applied for essential capital funding. What will the minister do to expedite decisions on funding and ensure that the capital fund for critical programmes is protected?

Neil Gray: Mr Sweeney will understand the financial landscape in which the Scottish Government is operating. A 10 per cent cut to our capital budget coming down the line and increased costs against capital allocations because of inflation make some projects very difficult to progress. He will understand that a review of all the projects by the Deputy First Minister is under way.

I understand the importance that Mr Sweeney places on the fund, and I recognise the good work that it can do. We will continue to keep it under review to ensure that our town centres can continue to receive our support.

South of Scotland Enterprise (Four-day Working Week Pilot)

4. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has held with South of Scotland Enterprise regarding any preliminary analysis of the outcome of its recently implemented four-day working week pilot. (S6O-03057)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): The aim of the four-day working week public sector pilot is to assess the environmental health and wellbeing benefits and efficiency gains that a four-day working week could bring. The pilot will ensure that meaningful insights are gained into the benefits and risks of a four-day working week approach.

The Scottish Government has held one high-level discussion with South of Scotland Enterprise on the future interim evaluation of its four-day week pilot. The meeting did not cover details of the results, as the interim evaluation is still pending completion and analysis by SOSE and Autonomy, which is the expert partner organisation.

Emma Harper: I met the SOSE leadership team on Friday last week and heard how the pilot is already beginning to boost staff morale, increase productivity and contribute to greater wellbeing in the workplace. Will the cabinet secretary comment

on the ways in which the Government is working with business to show the evidence on whether a four-day working week is beneficial?

Neil Gray: Conversations with business employer organisations on a more flexible approach to the employment market continue. We hold forums, including through the new deal for business group, to look at the economic impacts of a more flexible labour market approach. We also look at its impact on the trading environment of those organisations, as the approach could provide them with access to a wider pool of potential employees because of the greater flexibility that it could offer. Obviously, commercial decisions will be made by individual employers, but those discussions will continue.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): What additional costs will SOSE incur from its limited budget as a consequence of implementing the policy? What assessment has been made of how much it would cost were the policy to be implemented across the entire Scottish Government and its agencies?

Neil Gray: I note Ivan McKee's long-standing interest in this area. SOSE has not incurred any direct costs from volunteering to participate in the pilot. There are small staffing costs related to the time that is devoted to engagement with Autonomy, which is the expert partner supporting the work. The pilot will ensure that meaningful insights are gained on the benefits and risks of a four-day working week approach but, as it is a pilot, no assessment has been made of the cost to implement the policy across other public sector bodies, including the Scottish Government.

International Exports (Support for Growth)

5. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the growth of international exports. (S6O-03058)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): The publication "A Trading Nation—a plan for growing Scotland's exports" guides our approach to increasing Scotland's international exports. As part of that plan, we have added more international trade specialists, nearly doubled the GlobalScot network, increased our trade envoy network from four to 11 and run a programme of major events at events such as the Dubai expo, COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—and COP28.

In 2022-23, Scottish Enterprise support helped to achieve £1.73 billion of projected export sales. There are sector export plans on technology, life sciences and other key sectors. We have worked with the Scottish Chambers of Commerce on

delivering 100 trade missions under the programme that we have with it, generating £20 million in projected export sales.

Audrey Nicoll: In recent weeks, we have seen more of the same from the fallout of Brexit. A trade deal with Canada has broken down and, although new import controls have constrained Scotland, our neighbours and friends in Northern Ireland, who also voted to remain in the European Union, get a completely different deal. Over the weekend, we have also seen that, because of Brexit, even a former Scottish Labour leader voted for the Scottish National Party during the European elections. Does the minister agree that that demonstrates not only that the Tory UK Government is making up its Brexit policy as it goes along but that Labour cannot be trusted to stand up for Scotland on this highly important issue?

Richard Lochhead: Audrey Nicoll is correct. Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster for Scotland. Although we expect the Tories not to support Scotland on this issue, it is particularly disappointing that the Labour Party will continue with its pro-Brexit policy, which is causing so much damage to Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Also disappointing are the exchanges between members on the Labour and SNP front benches, which will cease.

Richard Lochhead: So much for a union of equals. We are paying close attention to the welcome progress in Northern Ireland, while recognising that the barriers to trade do not exist there under the current proposals, whereas Scotland, which likewise voted against Brexit, will continue to have barriers in trading with Europe. That is completely unacceptable. Many businesses the length and breadth of Scotland are suffering as a result of Brexit, which we voted against.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): If the SNP is so keen to support international exports, why has it opposed every trade deal that has been done by the United Kingdom Government?

Richard Lochhead: I recall very well that a former rural affairs secretary in the UK Government spoke out against his Government's trade deals, such as the deal with New Zealand and other countries, because those deals betrayed Scotland's farmers and rural industries. As the UK Government goes round with the begging bowl post-Brexit, trying to get deals at any cost, it is important that the Government in Scotland remains vigilant in standing up for Scottish industries and making sure that they are not betrayed by the Tory Government.

City Centres (Large Retail Stores)

6. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government whether, as part of the implementation of the recommendations of the city centre recovery task force report, the role of larger retail stores in city centres is being considered. (S6O-03059)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

The implementation of the recommendations in the task force report is led by the Scottish Cities Alliance, of which the Scottish Government is a member. The report identifies seven priority outcomes to ensure that city centres have a strong and vibrant offer to attract visitors, residents and tourists, as I referred to in answer to a previous question. It did not consider the detail of the role of larger retail stores.

Retail is an important component of a vibrant city centre economy. Our retail strategy encourages our retailers to promote city centres as retail and cultural destinations.

Roz McCall: According to the Scottish Retail Consortium, larger retail stores employ a high share of retail jobs and provide a significant share of low-cost everyday essentials for customers. Shops that are liable for the higher property rate have been paying more than their English counterparts for the past eight years, and now there is a threat of a rates surtax on grocers.

Given that the city centre recovery task force report already emphasises the need for out-of-town larger retail stores to be restricted and the prominence of large department stores on Scottish high streets, why does the cabinet secretary believe that Scottish stores are better placed than their counterparts down south to pay more rates?

Neil Gray: I assume that Roz McCall still supports the austerity agenda that has been the hallmark of the United Kingdom Government's policies over the past decade and a half. That has pushed us into having to look at broadening our revenue base. Discussions with the likes of the Scottish Retail Consortium are on-going. Indeed, the Deputy First Minister, Tom Arthur and I are due to meet the Scottish Retail Consortium this afternoon as part of the consultation on a retail surtax.

On non-domestic rates, 95 per cent of businesses in Scotland pay less in rates than businesses elsewhere in the UK pay, and the small business bonus scheme means that 100,000 business properties in Scotland are taken out of paying rates altogether.

Even in a difficult financial landscape, which has been made worse by decisions that have been taken at UK level, we are still investing in and

supporting the trading landscape for businesses in Scotland.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands)

(SNP): The city centre recovery task force is supporting Scotland's eight city centres at a time when businesses are facing increases in the cost of food and goods as a result of new import controls. The UK Government estimates that new Brexit red tape will cost businesses an extra £330 million a year. Seven years after Scotland rejected Brexit, what is the Scottish Government's assessment of its impact on retail and businesses?

Neil Gray: Business survey data shows that many businesses in the retail and wholesale sector continue to report additional costs due to Brexit, with 30 per cent of businesses in Scotland reporting additional costs—21 per cent said that there were additional costs due to red tape, 14 per cent reported higher transportation costs and 9 per cent faced extra tariffs. Brexit is directly responsible for that.

Clearly, the position with imports and exports varies by sector, but I am still to hear a positive view of Brexit from a business and economic perspective; there are only negatives. It is clear that, whichever party is returned to government after the UK general election, the economic pain will continue, because Labour and the Conservatives are signed up to a Brexit Britain future and the economic drag that Brexit causes. Independence is the only way back into the European Union.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Funding) (Women in Business)

7. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):

To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of the reduction in funding for Highlands and Islands Enterprise on women in business. (S6O-03060)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

We have prioritised funding for Highlands and Islands Enterprise to the extent that is possible, given the extremely challenging settlement, but the reduction in its budget will require it to revisit its plans for 2024-25 and to be rigorous in deciding what activity it can support. I know that HIE will continue to make a key contribution to achieving the Government's objectives, including through its support for women in business. I have had regular engagement with the chair and the chief executive in recent months, and I will meet them again shortly to discuss how we can continue to work together to achieve our joint ambitions of boosting investment, accelerating opportunities across the region and maximising the impact of available resources.

Beatrice Wishart: Shetland is rightly proud of its world-famous textile and knitwear heritage, and Shetland wool week attracts knitters from around the globe to the islands each autumn. HIE faces further cuts to its budget, which, in total, will have been cut by 40 per cent since 2018-19. There is significant concern that funding will not be available for small women-led businesses in the creative industries in Shetland to help them to address the current threat to their businesses. Changes in the operation of the textile facilitation unit at UHI Shetland mean that individual local producers face a serious challenge to continue the production of their innovative designs, which are very much in demand. What can the Scottish Government do to ensure that HIE is in a position to support women in business who want to keep that traditional sector alive?

Neil Gray: Beatrice Wishart makes a very fair point. The market has changed, and the popularity of traditional knitwear such as Fair Isle ganseys is evident and growing. Indeed, the offering from your constituency, Deputy Presiding Officer, is also evident. I am well aware of that. I will continue to work with Highlands and Islands Enterprise on what can be done to support that export potential and to ensure that those businesses, which are largely women led, as Beatrice Wishart pointed out, continue to be supported.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): In advancing the arguments that Beatrice Wishart put forward about encouraging more women to enter business, is the Government prepared to engage in dialogue with Women's Enterprise Scotland to make use of the formidable resources, skills and capacity that it has to offer on that agenda?

Neil Gray: Yes, absolutely. I give John Swinney the assurance that, as he would expect, I have already had significant engagement with Women's Enterprise Scotland and that I will continue to look at what more can be done to support women-led businesses and at how—through Ana Stewart's report, "Pathways: A New Approach for Women in Entrepreneurship"—we can encourage a greater proportion of women to start their own businesses in the first place. We have invested millions of pounds over the past year and for this coming year in achieving that.

Fair Work (Progress Against Benchmarks)

8. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress against the five fair work benchmarks in the national strategy for economic transformation. (S6O-03061)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government reports on progress on the national strategy for economic transformation

through its annual reports. The most recent, from June 2023, showed that, in 2022, 94.1 per cent of employees were in contractually secure employment and 35.4 per cent were affected by collective bargaining arrangements.

Updated estimates are available for the gender pay gap, which was 1.7 per cent for full-time employees in 2023. Estimates released last month indicate 89.9 per cent of employees aged 18 and over earned above the real living wage in Scotland last year. The latest employment rate in Scotland was 74.4 per cent for September to November 2023.

Jackie Baillie: It is disappointing that the SNP Government has decided to cut the £10 million flexible workforce development fund, a key intervention to support upskilling across the Scottish economy. As a result, some 2,000 employers and 45,000 learners will miss out on training opportunities from April.

Stephen Montgomery, director of the Scottish Hospitality Group, said that losing the fund

"is another sucker blow for many hospitality businesses who used and relied on this fund to develop career paths for their employees. It was seen for many employers as a great aid for recruitment and giving training for career progression, and it is essential that Scottish Government rethink this budget cut".

Does the cabinet secretary agree with that statement, or does he think that Stephen Montgomery and many businesses, trade unions and colleges are simply wrong?

Neil Gray: I have received that representation and I understand the challenges that people face. I hope that Jackie Baillie understands the challenges that the Government faces as it has to take very difficult decisions in the financial landscape that we are entering.

I presume that that is the first of the Labour Party's representations on the budget, because I believe that that has not yet arrived. If that is an area that Jackie Baillie wishes to see changed in the budget, we look forward to discussions on that. The Deputy First Minister is more than willing to have those discussions on a constructive basis.

In Scotland, we have lower unemployment, a narrower gender pay gap and the highest proportion of workers who are paid at least the real living wage. That is because of the investments that we are making compared with elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and we will continue to provide that support so that we have a strong workforce for employers in the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. My apologies to those members whom I was unable to call. That concludes portfolio questions on the wellbeing economy, fair work and energy.

There will be a brief pause before we move to the next portfolio, to allow the front benches to change.

Finance and Parliamentary Business

14:28

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is finance and parliamentary business. Again, there is a lot of interest, so members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant questions but should be brief in their questions. The responses should also be as brief as possible.

I advise members that questions 1 and 8 have been grouped together. I will take any supplementary questions after questions 1 and 8 have been asked and answered.

Budget 2024-25 (Local Authorities)

1. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has allocated to local authorities from its 2024-25 budget. (S6O-03062)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): The Scottish Government is providing record funding of more than £14 billion to local authorities, including funding for the council tax freeze. We have also allocated an increasing share of the discretionary Scottish budget to the local government settlement for 2024-25, highlighting the importance that the Scottish Government places on our local services.

Neil Bibby: The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance's budget spin has been "misleading". Meanwhile, the finance secretary told me in this very chamber on 1 November 2023 that the Government took advice from civil servants

"in the normal manner"—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2023; 21.]

regarding the council tax freeze announcement at the Scottish National Party conference. It has subsequently been revealed by *The Daily Record* that civil servants were, in fact, given just seven hours' notice.

Does the minister agree with the comments that the finance secretary made to me in the chamber in November? If so, how can he stand up with any credibility and say that the decision was made in the "normal" way and expect us to believe it?

Joe FitzPatrick: There are two points there. I need to first unpack the point about the IFS. The

Scottish Government brings forward its draft budget in line with the recommendations of this Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee, comparing the draft budget to the draft budget.

On the council tax freeze, Labour members need to put their hands up and tell us what they actually think. The people of Scotland are absolutely clear that, in these difficult times, a council tax freeze is absolutely crucial. The question for Mr Bibby is whether he and his Labour colleagues support a council tax freeze or putting council tax up across Scotland.

Neil Bibby: I am asking you the question.

Joe FitzPatrick: Will he back the people of Scotland, or does he want to increase the council tax?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As in the previous portfolio, we will have the questions asked and then answered without the person who has asked a question providing a running commentary.

Budget 2024-25 (Local Authorities)

8. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration is being given to increasing the funding settlement for local authorities. (S6O-03069)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Despite a worst-case autumn statement that did not prioritise public services, the budget delivers record funding for local government. We will continue to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities through the Verity house agreement to ensure the sustainability of local services.

We will continue to work with local government throughout the year ahead to ensure that we are able to provide the services that the people of Scotland want and need.

Katy Clark: It is not only the Institute for Fiscal Studies that is challenging the Scottish Government's figures; COSLA also says that local government is facing a real-terms cut, given significant cuts to both core revenue and capital budgets, and that using reserves is not financially stable. Its figures are confirmed by the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Will the minister revisit the funding settlement?

Joe FitzPatrick: The starting point is to go back to my point that the budget figures that we produce are in line with the requirements of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

We know that this has been an absolutely disastrous settlement for Scotland from the United Kingdom Government. Instead of backing up the Tories and saying that the Scottish Government needs to find more money from within that limited budget, surely Katy Clark will join the Scottish Government and call on the UK Government to use the spring budget to prioritise public services, to ensure that there is more money for Scotland, including Scottish local services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementaries.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the minister advise whether any Opposition party has come forward with alternative budget proposals, costed or otherwise, that would increase local authority funding? Given that Labour plans to have a bomb-proof UK manifesto that will mimic the Tories—with whom Labour is already in de facto coalition in Edinburgh, Fife, North and South Lanarkshire, Stirling, and West Lothian—has the minister had any indication whatsoever that a change in UK Government will mean greater resources being made available to the Scottish Government to allocate to our local authorities?

Joe FitzPatrick: On the first point, the Deputy First Minister has confirmed to me that there have been no suggestions from the Labour Party about how the Scottish Government could further increase the share of resource that is going to local government this year. There has been absolutely nothing.

On the wider point, Mr Gibson makes a very strong point. The Deputy First Minister met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury two weeks ago and made it clear that the UK Government needs to prioritise investment in public services over tax cuts in the forthcoming UK spring budget. Surely it is not unreasonable to expect support from not only those on the benches behind us but colleagues right across the chamber in calling for more spending for public services rather than tax cuts for the rich.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In its budget briefing yesterday, COSLA complained bitterly that the multiyear funding settlement, as set out in the Scottish Government's medium-term financial strategy, has not yet been delivered. When will it be?

Joe FitzPatrick: I think that everyone knows that multiyear settlements would be better. However, given the massive uncertainty that we have in relation to the funding that this Parliament and this Government get from the UK Government, it would be disingenuous to give further multiyear settlements that are built on sand.

Budget 2024-25 (Inverclyde Council)

2. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what dialogue it has had with Inverclyde Council regarding the Scottish budget for 2024-25. (S6O-03063)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Scottish Government ministers and officials meet regularly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities to discuss a range of issues. The Scottish Government has had extensive engagement with COSLA on behalf of all 32 local authorities in regard to the 2024-25 local government finance settlement.

Stuart McMillan: The minister will be aware of the social and economic challenges that those in my constituency face. I will always advocate for more money to go to Inverclyde Council, as I recognise the consequence of the COSLA-agreed funding formula, which only exacerbates our issues with population decline and deprivation, as it is heavily weighted towards an area's population level. Can the minister indicate whether there is any scope for additional resource to go to Inverclyde Council? It is receiving a 4.8 per cent budget increase, which is lower than those of most other affluent council areas in Scotland, due to the aforementioned COSLA funding formula.

Joe FitzPatrick: Stuart McMillan is a strong advocate for his constituency, but it is important to acknowledge the role that deprivation plays in the funding formula and to recognise that Inverclyde Council continues to receive funding that is equivalent to £159 per head, which is 6.2 per cent more than the Scottish average and is equivalent to £12.3 million more overall than it would receive if funded at the Scottish average.

The Scottish Government remains committed to strengthening the Inverclyde economy, and it is considering investment proposals from the Inverclyde task force with that aim. The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade is due to attend the next task force meeting, on 20 February. As the member mentioned, the wider formula for distribution is a matter for COSLA. The Scottish Government is always keen to hear suggestions on that, but any action has to be taken in collaboration with COSLA.

National Care Service (Cost)

3. Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has made of the potential impact on its medium-term financial strategy and future Scottish budgets of reports that the cost of a national care service could rise to £2 billion. (S6O-03064)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): Our medium-term financial strategy will be updated later this year, and the medium-term financial framework for health and social care will be published this spring.

The cost of the national care service is continually reviewed, as is demonstrated by the recent update on the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill that was provided to the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

The £2 billion is quoted as a cost forecast for the bill, as introduced, over 10 years, and it does not reflect the proposed Government amendments for a new shared-accountability approach to delivery, so the figures that are quoted are therefore outdated. The update clearly sets out that, should Parliament accept the amendments at stage 2, the costs of implementing the national care service will reduce substantially to between £238 million and £345 million over 10 years. Finally, the bill also includes a commitment to breaks for carers, the cost of which would be between £393 million and £571 million over 10 years.

Sandesh Gulhane: I declare my interest as a practising NHS general practitioner.

I am glad that someone is getting an update, because the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee certainly is not. The Finance and Public Administration Committee is unhappy with the financial memorandum for the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, and it is still scrutinising it. Given that the start date for the bill is many years in the future, how can we be confident that the money allocated will be enough? The Government does not even know the number of additional staff that will be needed to deliver the service on the ground. Given the Scottish National Party's appalling record on public projects—notably the disastrous Edinburgh tram scheme—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Dr Gulhane, please resume your seat. As I have said on three occasions, could members please listen to the questions and the responses to them as respectfully as possible? Please complete your question, Dr Gulhane.

Sandesh Gulhane: It is incredible that John Swinney was laughing, after what was said about him.

Given the Scottish National Party's appalling record on public projects—notably the disastrous Edinburgh tram scheme—will the cabinet secretary guarantee that the £2 billion cost, which is already £1 billion higher than it was previously, will not rise further? Or will it be another case of vastly escalated costs that are based purely on pursuing SNP dogma—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. Deputy First Minister.

Shona Robison: On infrastructure projects, of course, it was the Tories who voted for the Edinburgh tram system. I do not think that a Tory has any grounds to criticise—I could talk about HS2 and aircraft carriers. Sandesh Gulhane should have a little bit more humility when it comes to his Government's infrastructure projects.

He also clearly did not listen to my answer when I said that the £2 billion is not the plan. I gave the revised figures clearly in my answer. Sandesh Gulhane should really update his knowledge of the position. His wilful misunderstanding of the costs of the national care service is a bit like his unedifying wilful misunderstanding of the public health evidence on minimum unit pricing. Perhaps he should go away and do his homework.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The Finance and Public Administration Committee has heard worrying and, at times, deeply confused evidence from the minister and officials suggesting that the cost of the original proposals, as introduced to Parliament and on which Parliament will be asked to vote at stage 1, could have been as much as £3.9 billion. Is it not the case that the Government has lost control of this flagship bill, which now amounts to little more than expensive bureaucracy? Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that the legislation will not lead to a single extra care worker being recruited or put a penny more in care workers' pockets?

Shona Robison: We are putting money in care workers' pockets through our commitment to the delivery of £12 an hour in the next financial year.

Michael Marra might not remember that the national care service used to be a Labour Party policy, but that party has now shifted on it for reasons that I do not quite understand.

I set out the figures very clearly in my initial answer. If they are accepted at stage 2, the cost of implementing the national care service will reduce to between £238 million and £345 million over 10 years. That is very clear, and I hope that the Labour Party will support it.

Cost of Living Support (Engagement with United Kingdom Government)

4. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its latest engagement has been with the UK Government regarding cost of living support. (S6O-03065)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury two weeks ago and raised the continuing need to support people

with the cost of living. I made it clear that the United Kingdom Government should prioritise investment in public services over tax cuts in the forthcoming UK spring budget. I again pressed the UK Government to introduce an essentials guarantee to ensure that universal credit enables households to cover the cost of essentials such as food and utilities.

Since 2022-23, the Scottish Government continues to allocate around £3 billion a year to policies that tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible during the on-going cost of living crisis.

Clare Haughey: As the cabinet secretary outlined in her answer, the Scottish Government is doing all that it can, with its limited powers and fixed budget, to improve living standards and address the cost of living crisis, including through the Scottish child payment, capping in-tenancy rent increases and freezing council tax.

However, Westminster is failing to act in the areas for which it has responsibility, including energy costs and spiralling mortgage bills. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government should have introduced a £400 energy bill support scheme to help households during the winter months, that it should have set up a social tariff to help more vulnerable customers, and that it should look to introduce mortgage interest relief to help home owners?

Shona Robison: As Clare Haughey rightly pointed out, the Scottish Government cannot mitigate everything that is connected with UK austerity. Many of the tools to tackle the cost of living crisis rest with the UK Government. I called on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reinstate the £400 energy bill support scheme in last year's UK autumn statement. I also called for a social tariff scheme that would provide a much-needed safety net for priority consumers, and we continue to press for that. The chancellor chose to ignore those calls, and prioritised tax cuts over public services. The UK spring budget is an opportunity for the UK Government to change course and support people with the cost of living.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): On the topic of utility bills, water bills are going up by 8 per cent, despite Scottish Water's reserves now sitting at almost £2 billion. How is that justified, given that Scottish Water could clearly absorb or defer that increase?

Shona Robison: Over the years, Scottish Water has made sure that customers in Scotland have paid significantly less than customers south of the border. However, the investment plans that Scottish Water has are important because people want to make sure that the investment in infrastructure across Scotland is fit for purpose.

Scottish Water's infrastructure plans are contingent on its being able to raise the revenue that is necessary to make those investments.

Budget 2024-25 (Mid Scotland and Fife Local Services)

5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how its budget for 2024-25 will support the delivery of local services in the Mid Scotland and Fife region. (S6O-03066)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The budget delivers an additional £795.7 million of funding for all local authorities, including those in Mid Scotland and Fife. That is equivalent to a 6 per cent cash increase. The budget also baselines almost £1 billion of funding, prior to agreement on an assurance and accountability framework, to offer councils greater flexibility on how services are delivered.

Murdo Fraser: The Scottish Government's budget for the coming year is up in cash and real terms compared with the current year, but it delivers savage cuts to local services. According to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, councils face a cut in core revenue of £62.7 million, compared with the current year.

In my region, Perth and Kinross Council is closing public toilets, restricting access—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson. *[Interruption.]* Mr Gibson!

Murdo Fraser: In my region, Perth and Kinross Council is closing public toilets and restricting the opening hours of recycling centres, and there is a real prospect of Perth ice rink, the leisure pool and local sports centres being closed and not replaced. Who should residents in Perth and Kinross blame for those cuts in services—the Scottish National Party-run council or the SNP-run Scottish Government?

Shona Robison: I remind Murdo Fraser that the Tory-controlled United Kingdom Government did not give a penny for local government in the consequentials for 2024-25. It provided lots for business tax cuts, but not a single penny for local government.

If Murdo Fraser thinks that funding for local government is the overriding priority, why does he not have a word with the UK Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer to make sure that, in the spring budget on 6 March, we get more money for local government? That is where the issue begins.

I want to correct Murdo Fraser on the funding that is available to local government, which has increased by 6 per cent in cash terms and 4.3 per

cent in real terms, taking into account the £144 million that is being provided to support the council tax freeze. In difficult circumstances, that is a fair deal—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Fraser, I encourage you not to follow the lead of Mr Gibson in shouting from a sedentary position.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The leader of Fife Council, David Ross, has written to the First Minister to warn that Fife is teetering on the edge of a housing emergency. He has pointed out that the capital funding for the affordable housing budget has been reduced by 26 per cent, which, he says, is making the situation a whole lot worse. He wants the cabinet secretary to explain why that budget has been cut by 26 per cent when the overall capital budget has been cut by only 4.3 per cent.

Shona Robison: The capital budget is being cut by 10 per cent over the next few years. That amounts to a cut of £1.6 billion over this parliamentary session, which is a huge reduction in our capital availability. I put that matter centre stage at the meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Infrastructure investment is important, and that includes investment in affordable housing. As I made clear when I gave evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, should the position as regards capital availability improve in the spring budget on 6 March, my overriding priority will be to improve the position of the affordable housing supply programme. However, I cannot confirm that until I know whether the spring budget on 6 March will bring an improved position on capital and resource spending or a negative position on capital and resource spending. I need to know that before I can make the decision.

Budget 2024-25 (Public Service Reform)

6. **Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of how much money it expects to be able to reallocate from back-office costs to front-line services in the Scottish budget, as a result of its work on public service reform. (S6O-03067)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I set out a programme of actions alongside the budget in December to do just that. The budget provides envelopes within which we expect our public services to operate over the coming years, and we expect our partners across the public sector to shape their services in both the short and longer terms, driving efficiencies into their planning.

Reducing the cost of services is part of that, and we have made it clear that we expect all parts of the Scottish public sector, including the Scottish

Government, to explore efficiency measures, including for the workforce, in order to extract maximum value from public spending. Work continues on developing metrics to capture the investment required and the savings generated across the long-term programme of reform.

Ivan McKee: Core Scottish Government running costs are now more than £700 million per year, and that does not include the running costs of 129 agencies and non-departmental public bodies. What is the total running cost of all those bodies, and by how much does the Deputy First Minister expect to be able to reduce those costs through the public sector reform programme?

Shona Robison: Our approach to reform includes testing public bodies on the scope that they each have to work more efficiently and with more impact, and not just alone but across organisations. On the size, function and operating challenges that bodies face, we consider that approach to be more effective than applying a standard running cost savings target to all bodies.

I would say that savings will have to be made—that is a key priority—through implementation of a number of corporate efficiency levers, including the single Scottish estate programme, the commercial value for money programme, national collaborative procurement and intelligent automation. All those aim to reduce costs, increase efficiency and deliver better outcomes.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government has already hollowed out the backroom staff in public services such as Police Scotland, which means that police officers have to spend more time doing administration than working in their communities. How can the Scottish Government suggest that there are more cuts to be made to back-room staff?

Shona Robison: First of all, Brian Whittle should understand from the budget that, in difficult circumstances, we have prioritised front-line spend, including for police and fire services. He will see that in the budget. The move to the single organisation Police Scotland has enabled a number of reforms and efficiencies; I would be the first to recognise the efficiencies that Police Scotland has made.

In response to Ivan McKee, I say that, across the public sector, there are opportunities for organisations to share services, do things differently and use digital technology to deliver more effective and efficient services. Given the austerity budget that has been provided by the UK Government, those matters become even more important. We will get on with the reform that we need to make.

I always welcome positive suggestions, but they seem to be very few and far between.

United Kingdom Tax Reductions (Impact on Scotland's Public Finances)

7. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is, regarding any potential impact on Scotland's public finances, to reports that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is considering reducing taxes in the UK budget in March. (S6O-03068)

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): The UK Government should use any additional fiscal headroom to support public services, which it has decimated through 14 years of underinvestment. The International Monetary Fund agrees with that position and has advised the UK against further tax cuts, saying that proposed UK spending plans are "unrealistic" and that money should be spent prioritising health and education, for example, and reducing debt.

The Deputy First Minister met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury two weeks ago and made it clear that, instead of tax cuts, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must prioritise investment in public services, infrastructure and support for people in the cost of living crisis.

Evelyn Tweed: Recent UK Government spending decisions have meant that Scotland's block grant has fallen in real terms by 1.2 per cent since 2022-23. Does the minister agree that the UK Government should use its spring budget to rectify the mistakes of the chancellor's autumn statement and provide adequate investment in our public services, rather than prioritising tax cuts?

Tom Arthur: Although the UK Government has chosen to prioritise tax cuts at the expense of the national health service and other public services, our values and, therefore, our choices are very different.

Our missions and values are equality, opportunity and community, and the guiding principles of our 2024-25 budget are to protect people, to sustain public services, to support a growing and sustainable economy and to address the climate and nature emergencies. So, yes—we call on the United Kingdom Government to invest in those important areas in the upcoming spring budget, rather than offer more tax cuts.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business to allow front-bench members to change seats.

Social Security (Investment)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-12079, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on delivering record social security investment in Scotland to tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We have transformed social security provision in Scotland. We have established a radically different system that is based on dignity, fairness and respect. That system is now an integral part of the social contract between the Scottish Government and the people of Scotland. We have achieved that despite our fixed budgets and the limited powers of devolution.

We are making that safety net for the people of Scotland even stronger through record investment, but all the while, the United Kingdom Government is steadily dismantling the welfare system across the UK and enforcing a sanctions regime that is punishing the most vulnerable people in our society.

In 2024-25, we are committing a record £6.3 billion for benefits expenditure—that is £1.1 billion more than the UK Government gives to the Scottish Government for social security, which demonstrates our commitment to tackling poverty. The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that that figure will rise.

That is essential collective investment in a system from which we may all need help at any time in our lives. The money goes directly to people who need it most in the current cost of living crisis, and it is happening because of the deliberate budget choices that we have made in our national mission on equality, opportunity and community.

This morning, I was at Ibrox primary school hearing from parents who now automatically get early learning and school-age best start grants without the need for a separate application process. That money makes an immediate difference to their daily lives. Furthermore, we are delivering that investment against a backdrop of continued austerity at Westminster, catastrophic cuts to the Scotland block grant and a UK Government autumn statement that was the worst-case scenario for Scotland.

Our Barnett funding, which is driven by UK spending choices, has fallen by 1.2 per cent in real

terms since the 2022-23 budget was presented, and the UK Government did not inflation proof its capital budget, which has resulted in a nearly 10 per cent real-terms cut in our capital funding over the medium term. However, as a part of our social contract here in Scotland, and in recognition of the cost of living crisis, we are uprating all Scottish benefits in line with inflation by 6.7 per cent in April.

Benefit expenditure is our single biggest increase in the 2024-25 budget, and it will support 1.2 million people in the year ahead. That means that more than one in five people in Scotland will get one or more of our broad packages of benefits, which range from helping disabled people to live full and independent lives and helping older people to heat their homes to helping low-income families with their living costs.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): When the minister was at Ibrox primary school this morning, did she discuss the very low take-up of the early learning and childcare provision for two-year-olds? We have discussed the issue before, but the latest figures show that there has been a reduction in the number of two-year-olds who are accessing that provision. What steps is she taking, together with the education team, to make sure that that figure increases?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have indeed spoken about that in the past in the chamber. I recognise Willie Rennie's continued interest in the area. As he and I have discussed in the past, work has been done to ensure that people who are eligible know about their eligibility and are encouraged to apply and take benefit from that. I will be happy to provide him with further information through the education team in due course.

Although Scottish Government benefits have already been introduced and clients have transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions, the number of children and adults taking part and being invested in through Social Security Scotland and our investment in social security will rise to 2 million. That is a huge achievement and one of which we should all be proud, regardless of our political standpoint. For example, next year alone, we will invest £614 million in new benefits and payments that are available in Scotland only and that offer unparalleled support that is not available elsewhere in the UK.

Those seven Scotland-only benefits include our Scottish child payment, which, last month, Chris Birt of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation called

"a vindication of the power and potential of the Scottish Parliament."—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 9 January 2024; c 10.]

It is also a vindication of the Parliament's unanimous decision in 2018 to enshrine in law the essential principle that social security is a basic human right. I agree absolutely with Professor Stephen Sinclair of Glasgow Caledonian University, who said that it is "extraordinary" that social security across the UK is not founded on that principle.

In keeping with that principle, and thanks to the difficult but essential spending decisions that this Government has made, the Scottish child payment will, from April, be paid at £26.70 a week for 329,000 children. It is estimated that 50,000 children will be lifted out of relative poverty in 2023-24, reducing child poverty levels by five percentage points. Modelling estimates that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty this year as a result of this Government's policies, with poverty levels nine percentage points lower than they would otherwise have been.

The Scottish child payment is just one part of our five family payments package, which, from 1 April this year, could be worth more than £10,000 by the time an eligible child turns six. That compares with less than £2,000 for eligible families in England and Wales. That package, of course, includes the best start grant and best start foods, for which we are widening eligibility later this month.

The five family payments package is part of a £3 billion investment next year in policies that tackle poverty and protect people from harm as much as possible during a cost of living crisis. That investment includes funding for childcare, providing free bus travel for more than 2 million people and offering free school meals to all children in primaries 1 to 5.

Our disability payments are also delivering for the people of Scotland, with the latest figures showing that almost £400 million has been paid out for child disability payment to more than 72,000 children. In delivering our commitment and reopening the independent living fund to new entrants, we are also further supporting disabled people who need it most, with an extra £9 million in investment next year.

Disabled people have told us that they found the DWP system humiliating, dehumanising and bewilderingly complex, so we have listened and acted. We are building our disability benefits in partnership with disabled people to be better, fairer and easier to apply for. In Scotland, disabled people no longer have to gather multiple pieces of evidence to detail every aspect of their disability just to get the benefits that they are entitled to. They no longer have to suffer the indignity of having their disability tested by private sector

contractors. We have listened to families on carers as well.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I know about the cabinet secretary's points from my committee work and agree with many of them, but what work has the Scottish Government undertaken to look at the fact—it is a fact—that the number of complaints that Social Security Scotland has received has increased by 174 per cent in just one year?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Miles Briggs should know, one of the reasons why the number of complaints has gone up is that the number of cases has gone up exponentially because we took over child disability and adult disability payments. As a proportion of the number of cases, I am absolutely content with the fact that, as the client survey demonstrated, we still have a very high satisfaction rate. With the best will in the world to him, Mr Briggs is being slightly disingenuous not to also mark the fact that there has been a great increase in the number of cases.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): What would the cabinet secretary say to the 50,000 people who are waiting more than three months for disability benefits, some of whom are being forced to go to food banks as a result?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One of the very different aspects of the system that I have just discussed is the fact that Social Security Scotland will gather the supporting information. Previously, under the DWP, individuals were forced to do that themselves, which they found humiliating and difficult. It takes some time for Social Security Scotland to gather that supporting information for the client, but we reassure anybody who is eligible that their payment will be backdated to the point of application.

As I said, we have also listened to families and friends who are providing essential unpaid care for disabled people. That is one of the reasons why the carers allowance supplement was introduced—our very first act when we took over social security powers—why we have invested £3.3 million in our young carers grant since 2019, and why we are also delivering extended entitlement for full-time students to the carer support payment.

We have to contrast that approach with the approach from the UK Government. We have progressive policies here in Scotland, but that is happening amid a worsening fog of Westminster austerity. We have a contract with the people of Scotland, but that contract does not exist when it comes to reserved benefits. We could do so much more if we were not held back by, for example, the fact that universal credit is failing to support the people that it should be there for—it does not provide for essentials.

The two-child limit alone is affecting 80,000 children in Scotland, and no victim of sexual violence should ever have to disclose that fact to access welfare payments but, under Westminster, that is the society that we are living in. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that scrapping the cruel two-child limit and the abhorrent rape clause could lift 250,000 children out of poverty, including 15,000 children in Scotland.

Sir Keir Starmer says that he wants to implement the rape clause “more fairly”. I struggle to comprehend what he means by that. His Labour colleagues in this chamber should also struggle to comprehend that and then do something about it, because, with Labour at Westminster saying that it will keep cruel Tory policies such as the rape clause and the two-child limit, and that it will cap benefits but not bankers' bonuses, it is increasingly clear that Westminster values are not Scotland's values.

While Westminster chose to introduce the rape clause, the Scottish Government chose to deliver the baby box. While Westminster chose to hike tuition fees, the Scottish Government chose to keep tuition free. While Westminster chose to hike prescription charges, the Scottish Government chose to keep prescriptions free. While Westminster chose to scrap the universal credit uplift, the Scottish Government chose to deliver the Scottish child payment. That is how we are delivering for the people of Scotland.

The Scottish Government has spent more than £1 billion mitigating the impacts of Westminster austerity over the past 13 years. We could and should be doing so much better. I am concerned about what the UK Government has announced in relation to changes to work capability assessments and I call on it to reverse those changes. I call on the UK Government to accept that it is not too late to look at universal credit and to set it at a level that provides enough support to include an essentials guarantee. We have asked the UK Government to do so, and yet that is not forthcoming.

We have built a new system in Scotland, with the powers at our disposal, but our hands remain tied by restricted powers and by UK Government austerity. Even with the significant restrictions that we face, we have delivered a social security system that is built on the values of dignity, fairness and respect. We have introduced 14 Scottish Government benefits—seven of which, remember, are available only in Scotland—thanks to an investment of £12 billion to March 2023, delivering for the people of Scotland when they need it most.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that social security plays a vital role in tackling poverty and reducing economic and social inequalities, and that the Scottish social security system must have dignity, fairness and respect at its heart; welcomes the Scottish Government's record investment of £6.3 billion in social security expenditure in 2024-25 and that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has forecast that this is an investment of £1.1 billion more than the funding received from the UK Government through the social security block grant; notes that this investment includes the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods, as well as the landmark, and extended, Scottish Child Payment, which is estimated to lift 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024; recognises that £614 million of Scotland-only benefits are being delivered in 2024-25, which is support that is unparalleled across the UK; further recognises the substantial difference that Social Security Scotland is making through improved disability and carers benefits; notes that Scottish Government support is being delivered despite continued UK Government block grant cuts and continued UK Government austerity, and calls on the UK Government to drop planned Work Capability Assessment changes, introduce an essentials guarantee and immediately scrap the two-child cap and the associated so-called rape clause.

15:09

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I remind members that I receive the personal independence payment.

I am pleased to take part in the debate. It is always encouraging when we come to the chamber to debate a topic that falls under the remit of this place; I am sure that the people of Scotland will be grateful that we are discussing a topic that actually reflects their priorities. In that spirit, I begin on a point of agreement. We in the Conservatives agree

“that social security plays a vital role in tackling poverty”.

A safety net can and should act to lift people out of poverty and help them to move towards a full and thriving life. Of course, the system absolutely should treat everyone with dignity, fairness and respect.

Unfortunately, however, that is where the agreement must end, because we cannot in any way endorse the Scottish National Party patting itself on the back in the ways that we see in the motion. It tells a story about a perfect system that works well to provide for those who are in need, when that could not be further from the truth. The past eight years of social security have been marked by error, delay and broken promises.

The devolution of social security was meant to signal an unprecedented opportunity to build a uniquely Scottish social security system that would work to address the unique issues that we face in Scotland. It was a radical affirmation of the doctrine of localism, and a chance for the Scottish Government to put its money where its mouth was and build a quality system that would leave behind

the problems that the SNP claimed were embedded in the DWP.

Alas, it was not to be. Eight years on, we have what is essentially a carbon copy of the Westminster model that seems to be costing significantly more and producing worse results. As our amendment lays out, the Scottish Fiscal Commission has reported

“that ... the Scottish Government will need to find an additional £1.3 billion in”

its budget for 2027 to pay for its “demand-led” benefits. To put that in perspective, that represents more than double what the Scottish Government spent on the entire Scottish Prison Service last year. It is all very well to make big promises, but there has to be thought as to how we are going to pay for it.

We see costs ballooning at every level of the enterprise. Not only is the payment bill racking up; we see ever-increasing operational costs for Social Security Scotland as well.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Does the member recognise that we are spending more money than Westminster because our values are different? That spend includes investment of nearly £500 million in the Scotland child payment; investment in mitigation measures because the UK Government will not scrap the bedroom tax; and investment in protecting people in a cost of living crisis when the UK Government has just walked away from its responsibilities this week. That is why it costs more money—because we actually invest in the people of Scotland. I am disappointed that the Scottish Conservatives are suggesting that we would want to cut that money in the future.

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

Jeremy Balfour: I say with respect that I think that the cabinet secretary has got the wrong end of the stick. I am simply asking, if the Scottish Government is going to need an extra £1.3 billion in 2027, what other Government budgets will be cut to pay for that.

I understand that Social Security Scotland will run up a £322 million operations bill over the next financial year, which is a 130 per cent increase from 2020-21. What on earth is going on in Dundee that is causing that meteoric rise in cost?

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Jeremy Balfour: I will in a second.

One would think that, if the agency was spending that much on operations, it would be

running a bit more smoothly, or at least the handover would be running a little more to schedule. The entire roll-out of devolved benefits has involved nothing but delay, delay, delay.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Balfour for giving way, because he is advancing an entirely contradictory argument. On the one hand, he is telling Parliament that the Scottish Government has simply followed Westminster policies; on the other hand, he is saying that we are incurring more costs in social security because we are spending more money, as the cabinet secretary just said in her intervention. Will Mr Balfour please bring some coherence to this argument, rather than the incoherence that the Conservatives bring to any debate on welfare in this society?

Jeremy Balfour: I am always happy to try to help Mr Swinney. We have higher and higher costs of administration of the same benefits. We are spending more money on doing the admin compared with what happens in the DWP.

Most recently, the Scottish Government has pushed back its estimate of how long it will take to fully move everyone over from PIP and the disability living allowance to ADP. It was originally claimed that that would all be done by this summer, but the Government now estimates that it will be done by the end of 2025. The incredible thing is that I suspect that the Government will struggle to meet even the extended deadline. Up to this point, Social Security Scotland—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, we need to hear the member who has the floor, which is Jeremy Balfour. Please continue, Mr Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour: I am grateful. Up to this point, Social Security Scotland has moved across fewer than 5,000 people per month on average. To meet the new target, the Government will need to move just over 10,000 people a month on average. I ask the cabinet secretary to clarify in closing whether she is confident that the deadline will be met.

None of that is acceptable in any way. It is a total failure to deliver for the people of Scotland. We have got nothing that was promised from devolving social security. There is no radical Scottish way of doing things, and there is no appetite from the Government to really put in the work to do what it claims that it wants to do.

The Government likes to pretend that it is kinder and more cuddly than the big, bad DWP, but the figures do not bear that out. One third of Scottish child payment applications are denied; two thirds of job start payment applications are denied; one in five funeral payment applications is denied; and more than a third of ADP applications are denied.

The Government claims to be kind and friendly, but it is no such thing. It parrots the mantra of dignity, fairness and respect without doing anything meaningful to pursue those ideals. For example, the Scottish Government could change the 20m rule to 50m in the budget—that would be a radical departure from the UK-wide policy—but it will not. All that it has done is commission a review of ADP that will not report until August 2025. Again—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Jeremy Balfour: I will finish this point. I would appreciate it if the cabinet secretary, now or in closing, explained why it will take so long for the report's findings to be published.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The independent review will decide its own timelines, but I suggest that, if Mr Balfour wants any changes to eligibility, it would be useful if the Scottish Conservatives came forward with costed budget proposals on how much that would cost and where the money would come from; otherwise, we are again hearing empty rhetoric but seeing no action.

Jeremy Balfour: I ask the cabinet secretary to reflect in closing that the August 2025 date came from her press release. That is the date that the Government has set.

I am aware that the SNP will accuse me of being partisan for pointing out those failings, but members should rest assured that I am not speaking for myself. I, along with many other members, have had a number of briefings from third sector organisations, which have all referred to the Scottish Government's shortcomings. Age UK points out that we still do not have a minister for older people, and we have lost the title of minister for disability. Those are key responsibilities in the Scottish Government.

A number of organisations, including the MS Society, have been in touch with me this week to call for changes to the 20m rule. Others, such as Carers Scotland, are calling for changes to the way in which carers are supported in Scotland. Both requests demonstrate that the Scottish Government is not living up to its rhetoric. Our amendment recognises those shortcomings, and I am proud to move it. I hope that every member will vote for it at decision time.

I move amendment S6M-12079.2, to leave out from “; welcomes” to end and insert:

“, but notes with extreme concern that the Scottish Fiscal Commission reports that, by 2027-28, the Scottish Government will need to find an additional £1.3 billion in spending from within the Scottish Budget for these demand-led payments; understands that the Social Security Scotland agency is set to cost taxpayers in Scotland £322 million in operational costs in 2024-25,

which is 130 per cent higher than spending in 2020-21; acknowledges that these benefits were first promised to be fully devolved to Scottish control by 2020, but that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has recently had to agree to extend the agency agreements to continue to assist and support the Scottish Government until 2026 as Social Security Scotland is, to date, unable to handle the full caseload; notes that these devolved benefits have not been significantly changed from the DWP criteria and that the promised review of adult disability payments may not be published until August 2025; acknowledges the disappointment from the third sector that the dedicated Minister for Equalities and Older People post was removed in March 2023, and backs the calls from Age Scotland and 15 partner agencies for this to be reinstated to ensure a targeted focus on tackling inequality, and welcomes the announcement by the UK Government that the third instalment of its Cost of Living Payment will be paid later in February 2024, benefitting more than 680,000 people across Scotland and totalling up to £900 paid to eligible households on means-tested benefits, and directly helping tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality equally across the UK.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Paul O’Kane joins us remotely to speak to and move amendment S6M-12079.1.

15:19

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): This is at least the third debate that we have had on social security in the past 12 months. As always, I will begin with a note of consensus. As in previous debates, the Scottish Labour Party recognises the impact that social security has in supporting people across Scotland, particularly the Scottish child payment, which we have supported since its introduction, and the binding poverty targets that were agreed by the Parliament.

We would also reflect that our aspiration for social security in Scotland should be one that is based on dignity, fairness and respect. Indeed, the changes that the previous UK Labour Government made to the social contract, including to social security across the UK, led to 1 million children and 1 million pensioners being lifted out of poverty. The principles of dignity, fairness and respect were very much at the heart of that.

However, we must recognise that, in lodging a motion that does not recognise the significant challenges in Social Security Scotland, presents no detail on what might be done to fix the issues and, in many ways, ignores the lived experience of thousands of Scots facing the blunt end of poverty, this Government seems to be more interested in self-praise and political posturing than it is in debating solutions.

Let me be clear: we on the Labour benches will always call out the failings of the current UK Conservative Government, its crashing of and failure to grow the economy, the failure to make work pay and, bluntly, its failure to tackle poverty and show compassion to the most vulnerable

people in our society. It has failed working people and should be voted out of office as soon as possible, so that a Labour Government can go about the work of reform, making work pay and reforming social security to be a proper safety net for those who need it.

Kate Forbes: I wonder whether Paul O’Kane could identify specific welfare policies that Labour would reverse that the Tories have introduced.

Paul O’Kane: I believe that Ms Forbes has participated in a number of social security debates in which we have had this interaction before. I am very clear that Labour wants to fundamentally reform the system, because universal credit does not work and it is not working for all parts of our United Kingdom. We need to fundamentally reform the entire system so that it works and ensures that people have a sufficient safety net, as I have said. It is clear to me that we have opposed all that the Tories have done, and we are clear that the system needs fundamental reform. However, we will have to do that in terms of the fiscal situation that we inherit.

I move to the challenges that we are facing in Scotland. The current Scottish Government is presiding over a system that faces significant challenges. Today, the cabinet secretary has again repeated the words “dignity, fairness and respect” when referring to the social security system. Just saying that does not make it so, because we know that, in many ways, Social Security Scotland has failed to live up to people’s expectations and their aspirations.

We should reflect on waiting times. Last summer, the chief executive of Social Security Scotland told the Social Justice and Social Security Committee that he expected the waiting times for child disability payment to fall below the 80-day mark on average by the end of the summer. The end of the summer came and the statistical releases in September showed that the waiting times were stuck very stubbornly over 100 days, at 106 days.

Last week, at the committee’s evidence session, we asked Social Security Scotland when we would see a marked improvement in the waiting times and when it would get below the 80-day mark. I am not sure that we got any clarity on when that would happen or, indeed, on how that will happen.

It would be good to hear from the cabinet secretary about what part of keeping many families with vulnerable children in that waiting period for more than three months is meeting the aspirations of dignity, fairness and respect, because we know that people really are struggling as they wait for benefits.

It is not just child disability payment, either. As was reported over the weekend and as my

colleague Michael Marra has already referred to, there are reports of almost 50,000 Scots having to wait for three months for their claims to be processed. Some have waited longer than that, and many people waiting have terminal illness. Many have also had to turn to food banks as a result of the wait. Charities such as Macmillan Cancer Support are sounding the alarm and urging the Government to take urgent action. We absolutely must reflect on that, because I do not think that people would recognise that picture as according with the aspirations of dignity, fairness and respect.

Social Security Scotland has been in development or existence for five years now. We have heard in the debate about the many benefits that it delivers and much of its work that is going on. However, I think that we are past the point where many of the delays can be blamed on teething problems. It is high time that the Government accepted that it has responsibility and must be held accountable for the significant challenges in the system.

We know that social security alone cannot solve the problem of poverty in Scotland and across our United Kingdom. More than 1 million people in Scotland still live in poverty—nearly half of them in very deep poverty—according to reports from various third sector organisations. In-work poverty is on the rise, with more than 10 per cent of workers locked in persistent low pay. The Scottish Government's statistics show that lower and middle incomes have decreased over the latest three-year period. Yet, we hold this debate in a week in which we will debate a budget that will do nothing to stimulate economic growth and will take actions such as cutting the housing budget by 27 per cent, which will clearly impact on people who are struggling on low incomes.

It is against that whole backdrop that we consider today's motion, which is rich in praise but perhaps lacking in the reality of the situation. If we want to tackle the cost of living crisis, inequality and poverty, we need a Government that is willing to take the decisions to make work pay and to tackle the structural causes behind poverty and inequality. Positive change can be delivered by a Labour Government that is willing to get to grips with the challenges that surround the system. The previous UK Labour Government, as I have said already, understood that when it removed 2 million children and pensioners from poverty through its action. We can do the same again, by making work pay and so ending in-work poverty, by growing the economy and by fixing the broken social security system across the UK. That is the change that I believe the people of Scotland want, the change that the people of Scotland need and the change that Labour will deliver when the SNP has failed to do so.

I move amendment S6M-12079.1, to leave out from "Government's" to end and insert:

"Child Payment; notes the stubbornly high waiting times for Child Disability Payment, where the median processing time was 106 days, and for Adult Disability Payment, where the median processing time was 83 days, according to the latest statistical releases; is concerned by the Scottish Government's failure to sufficiently and swiftly address these long processing times, which are driving some people to rely on foodbanks, according to reports from third sector organisations; is further concerned by the rise of in-work poverty in Scotland, with over one in 10 workers locked in persistent low pay according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and agrees that a UK Labour administration will implement a New Deal for Working People that will end in-work poverty and implement a fundamental reform of the Universal Credit system to provide a real safety net for those who need it."

15:27

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): John Swinney will recall how we got here. It was as a result of the Smith commission. I know that John Swinney was not wholly satisfied with the process, but there was significant movement through those cross-party discussions. At the start, I think that not many of the UK parties were in favour of the devolution of significant parts of the social security budget; however, by the end of the process, we agreed that, in total, combined with what had already been devolved, there would be a £3 billion budget for it. It was quite significant at the time, because it was probably the first time that a service was disentangled across the UK and a new service devolved to the Scottish Government. Therefore, the challenges of delivering it are not to be underestimated.

That is why at that time we committed to work in partnership across the Parliament to build a consensus on forging a new social security system, in many ways similar to when the national health service was forged after the war, although there was more collaboration than on building a consensus. I think that that commitment is to be welcomed.

However, I have been concerned slightly with today's debate. I recognise that the child payment has significantly reduced the levels of child poverty—there is no doubt that it has. I do not think that Jeremy Balfour is right when he says that the Scottish Government has just replicated what Westminster is doing but in a more inefficient way—I do not think that that is correct.

I think that something has been missing from this discussion.

Jeremy Balfour: Will Willie Rennie give way?

Willie Rennie: Not just now. Although it is right to reflect on the decline of child poverty levels, we have not dealt with the root causes of why we have such high levels of child poverty. I am not

saying that that is wholly at the door of the Scottish Government or wholly at the door of the Scottish Government to resolve, but I would have expected some kind of discussion today by the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice on the ambitions for reducing those levels.

Paul O'Kane was right to talk about in-work poverty and the need to boost the economy. I would have hoped that the Government would perhaps say that the high level of children who are accessing the payment is not good enough and that we must try to drive down those numbers, because that would be a reflection of more people being not just in work but in well-paid work.

John Swinney: Mr Rennie makes a serious point. The Government's child poverty action plan takes into account things other than the child payment. Some of us who served in Government at the time made sure that that was the case and that there was an emphasis on employability to tackle exactly the issue that Mr Rennie raises.

Down at the bottom end of the Parliament's garden lobby today, there is an illustrative picture that goes through the history of the development of child poverty. I am afraid that the genesis of the current crisis that we face is the austerity that commenced after 2010—it is crippling our society. That is why we have to have an honest discussion about the financial choices that are inherent in the budget, which will be discussed tomorrow, and about trying to tackle child poverty. The UK Government has made the situation that we face in Scotland a great deal worse as a consequence of the prevalence of the austerity agenda.

Willie Rennie: I think that we are all learning from the impact of that period and the financial decisions that were made, and how those affect future decisions. That is right, and I have certainly learned lessons from that period. We would rather not have made some of those choices, but they were made because of the financial position at the time. Nevertheless, we all need to reflect on how we learn the lessons from that period.

I, too, have been briefed by the people from the Glasgow Centre for Population Health down in the garden lobby, and I understand the point that they are making. However, we need a greater emphasis from the Government on the economic aspects and the economic opportunity. There should be not necessarily a celebration of reducing child poverty but an impatience to deal with its root causes rather than just its symptoms, which is what the child payment is doing, in effect.

I want to deal with a couple of technical transitional issues. One has already been referred to, which is the delays with ADP. I understand the cabinet secretary's point that, as a result of gathering information on behalf of the client, the

process is taking longer, but that is having a big financial impact on the individuals who are having to wait longer. The target was eight to 10 weeks, but the waiting time is now 16.6 weeks, which is a long time. I cannot believe that, with PIP, the process is taking nine weeks. We should aspire to be much better than that, and I hope that there is an impatience on that front, too, to drive down those waiting times, because that is having a big impact.

My second point is on the transition. I have a constituent who was on PIP and had a change of circumstances when her health deteriorated. She applied to have that change of circumstance recognised, which triggered the transfer to adult disability payment. Subsequently, her payments have been backdated to the point of transition rather than the point of change of circumstance, which has resulted in her losing out on £1,000. For her, that is an enormous sum of money. We must have a means to backdate the funds to the point at which her circumstances changed. That is when she needed more money; it was not at the point of the technical transition from PIP to ADP.

I hope that the cabinet secretary can look at that problem and resolve it, because I do not want more of my constituents to face a loss of £1,000.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that, at this point, there is a bit of time in hand for interventions, should members wish to take them.

15:34

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am glad that the Scottish Government is choosing to spend more on social security. Scotland has built a new social security system that is rooted in compassion and that has dignity, fairness and respect at its heart. That has resulted in great changes, even with the limited powers that we have.

Stakeholders such as Save the Children welcome the Scottish Government's positive choices in tackling poverty, so it is baffling that Labour and the Tories cannot even acknowledge that investment is increasing. All parties should recognise that devolved social security is actively lifting children out of poverty, and we should continue in that vein.

The Scottish Government is supporting people through the Tory-made cost of living crisis by providing on-going investment of about £3 billion per year in policies including 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, the expansion of free school meals and the council tax reduction scheme. On top of that, despite continued Westminster austerity, the Scottish Government has chosen to spend more on social security and

has delivered 14 benefits, seven of which are unique to Scotland. Those benefits will continue to tackle inequality and support the national mission to tackle child poverty.

A crucial part of that is the game-changing Scottish child payment, which Inclusion Scotland recognises is the single policy intervention that has created the largest fall in child poverty anywhere in Europe for at least 40 years. The payment of £25 per eligible child per week is a lifeline for many families, and it will keep up with inflation. This year alone, it is lifting 50,000 children in Scotland out of poverty, and it will benefit a further 250,000 children.

Other initiatives include the best start grant and best start foods, which help families in the face of inflated food prices. Estimates suggest that such policies are lifting 90,000 children out of poverty this year, so I am glad that those bold initiatives will continue.

However, Scottish efforts to tackle the scourge of child poverty are needlessly undermined by cruel UK Government policies such as the two-child cap, which Labour will keep, and the £20 cut to universal credit. Those policies have a social and financial impact, and reversing them could lift 30,000 children in Scotland out of poverty and allow the Scottish Government to reallocate the resources that it spends every year on mitigating the worst aspects of Westminster policies, including the bedroom tax.

I want to touch on aspects of Labour's amendment, and waiting times for disability payments in particular. It is important to note that successful applicants will have their payments backdated. Social Security Scotland figures cannot be compared with DWP figures on a like-for-like basis. In Scotland, people get help to apply, including by medical information being collected on their behalf, thus reducing the stress of the application process compared with that under the DWP system.

Willie Rennie: Collette Stevenson has made a not-unreasonable point, but does she accept the financial impact on people who have to wait so much longer to get benefits? Is that not a factor?

Collette Stevenson: I will come on to issues relating to backdating, which Willie Rennie alluded to in his speech. Having visited Social Security Scotland in Dundee, I know that it is trying to mitigate the waiting times. As far as I know, at the last count, waiting times had gone down by eight days, so Social Security Scotland is doing progressive work to tackle the issue.

When the Social Justice and Social Security Committee visited Social Security Scotland, as I said, we learned about the work that is under way to speed up the process of dealing with all the

applications, and I am glad that that will not come at the cost of delivering a Scottish social security system that has fairness, dignity and respect at its heart. We were told that part of the processing time is due to Social Security Scotland checking that people have not underreported their conditions, thereby ensuring that they get the full payment to which they are entitled. Some claimants have complex needs, so discussions with multiple stakeholders, including hospital consultants, general practitioners and mental health practitioners, are required. There might also be issues with the use of the Scottish care information—SCI—gateway by external agencies, so it is definitely worth exploring that matter further.

Some of those points tie in with Jeremy Balfour's remarks about case load. I hope that there is a consensus and that we can all accept that Social Security Scotland is trying to do things in a much fairer way.

On finance, disabled people and their families are at greater risk of poverty than non-disabled people. Inclusion Scotland welcomes the additional £1.1 billion that is being spent on social security in Scotland. We should all recognise that the Scottish Government's approach to the application process for adult disability payment has resulted in a higher number of claimants receiving support, and support the investment required for that.

While Westminster rips the UK welfare state to shreds, the SNP in government is investing in Scotland's social contract. However, Scottish policies are being stymied by the Tories. I call on the UK Government to introduce an essentials guarantee to ensure that people who are in receipt of UK benefits have enough to cover their basic costs, such as food and fuel.

With its powers, the Scottish Government will deliver record investment in social security next year and will continue to deliver unique benefits that are lifting children out of poverty. Overall, estimates show that Scottish Government policy is lifting 90,000 children out of poverty this year alone. It is right that we increase investment in social security to tackle poverty. Surely colleagues in other parties will vote for that tonight.

15:41

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives and I will support the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour.

It is right that the Scottish social security system be used to support those who are suffering due to the cost of living crisis. With the significant social

security powers that Scotland now has available to it, we would expect nothing less from the Scottish Government, just as we would expect nothing less from the United Kingdom Government, which has already invested an additional £94 million to support households in this difficult economic climate. That support was significant and helped to avoid a recession in 2023, according to estimates from the Office for Budget Responsibility.

There have also been significant increases to universal credit and other means-tested benefits—more than 700,000 Scots will benefit. That is in addition to the increase in the state pension of more than £900 per year, an increase of nearly 10 per cent in the national minimum wage and national insurance cuts worth more than £750 to nearly 3 million working Scots.

On the face of it, there are laudable statements in the Government motion, which speaks to the importance of using Scotland's social security powers to support those who are in need of assistance. Unfortunately, however, the motion also contains too many self-congratulatory statements, so we will not be able to support it. As our amendment sets out, the Scottish Government's record on this issue is not one for which Scottish ministers should pat themselves on the back.

As we have heard in the debate, the Government's record so far is one that includes many delays and missed opportunities. The Government missed its original deadline for transferring benefits to Social Security Scotland. In total, a decade will have passed between the Scotland Act 2016 and the Scottish Government taking full control of them.

Although it is good news that benefits such as the Scottish child payment and the adult disability payment have finally been introduced, we are still seeing problems with how those benefits are processed.

Nearly a third of applications for the Scottish child payment have been denied, and Social Security Scotland has admitted that processing times for the adult disability payment are still too long and are causing concern for those individuals.

Recent data shows that, in 2023, the number of applications that were processed within three months decreased from 26 per cent in January to just 15 per cent in July.

The number of applications that were processed in fewer than two months has now fallen to just 3 per cent. On top of that, as we have heard, the number of complaints has increased by 170 per cent in the space of a year. The cabinet secretary talked about managing the situation and coping with the increase, but the reality is that people are

waiting longer and that more people are making complaints about the process.

The SNP Government has often liked to criticise the Department for Work and Pensions and the UK Government's approach to dealing with benefits; I have heard that on numerous occasions in the chamber over the years. However, with Social Security Scotland, the SNP is now learning hard facts about how it tackles the issue, how that works and what it looks like.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): You said that the Scottish Government has been critical of the way in which the UK Government's Department for Work and Pensions has handled things. Are you critical of it, or do you think that what it has been doing for the past few years has been acceptable?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need to speak through the chair.

Alexander Stewart: There is no doubt that mistakes have been made on all sides. However, the basic necessity is to ensure that individuals receive, and have been receiving, support. As I said, Scotland is taking longer and getting more complaints, so your record on that process is not blameless.

The UK Government has made mistakes, and I have admitted them many times in the past. I do not necessarily always agree with what it has achieved. At the end of the day, the safety net is there to support individuals.

It is clear that more needs to be done as case loads are increasing, as we have seen. However, despite the SNP Government not being able to manage all the current situations with the powers that it has, we are getting into the realms of pie-in-the-sky plans for more benefits. The Scottish Government recently put forward its independence paper, "Social security in an independent Scotland", which makes the usual collection of undeliverable promises, which the Scottish public are becoming very tired of listening to.

Those include suggestions that an independent Scotland could consider introducing a universal basic income. Although the details of that have been talked about in the past, the Government has not given us a full estimation of how it would be funded and how many billions it would cost. It is surprising that the Government does not go into that clarity, given that we have seen that in the past.

Instead of wasting yet more time and more money setting out hypothetical plans for a hypothetical social security system in Scotland, the Government should be putting its efforts into using the powers that it has to support the

individuals who need that support on the ground today.

Members on the Conservative benches want to see a distinctly Scottish approach to social security that takes full advantage of the powers of this Parliament, underpinned by the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom Government. We all want to see a distinctly Scottish approach. However, it is disappointing to see that the current Scottish Government wants to have a distinctly Scottish approach that overpromises and underdelivers. The whole idea of capitalising on the Parliament's powers cannot be swept under the carpet.

Our amendment sets out an alternative vision for how to deliver the social security system that the Scottish public expects, which members should support.

Collette Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is closing.

Alexander Stewart: I call on them to do so.

15:48

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Today, the Scottish Parliament has an opportunity to reaffirm the kind of social security system that we all wish to see. It is an opportunity to recognise, on a cross-party basis, the huge progress that has been made by Scotland's Government and Scotland's Parliament to embed a social security system that is based on dignity, fairness and respect. It is also an opportunity to set out how we can build further on our fledgling social security system and to have a frank conversation about the barriers to allowing us to go further, as we would wish to.

I am not surprised that the Conservative approach to the debate is to seek to airbrush out of the public record the very real progress that has been made by the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland towards helping those who are most in need in Scotland. I am also not surprised that they seem to question whether it is money well spent, by drawing attention to the cost of social security in Scotland.

Let me say clearly to the Conservatives that the £6.3 billion of social security expenditure in 2024-25—which the Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts will be £1.1 billion beyond what we will get from the UK Government for social security through the block grant—is an investment that is well spent and welcome. It will support the most vulnerable people in our society, and I am proud of it.

The nearly £500 million annual investment in the Scottish child payment means that the level of child poverty is significantly lower in Scotland than it is in Conservative-run England and in Labour-run Wales. The level of child poverty in Scotland is nine points lower than it would be without the payment. That is still too high, of course, but 90,000 fewer children are living in poverty because of the Scottish Government's actions.

I agree with the Conservatives' concerns about cost—but it is the cost to Scottish society of having to pick up the pieces when a Westminster Government is prioritising a tax on the poor and disabled and tax cuts for the rich over doing the right thing. I, too, am concerned about that. The Scottish Government is absolutely right to reference UK Government block grant cuts and continued UK Government austerity. Those directly undermine the positive progress that Scotland's Parliament has signed up to for a number of years. We must never take the progress on child poverty, carers allowance, disability assistance, the bedroom tax and so much more for granted.

The Scottish Government's motion also calls on the UK Government to drop planned work capability assessment changes that have all the hallmarks of another Westminster attack on our most vulnerable. They could potentially directly attack some of the most sick and ill people in society. Shame on the UK Government. If it were to immediately scrap the two-child cap, the 80,000 children in Scotland who are affected by it no longer would be, and 15,000 of those children would be lifted out of poverty. There is also the heinous rape clause.

I sign up to the Scottish Government's motion, which acknowledges the excellent progress that has been made by Social Security Scotland and our Parliament in supporting many of our most vulnerable citizens. It also acknowledges the £6.3 billion investment and the progress that has been made on tackling child poverty. The motion also points out the clear cruelties and deficiencies of the current UK Conservative Government's approach to welfare. Acknowledging that should be plain sailing for any Labour Party that is worthy of the name. How sad that the UK Labour Party representatives in the Scottish Parliament have again failed to offer any commitment to scrapping the repugnant Tory rape clause or seeking to raise any concerns about work capability assessments.

As we look to the Parliament passing the 2024-25 Scottish budget in the days ahead, let us also draw attention this afternoon to the Labour Party's actions in seeking to remove all reference to the impact of Westminster austerity on Scotland and any reference to cuts to Scotland's block grant by Westminster. This is a diminished Labour Party; it

is a Labour Party in name only. Let us have no crocodile tears from the Labour Party about the tough choices that the Scottish Government will make in the days ahead because of the UK cuts. We need to be champions for the most vulnerable people in Scotland, not apologists for Westminster.

I will now talk about the what nexts for social security in Scotland. I acknowledge that the what nexts depend heavily on the extent of UK austerity and the budget constraints on the Parliament, but I want to suggest a few. We need to explore whether there is a need for a taper when people move into work or lose universal credit when they were previously receiving the Scottish child payment. Should those payments be removed in a phased way? Is there a cliff edge as families try to get back into work? Are there unintended consequences of that? Willie Rennie made some points in relation to how we support making work pay in Scotland. Perhaps the Scottish child payment has a role to play in getting people into well-paid work. Using a taper might be one way of doing that. I would like to know what the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government think about that.

I also believe that we need to do more to provide support with energy costs for terminally ill individuals, their families and their carers. Ahead of this afternoon's debate, Marie Curie Scotland and Motor Neurone Disease Scotland gave us a briefing in which they call for several things, one of which is targeted support with energy costs from the Scottish Government for those in that situation. I acknowledge that one of my SNP colleagues at Westminster, Marion Fellows, is seeking to bring in legislation at the UK level to establish a social tariff for those who are disabled and those who have a terminal illness. However, if we can do more in Scotland, even though it is the UK's responsibility, let us do so, despite the financial constraints.

I will support the Scottish Government's motion this afternoon and will reject the amendments from a discredited Conservative Party and a diminished Labour Party.

15:55

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): A quarter of families in Scotland are now living in poverty, and urgent action is required across a range of areas to protect families from the immediate impact of the cost of living crisis and austerity. Parents need to have a consistent and sufficient income to plan ahead and make decisions for their children. Parental employability funds exist to assist in lifting people out of poverty, but they have been stripped of more than £20 million in a year by the SNP Government.

We welcome the news that the Scottish Government has finally listened to the Scottish Labour Party and has provided resources to wipe school meals debt. However, the policy is limited to a year and, without sustained investment, the debt will begin to build up again almost immediately.

Adverse childhood experiences have been found to have a lifelong impact on mental health. One of those experiences is a childhood that is spent below the poverty line. According to Public Health Scotland, children who are born into poverty are more likely to experience mental health problems. Prevention of adverse childhood experiences, such as poverty, is essential for fostering the long-term mental wellbeing of young people. Public Health Scotland has advised that the majority of people's mental health problems will develop before the age of 24, with 50 per cent of mental health difficulties being established by the age of 14. The SNP is set to miss its own statutory child poverty target, with 23 per cent of children in relative poverty in 2021-22.

Children who are born into impoverished areas will eventually face significant hurdles in their life. The longer children live below the poverty line, the bigger the impact it has on their overall health, development and wellbeing. If the Scottish Government fails to meet its own 2030 child poverty targets, it will place an even bigger strain on the NHS. Mental health services and social security will be affected as a result.

Bob Doris: Will the member take an intervention?

Foyso Choudhury: I want to make progress.

The Scottish child payment is a welcome investment in lifting children out of poverty, but there needs to be a more targeted approach to addressing the consequences of a childhood lived below the poverty line. This week, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health has an exhibition in Parliament, and many members will have already visited its stand. The centre's recent report outlines that the cost of living crisis and austerity are affecting mortality rates across Scotland. In 2019, it was reported that a boy who was born in Muirhouse had a life expectancy that was 13 years less than that of a boy who was born in neighbouring Cramond. That is still the reality for many children who grow up in poverty. Across the nation, healthy life expectancy is decreasing, but it is decidedly lower for those who are from the most deprived areas across Scotland.

Paul McLennan: Will the member give way?

Foyso Choudhury: I want to make some more progress.

The report also emphasises increasing death rates among poorer communities across the country that were made worse by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Those inequalities can often be linked back to a childhood below the poverty line, yet we are still seeing budgets for tackling child poverty and social justice reduced. This year alone, those budgets have gone down by £3 million, and they are £68.8 million lower than they were two years ago.

The Scottish Government must meet its 2030 child poverty targets, but it must also address other inequalities that people in Scotland are facing. Social security costs are spiralling. There has been a multimillion-pound increase in the cost of supporting the delivery of devolved benefits, yet we are still seeing alarmingly high waiting times for the child disability payment, and there has been no great improvement in waiting times for the adult disability payment. Around half of all people who live in poverty live in a household in which at least one member is disabled.

The Scottish Government must do so much more to patch up the broken system.

16:01

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Although I am pleased to be taking part in today's debate, I will be even more pleased to see the day when the cost of living crisis and inequality are no longer an issue here in Scotland. However, at the moment, they are, and we are still trying to mitigate the situation.

Therefore, I am delighted to hear that the Scottish Government will invest a record £6.3 billion in social security in the year ahead. That money is an investment in the folk of Scotland, in our social contract with them and in the safety net that should be there to catch folks when times get tough. Right now, times are tough.

During the cost of living crisis, every single penny that we can put towards helping folk to get by is worth it. I am particularly pleased that, when folk interact with Social Security Scotland, they are treated with dignity, fairness and respect. That approach is a key part of why 90 per cent of people who had been in contact with Social Security Scotland said that their experience with staff was "good" or "very good" and 93 per cent felt that they were treated with kindness. I think that that approach stands in sharp contrast to what folk have experienced with the UK Government's Department for Work and Pensions, especially since the UK Government first started to implement its welfare reforms.

The idea that social security needed to be reformed was not in itself a bad idea, but it was not simply reformed. Instead, billions of pounds of

support was snatched from the very hands of folk who needed it most, right across the UK. Looking back, I remember the devastation of those who had been sanctioned and simply did not know where to turn to for help. I remember the fear of those who did not know how they would cope with the impending bedroom tax. I remember the trepidation of those who were asked to attend a work assessment, including those with lifelong or terminal conditions. I remember the implementation of the benefit cap, the child cap and the rape clause. I remember food banks becoming commonplace.

For a lot of folk, the early 2010s was when their cost of living crisis started. That was when they started to struggle to afford food and electricity. That was when they could no longer afford to socialise, play sports or enjoy certain hobbies, or to take part in a wide range of activities that give joy and meaning to life, because they cost money. In the past two years, most folk have cut back on such things or have simply gone without.

I am worried about how many folk are now struggling with their utility bills, their housing costs and their food bills, because those are the price rises that hit folk hardest. However, my even greater worry is for the people who have been struggling for a decade or so. The pressures that they face are not cost of living pressures. Heating, shelter and food are basic essentials. The challenge that they now face is with the cost of merely surviving. They face that situation because the UK Government did not see the value of social security and the safety net that it is supposed to offer in time of need. Today, I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government values that safety net and that Social Security Scotland is starting to repair it.

That this Parliament has the power to make some differences is a result of the independence referendum and the Smith commission that followed. If we look at the communities that have been hardest hit by the Tory welfare cuts, we see that they are the communities where support for Scottish independence was the highest. In my Aberdeen Donside constituency, that was certainly the case across Middlefield, Mastrick, Cummings Park, Northfield and Heathryfold. I know that we will have seen that in other communities right across this nation.

It is fair to say that, during that campaign, many of the folk who were struggling to get by saw the prospect of independence as a light at the end of the tunnel. Those of us in the yes campaign promised that things could be better with independence, with control over our own affairs. The independence campaign gave a lot of folk hope, and we saw how powerful that hope could

be with the turnout that we saw on 18 September 2014.

The aftermath of the referendum saw the Smith commission and further devolution, and now this Parliament has some power over welfare. What has followed has been the establishment of Social Security Scotland. We are building a social security system that, even at this early stage, is offering support from the cradle to the grave, with best start grants, best start foods and the game-changing Scottish child payments there for the start of life, while funeral support payments are supporting families who are grieving the loss of a loved one at the end of life.

All of that has helped to bring about a situation in which 90,000 fewer children are growing up in poverty than might be otherwise. That is investing in Scotland's future, and that is what we can do with just some control over our own affairs. There is more to do, but we are on the right path, and continued record investment in social security will help to make the fairer and more equal Scotland that we all want to see a reality.

16:07

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I put on record my thanks to all the organisations that have engaged with me over recent weeks or sent in briefings for today's debate. The work that those organisations and their staff and volunteers do is a vital part of our system of social protection, on which we all rely. I will not manage to address today all the asks in those briefings, but I undertake to keep them in mind in forthcoming discussions about budgets and service deliveries.

For decades now—for the whole of my lifetime—both the idea and the practice of social security have come under cynical and sustained attack. In the UK, they have been undermined by the vicious drip-feed of media myth, made subject to humiliating and often impossible hurdles, and reduced to levels of near and often actual destitution. Too often, even those defending social security have been apologetic and half-hearted. They cannot, it seems, fully withstand those tabloid lies, the constant bombardment of stereotypes and the perpetuation of the deep and damaging stigma that generations now bear.

Social security is not an unfortunate side hustle—a grubby little job to be got out of the way before we begin our important business. It is our important business. It is at the heart of what a responsible Government does and what a responsible Parliament cares about. Why is that?

First, it is a question of justice. The degree of inequality in our society goes far beyond anything that might be explained by natural variations of

fortune, aspiration, hard work or talent. It represents deliberate dispossession and the ongoing transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. It is a reverse Robin Hood, obscenely celebrated as though the Sheriff of Nottingham were the hero and Maid Marian a woke activist, getting in the way of economic growth. Salaries for the richest have been rising in what Professor Danny Dorling has described as a “spiral of excess”, involving not only bankers and hedge fund managers but those such as university vice-chancellors who once saw their work as a matter of public benefit and the common good.

Faced with such injustice, we should be unashamed in calling for fair redistribution—for the poor to recover what has been stolen from them. Social security is one way in which we can do a small part of that essential rebalancing—a small act of justice and solidarity.

Secondly, it is a question of rights. Among the four freedoms that President Roosevelt set out as the foundations of a post-war world was freedom from want. The social and economic rights that expressed that freedom are integral to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 75th anniversary we celebrated just a couple of months ago. It was a pure political project on the part of capitalist Governments to pretend that those rights were less important than their counterpart civil and political freedoms. It is part of our role to dismantle that project and to restore a dignified and healthy life to the heart of our human rights endeavours.

Thirdly, it is a question of sustainability and of what our shared future will look like. Inequality, as the authors of “The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better” demonstrate, damages our whole society. The traumatic effects of poverty harm not only individuals and families but communities and social structures across time and place. There are huge tasks ahead as we work for a fair, peaceful, unpolluted and thriving Scotland, and we each need the resources and resilience to play our part.

As the motion reflects, we can and, I think, should be proud of what we have done in Scotland, including our record investment in social security, our increased benefits, our respectful approach and our mitigation of Westminster cruelties, but most of all we should be proud of the Scottish child payment, which Professor Danny Dorling has described as

“the single policy intervention that has created the largest fall in child poverty anywhere in Europe for at least 40 years”,

as others have highlighted.

However, we must do more. We must look at all our policies, budget decisions and proposed

legislation from the perspective of a child in poverty. We must use the tools that we have and develop those that we need. Participation, transparency, accountability, accurate data and monitored targets all take meticulous work, humility and a willingness to challenge and be challenged. This afternoon's debate is an opportunity to recommit ourselves to that work and that willingness, and I thank Bob Doris especially for his suggestions and clear proposals for us to consider.

We must continue to call out Westminster's cruel and vindictive policies, its direct social security decisions, the inhuman two-child limit and the prurient rape clause, and its failures in reserved areas, especially in energy, trade and immigration. Social security that excludes children seeking sanctuary from the worst horrors of the world is neither social nor secure.

We must challenge vested interests that hide their exploitation of the poor behind a cloak of invented inevitability. The reality of the cost of living crisis is that it represents the cost of greed. The new report by Global Justice Now and others, "Taken, not earned: How monopolists drive the world's power and wealth divide", shows how huge corporations and their billionaire controllers set exorbitant prices using their effective monopoly power not only to gouge consumers but to strangle the smaller firms on which our communities depend.

Social security, at its best, is the essential oil that keeps our society, our communities and our families working as they should—safe and secure and freed from want to come together in growing our shared future. We are privileged to help to make that a reality.

16:13

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's plans to invest £6.3 billion in benefits and payments in 2024-25, thereby supporting more than 1.2 million people. The Scottish Government has rightly taken a different path from the UK Government on social security. The contrast between the two Governments could not be greater. Here in Scotland, we are creating a social security system that is humane and compassionate, and which recognises that decent levels of support and assistance are essential to help our citizens to thrive. It is an investment that secures a fairer Scotland that wants to leave no one behind.

That is in stark contrast to the Westminster system, which has a punitive approach at its heart. It promotes stigma and drives down living standards to the lowest levels since records

began, with a sanctions regime that stigmatises and denies basic subsistence. It ignores the evidence of experts such as Dr David Webster of the University of Glasgow, who believes that

"The workhouse aside, there's never been a social security programme that delivered as much pain for so little gain".

Yet, that system has been supported by the two main Westminster parties, Labour and the Tories, as has use of private sector medical assessments, which have caused much misery and harm.

A humane system needs to take a different approach. The Scottish Government has taken that path with our social security system by delivering 14 benefits that tackle poverty and reduce inequality—seven of which, including the Scottish child payment, are available only in Scotland—and, which is most important, an overall system that treats people with dignity, fairness and respect.

That record investment demonstrates the Scottish Government's choices in particularly challenging times. With increased food, energy and general living costs, we are trying to reach the people who need it most. That is delivering real and meaningful change, through Social Security Scotland.

In the recent London School of Economics and Political Science blog post entitled "What Scotland's policies can teach Westminster about fighting poverty", academics from the University of York wrote:

"The devolution of some social security powers has meant that Scotland has been able to forge a different path, introducing potentially transformative policy reforms which mean families with children living north of the border face a more hopeful future than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK."

When discussing the Scottish child payment, the blog states:

"Oxford University's Danny Dorling has predicted that the increased and extended payments will transform Scotland from being one of the most unequal places to live in Europe to being one of the most equal. In short: it's a big deal."

Those academics are right. It is a big deal and we will do more, but we are hindered in that endeavour by the need to mitigate Westminster welfare cuts. For instance, £90 million has been made available for discretionary housing payments, including payments to fully mitigate the bedroom tax, which will help more than 92,000 households in Scotland to sustain their tenancies. More than 50 per cent of Scottish households that are in receipt of universal credit housing element have rents that exceed the local housing allowance that has been set by Westminster, so discretionary housing payments are in many cases necessary to help to cover the rent.

The benefit cap has also been mitigated as fully as possible to support more than 2,700 families, which include more than 9,400 children. The cap denies children the support that they need, but the Tories persevere with it. Shamefully, Labour is silent on the cap that plunges families into poverty, but is all chatty about the cap on bankers' bonuses. Labour is happy to see the cap on bankers' bonuses lifted, but will not commit to lifting the cap on benefits or to scrapping the two-child policy and its abhorrent rape clause. That is disgusting.

We are also righting wrongs that the Tories and Labour refuse to fix. One example is the raw deal that both parties have given unpaid carers when in government. Since 1976, when the carers allowance was introduced as invalid care allowance, successive UK Governments have refused to align the amount that is paid with other earnings-replacement benefits. It has taken the SNP Government to change that, with the carers allowance supplement.

We are making further improvements, in contrast with the neglect from Westminster. The recent proposed changes to work capability assessments show that that neglect will continue. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that hundreds of thousands of people could be impacted and will lose more than £4,000 per year. Unfortunately, that shows that the cruel UK Government austerity measures are continuing at pace.

We need to end that Westminster approach, which lacks humanity and compassion. Real change will come only with independence and full control over social security. Then, we could remove the two-child limit and scrap the rape clause, remove the benefit cap and bedroom tax and end the benefit sanctions regime and the young parent penalty. We could provide more support for people who are starting work, such as up-front childcare and travel costs.

The Scottish Government will continue to invest in social security, providing help when needed and investing in our citizens. With independence, we will do even more.

16:19

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the debate as an opportunity to scrutinise the work of Social Security Scotland and the devolution of benefits in Scotland. As others have said, we face significant problems with poverty, deprivation, deindustrialisation, poor growth and poor productivity in Scotland. We will not be able in the debate to lay out a strategy to deal with that situation.

However, I believe that we can use the debate as an opportunity to scrutinise what has happened in recent years and how social security is working in Scotland. The cabinet secretary and others are, of course, correct to make the point about mitigation; decisions that this Parliament has made to mitigate some of the inhumane policy decisions of the Westminster Government are part of the reason why social security benefits in Scotland are under strain and the budget is so high. The role of this Parliament is to ensure that the new significant social security benefits and budgets are properly spent and that support is provided to those who are most in need.

It is fair to say that all parties in the chamber have the expectation that Social Security Scotland will be significantly better than the Department for Work and Pensions, but as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I would like to highlight some of the flaws that I believe exist in the design of the Scottish social security system, and which are becoming increasingly apparent.

Despite more than five years of a devolved social security system that was meant to be fairer than its UK predecessor, in-work poverty and deprivation levels in Scotland remain stubbornly high, with many of the problems that claimants highlight being very similar to those that were experienced when the DWP was dealing with similar benefits. Unfortunately, the cabinet secretary's claim to have transformed the social security system in Scotland—I presume that she means the experience of claimants—is simply not borne out in reality.

For example, last week, my office was contacted by two constituents who were receiving daily communications by email saying that their payments would be stopped. Both cases were resolved when we intervened. However, I believe that that is an example of overreliance on systems sending out automatic computer-generated emails, which cause distress. On both occasions, the social security emails indicated that information had not been provided and that, therefore, benefits were being stopped. However, it was later accepted that, in fact, the information had been safely received.

There are also serious concerns about the over-budget and behind-schedule social security information technology system, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will respond to those concerns in her conclusions.

If we look at some of the most recent statistics that are available, it appears that processing times have worsened for several services, compared with previous years' times. I note what the convener of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee said in relation to one specific

benefit—it might be that she has information that I have not been provided with, yet. However, when we look at the data for the adult disability payment, which is a substantial benefit that takes up a substantial part of the budget, we see that the average number of days waiting for an application to be processed has increased. Between March 2023 and October 2023, the average waiting time for an adult disability payment to be processed was 104 working days. Over the same period for the year before, the application processing time was 37 days.

If there is more up-to-date information on any progress, it would be helpful if that could be provided. However, according to the most recent available data on the child disability payment, the average number of days for an application for it to be processed has also increased. Between January 2023 and September 2023, an application took 105 working days, which was longer than the previous timescale.

Collette Stevenson: I touched on that point earlier, in my response to an intervention from Willie Rennie. When the Social Justice and Social Security Committee visited Social Security Scotland in Dundee, we heard that there were external factors at play, which I also alluded to in my speech. Notwithstanding that, there are also significant factors with regard to the varying degrees of disabilities and activities that need to be dealt with.

However, the member asked about processing times—the number of days has gone down. When Social Security Scotland gave evidence to the committee last week, it stated that the time that is taken is clearly going down, and that it is a work in progress.

Katy Clark: I do not know whether I am going to get time back, Presiding Officer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give you the time back for that.

Katy Clark: I am grateful for that, Presiding Officer, because—as you can see—time is progressing.

Similar information to the data that I set out is available in relation to the funeral support payment. However, I will look at what the committee convener said, because that information has not been provided formally as yet and, as she will be aware, I did not attend that particular committee visit. As she will also be aware—and as other members have highlighted in the debate—the turnaround times for some benefits are the same as, or have at times been worse than, DWP levels.

Labour members fully appreciate the financial pressures on the Scottish Government. As I said,

most social security spend goes on the adult disability payment, and there are pressures. We strongly support new benefits that have been introduced, including the Scottish child payment. That specific measure is worthy of mention, because recent research suggests that it has been successful.

As a Parliament, however, we have to say clearly that we have high expectations of Social Security Scotland. It is not helpful for the Scottish Government to lodge self-congratulatory motions. We need a balanced debate, and some significant issues have been raised today. It is appropriate to raise those issues in the chamber, and I hope that, as we move forward, there will be a constructive debate as to how we ensure that what claimants receive in Scotland is at least as good as what they receive south of the border or—as most of us would hope—significantly better.

16:26

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I am happy to contribute to the debate, and proud to highlight the work of Social Security Scotland, which I believe has been hugely positive and has been making a real difference to people's lives. I am disappointed, however, that in the amendments that are before us there is no recognition of the huge amount of dedication and effort from all those who are involved in delivering Scotland's social security. The Government motion rightly recognises that they play

“a vital role in tackling poverty and reducing economic and social inequalities”.

That work stands in stark contrast to the callous right-wing policies of the Tory UK Government and the UK Opposition's meek desire to ape them.

A decade of austerity, a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for and disastrous economic decisions such as Liz Truss's infamous mini-budget have hit Scottish households and deepened inequality. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently highlighted that more than one in five people in the UK—22 per cent—were in poverty in 2021-22, which is a total of 14.4 million people. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation stated:

“It has been almost 20 years and 6 prime ministers since the last prolonged period of falling poverty.”

The Scottish Government is doing everything that it can, with limited powers, to put money in people's pockets, as the Tories take it away and Labour promises more of the same.

The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has gone as far as to say that the UK Government's welfare system is “grossly insufficient” after a decade of austerity and may potentially be in violation of

international law. However, what is Westminster's response to that shocking statement? It is more cuts and more austerity, as Rishi Sunak considers plans to slash sickness benefits to the tune of £4 billion. Those proposed changes would mean that, in Scotland alone, as many as 56,500 people would lose out on existing health benefits worth £390 per month.

Should we be proud of the fact that in response to being told that mothers were being forced to water down baby formula, the Prime Minister said, after being pressed, that he was, of course, "sad" to hear that someone was in that situation. Sad? He and his party should be ashamed that, in 2024, families cannot afford to feed their children.

Can the Prime Minister be proud of the fact that, rather than showing compassion and focusing on making people's lives better, he is happily gambling with lives instead? While people struggle to scrape together another tenner for food, he is happy to wager £1,000 with Piers Morgan on whether his unlawful and inhumane Rwanda deportation policy will ever get off the ground, turning ex-Home Secretary Suella Braverman's self-proclaimed "dream" and "obsession" into a reality.

Meanwhile, Keir Starmer even praised Margaret Thatcher in a recent article, and that was amid a string of U-turns and broken promises from the shadow cabinet, most recently when it confirmed that it has no intention of reinstating the cap on bankers' bonuses.

We should be proud of a social security system that puts dignity, fairness and respect at its heart. Tackling poverty and protecting people from harm is one of the three critical and interdependent missions of the Scottish Government, alongside focusing on the economy and strengthening public services. Remember that it is only with the full economic and fiscal powers of an independent nation that ministers can use all the levers that other Governments have to tackle inequalities.

The paper "Building a New Scotland: Social Security in an independent Scotland" shows how a progressive Scottish Government with full powers could take

"a human rights-based approach, treating people with dignity, fairness and respect";

"build a system that is an integral part of a wellbeing economy";

and deliver

"financial security for all through a Minimum Income Guarantee".

Small, independent European nations that are comparable to Scotland have lower inequality and poverty rates than the UK does. If they can do it, why can Scotland not do it? Until then, the SNP

Government will use the limited powers of devolution to build a social security system with dignity, fairness and respect at its core. We should support that and be proud of it.

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

16:31

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

It is fair to say that the debate has been a bit of a mixed bag. Much of the cabinet secretary's opening speech and the content of the motion look as though they have been copied and pasted from the 12 September debate, much of which was copied and pasted from our debate on 4 September.

I note that we have another debate on social security on 20 February, which is slightly different in that the Cabinet will lay out how to build a full social security system in Scotland in the context of an immediate £14 billion cut to the revenue spending in this country. We look forward to that.

Today, many members have, rightly, set out the benefits of an evolving constitutional settlement in Scotland, which has provided social security powers and, crucially, presented real and often very difficult decisions for this Parliament and the Government to take about how to use those powers and how to provide the resources to pay for them.

It falls to all of us who support a progressive welfare system that recognises human dignity and supports our families and the communities in which they live to continually make the case for an effective and efficient Social Security Scotland. Public support for that institution and for the powers and how they are used is absolutely crucial, but it depends on the effective operation of that system. The job of Parliament in that regard is to ensure that we ask those questions and challenge the Government to make sure that the system performs properly. It is on that basis that we will continue to command full public support for the system.

Members are correct to question the operation of the system as it stands, and we have had some useful exchanges on that today. However, we should not be in a position where waiting times for disability payments are longer in Scotland than they are in the rest of the UK. When people are facing destitution, that has a real and immediate impact.

Willie Rennie was right to discuss the issue of backdating payments, but for many people the need is immediate—it is not just a case of whether they can get the money in a few months' time. The

cabinet secretary highlighted some of those issues and will continue to have those conversations, but many people cannot wait weeks, months or even days.

Collette Stevenson highlighted the committee visit to Social Security Scotland in God's own city of Dundee and, crucially, the recognition from senior staff there that they must, and are striving to, do better to reduce waiting times. There can be consensus that more has to be done in that area and that we want to see those performances improve.

There are considerable challenges in the system, and significantly growing numbers of people have long-term sickness. Paul O'Kane was right to highlight the numbers—50,000 people—in that regard and the calls from Macmillan Cancer Support to ensure that people with a terminal illness are given proper respect and the dignity that the cabinet secretary says she wants to see in the system that she presides over.

There has been some discussion during the debate about what is next. Bob Doris talked about some of the challenges that the system will face, and I will highlight one in particular.

Recently, the Office for National Statistics highlighted that an additional 200,000 people across the UK are suffering from long-term sickness. That is a significant strategic challenge for the entire UK's social security system, not just Scotland's.

The causes of the sickness rates are far from clear. There are certainly issues to deal with in the post-Covid environment, with its burden of legacy disease. We know that the figures are partly a consequence of the Government's complete failure to restart our NHS appropriately and the failure of its recovery plan, with one in six people on waiting lists, disastrous accident and emergency performance and elective surgery that is at a standstill for many people across Scotland. If we do not solve such issues, we will continue to increase the burden on our social security system.

Paul McLennan: We keep on hearing that Labour is the change that we need. Paul O'Kane was asked what welfare policies Labour would reverse if it were in power in the UK and he mentioned fiscal rules. Fiscal rules are something that Labour could change if it is in power. That would be a political choice, which is an important point. Marie McNair mentioned mitigation policies, but, to start with, a Labour Government could reverse the two-child cap, the rape clause and the capital cuts, and it could raise the local housing allowance. Does the member support making that request of an incoming Labour Government?

Michael Marra: The minister rightly points to the issue of fiscal discipline in the UK. We have seen,

and we regularly discuss, the complete lack of fiscal discipline from Conservative colleagues, which has left us in a disastrous situation, with rising household prices, mortgage payments going through the roof and the real challenges that are pushing people into poverty in this country. Labour will never play fast and loose with the public finances, and we will examine the situation that is inherited, if we have the opportunity to serve in a UK Parliament after a general election.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

It is on those bases that those decisions will be taken—and rightly so, because those are contingent issues. We must have an economy that works and effective stewardship of our public finances to ensure that we can do that.

That brings me to the point about the effective stewardship of public finances in Scotland. There is a £1.9 billion gap in our budget, of which £1.3 billion is above and beyond the block grant allocations on social security—in other words, it relates to decisions that are taken by the Government. However, those issues will be exacerbated by the long-term sickness figures. If we listen to the Office for Budget Responsibility, all of that leads to a 1.5 per cent downtick in gross domestic product figures. That in itself would also be disastrous, if we are to deliver the resources that we all want to deliver for social security and many other public services that we require.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, as I am just coming to a conclusion, but thank you for your interest, Mr Doris.

I will briefly reflect on the contributions of my colleagues behind me, Foysol Choudhury and Katy Clark, who detailed some of the issues that they have received in representations from their constituents. It is the divergence between the representations that we MSPs receive in our inboxes and the content of the motion that means that we shall not be able to support it today.

There are significant challenges that the Government must face up to. The sooner we can get into a more constructive debate on that, the better.

16:38

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I think that we have heard a lot of the SNP rhetoric that we will hear during the Westminster election.

I thank the organisations that provided helpful briefings for today's debate. We all want a social security system that can help people to realise

their potential and provide a safety net when they need it.

As the cabinet secretary stated at the beginning of the debate, Parliament has worked on a cross-party basis to support the delivery of new payments. Ministers have highlighted, for example, the Scottish child payment, which is making a difference, and we should collectively welcome that.

However, Katy Clark was right to say that today's debate should have been about scrutinising the Scottish Government. It would have been more honest for the cabinet secretary and SNP and Green members to acknowledge the many and increasing challenges that Social Security Scotland is facing, as well as the increasing questioning of the future sustainability of the new and existing benefits.

The Conservatives have stated—I have stated—in previous debates that we cannot believe that ministers and SNP and Green MSPs have not received complaints from constituents about Social Security Scotland processing times and arrangements. It does not help any of us—certainly not our constituents—to dismiss or sweep those concerns under the carpet.

Despite the SNP-Green Government claiming that all is well, it is clear that the transition to and establishment of social security powers in Scotland to date have not been as easy or straightforward as Scottish ministers suggested they would be. The fact that the DWP and UK ministers have been able to provide contingencies and extensions is welcome—it shows that the UK is working together—but those assists will be in place until 2026 to support the delivery of what was meant to already be in place here. Promises made by SNP ministers about the establishment capabilities of Social Security Scotland have clearly not been realised.

We are in the middle of a Scottish budget process. Although ministers today highlight a forecasted £1.1 billion more in welfare spending, what is not clear—although it is something that we should all, across the parties in the chamber, take seriously—is the future sustainability of that spend, especially as we see the developments in relation to new demand-led payments. The Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee has consistently, and on a cross-party basis, raised concerns in Parliament about the future financial sustainability of our welfare budgets, but we have not heard much about that from ministers today.

Bob Doris: I mentioned the idea of tapering the Scottish child payment to support families and parents back into work without there being a cliff edge. It would be of financial benefit to the UK

Government to get people off universal credit and the like. Do you think that the UK Government could help to finance some of that in Scotland? Is there hope that the UK Government will fund Scotland more, to allow us to do innovative things that would save the UK Exchequer cash?

Miles Briggs: I definitely think that that should be looked at.

A number of issues have been touched on that both Governments can look to take forward collectively—Willie Rennie made a characteristically measured contribution. However, today, we have lacked a vision for our social security system.

On that point, 150,000 of our fellow Scots who have never been able to get into work—that is 6.8 per cent of our working-age population—need additional support to achieve that. One of my key questions is whether cuts to employability schemes in Scotland over recent years have hampered that happening.

Changes to carers allowance have been touched on. The extension of payments towards six months for people who have been bereaved is something on which I think there is cross-party consensus.

We have seen a negative impact on rural households from changes to the winter heating payment. Maggie Chapman, who represents North East Scotland, did not want to mention the fact that, under the SNP-Green Government, her constituents are facing an unfair and cruel cut to the winter support that they receive. The Scottish Government should look at that again, because many people in rural Scotland are losing out because of the SNP-Green Government.

Bob Doris highlighted Marie Curie Scotland's briefing and the call for more targeted support for those who are terminally ill and their families and carers. I hope that we can look at that issue in future debates. I agree with Marie Curie Scotland that we need to see more support.

Last week, I chaired a round-table meeting with Kidney Care UK, at which I was pleased to hear from the minister responsible for palliative care about work that is progressing to deliver a national home-dialysis energy reimbursement scheme. That is really welcome, but, although kidney patients are an important group of patients, they are few in number. I hope that we will see more cross-party support for patients who run NHS medical equipment in their homes. The former First Minister said that providing such support would be a priority, but we have not quite seen it happen.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Members have alluded to reform of the work

capability assessment by the UK Government, which is under way. Does the member think that it is acceptable that, at a time of high poverty, while the Scottish Government is investing more than £1 billion above the Westminster funding for social security, the UK Government is looking to slash health benefits further to the tune of £4 billion?

Miles Briggs: I do not think that that is the case. The decisions that the UK Government has taken to increase Barnett formula funding have provided the Scottish Government with the resources to make different decisions and to make that investment.

I was about to come on to the point about UK Government support. We have heard a lot from SNP and Green back benchers about that, but let us look at the facts. This year alone, UK Government benefits will increase by an average of £470 for people in Scotland, which will benefit more than 700,000 of our fellow Scots.

The UK Government has provided £94 billion of support for households in navigating the cost of living crisis. No one has mentioned the real heart of that crisis, which is the global pandemic and the illegal invasion of Ukraine. It is welcome that, just last week, the UK Government announced the third instalment of its cost of living payment, which will be paid later this month to qualifying households and will benefit more than 680,000 people across Scotland through payments totalling £900 to each of those households.

The UK Government has also announced a national insurance cut that will put £754 in the pockets of more than 2.8 million working Scots.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I do not have any more flexibility.

The UK Government has also raised the minimum wage from £11.44, which will result in an increase of more than £2,000 a year for many households. Let us not forget that the state pension will increase by an average of more than £900 this year, benefiting more than 1 million pensioners in Scotland.

Taken as a whole, both Governments can and should be working together to deliver the welfare system that we want. As I have outlined, the UK Government has made many welcome changes to support people during the cost of living crisis.

Across the parties in this Parliament, we need to take seriously the future financial sustainability of our welfare system in Scotland. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament are responsible for that, and it is important that, in future debates, we consider how the system will be fully funded. That is why I am happy to support

the amendment in the name of my colleague Jeremy Balfour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to conclude the debate. You have a very generous nine minutes, cabinet secretary.

16:46

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Presiding Officer,

“The right to social security is of central importance in guaranteeing human dignity for all persons when they are faced with circumstances that deprive them of their capacity to fully realize their human rights.”

Those are not my words; they come from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and they underline exactly why we, as a Parliament, should be very proud of the difference in social security in Scotland, in that we recognise in statute that social security is a human right.

There have been a number of contributions that I will try to respond to. A variety of members, including Katy Clark and Willie Rennie, offered up cases as examples of areas where Social Security Scotland and social security in Scotland are not performing as they should be. In case I miss anyone out, at this point I say that, if members wish to provide me with details so that we can learn lessons about where things need to get better, and if the constituents concerned are agreeable, I am more than happy to look into those cases.

Willie Rennie: I appreciate that but, in principle, does the cabinet secretary accept that we need to backdate beyond the transfer from PIP to ADP to the point of the change of circumstance? Does she accept, in principle, that that should happen?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said, I am more than happy to look into what is preventing that from happening and to see whether we can do something in general about shortening that timeframe. I am happy to look into that—the offer is a genuine one.

That offer shows the difference between how we are running social security in Scotland and the DWP’s approach. Despite criticisms to the contrary, I am willing to learn lessons and I recognise that things need to improve. We will always ensure that we continuously look to improve. In his introductory speech, Jeremy Balfour somehow suggested that there have been no changes when compared to the DWP system, but he also criticised us for spending £1.1 billion more on social security because of policy changes that we have made. As Mr Swinney said, that was confused.

I point out to members what that £1.1 billion additional investment is all about. It is about new

benefits that are unique to Scotland—those make up £614 million, including the £457 million for the Scottish child payment. It is about other social security payments totalling £110 million, which include the Scottish welfare fund and discretionary housing payments, many of which are there to mitigate the worst excesses of Westminster. It is also about the spend above the block grant adjustment for social security—that makes up £368 million, of which £300 million is on adult disability payment. That is the difference that we are making. We are making policy changes because social security is an investment in the people of Scotland.

I will make two suggestions to those, particularly Conservative members, who ask how we can ensure the sustainability of social security. First, if the UK Government got its act together and ensured that we did not have to mitigate its worst excesses, that would save us hundreds of millions of pounds each year. Secondly, if the UK Government raised universal credit or introduced an essentials guarantee—we are still waiting for a reply on that, but I do not hold out hope—the Scottish Government would have more money to invest in and make other changes to social security. Many members have asked for such changes today, but none suggested where the money would come from.

When it comes to how people feel about social security and its delivery, I point to the number of complaints about ADP that were received in the first half of 2023-24—it represented 0.67 per cent of cases. We still have lessons to learn in that regard, but that clearly shows a marked difference with the DWP. The client survey results show that 97 per cent of people who use the service get their payments on time, and 93 per cent say that they were treated with kindness. I would compare that with the DWP, but it does not publish figures on that. I wonder why.

In relation to the contributions from Labour Party members, Paul O’Kane’s introductory remarks put the issue into focus right from the start. He talked about social security overall needing reform but, in response to the intervention by my colleague Kate Forbes, he gave no suggestions about what Labour would do. To be fair to Mr O’Kane, he said that Labour would have a review. I do not need a review to know that the rape clause is immoral or that universal credit is not fit for purpose and is not at a rate that allows people to survive, never mind thrive. *[Interruption.]* Unless anyone from Scottish Labour—I hear Michael Marra speaking from a sedentary position—wants to say that Labour will introduce an essentials guarantee and scrap the rape clause, we have, unfortunately, just heard more empty rhetoric from the Labour Party today.

We need to do better on processing times. There has been some discussion about people with a terminal illness. For absolute clarity, I say to members that, under the special rules, the processing time for people with a terminal illness is three days. That is an important reassurance, and I hope that everyone will be able to provide it to those who are suffering in some of the most difficult circumstances that they and their families will ever face.

In saying that, though, I know that people are waiting too long in many cases. That is why I am pleased that there have been improvements—there is more to do, but there have been improvements. The latest published figures, covering the period to October 2023, show that the average processing time for adult disability payment applications was reduced by seven working days. Social Security Scotland processed 18 per cent more adult disability payment applications than it did in the previous quarter, and more child disability payment applications were processed in the latest quarter than were processed in any other.

Yes, absolutely, there is more to do, but it is very important to recognise, once again, that the critical difference between Social Security Scotland and the DWP is that, in Scotland, we collate the supporting information for an individual. Previously, that time and stress lay on the claimant’s shoulders, but that will not happen under the system here.

Many members talked about case transfer. I can confirm that we are on target to complete all case transfer for care and disability benefits in 2025.

Many members also mentioned the work capability assessment, and they were right to do so, because I am very concerned about the changes to universal credit that were announced in the UK autumn budget statement. Last week, I met disabled people’s organisations to hear more about their concerns about the planned changes to the work capability assessment. I call on the UK Government to reverse its plans. The changes will lead to disabled people and those with long-term health conditions losing out financially, and they will cause stress to anyone who has to take part in the benefit sanctions regime. The Conservatives need to roll back their plans, and Labour needs to find a backbone and say that it will have nothing to do with them if it gets into power.

I was at Ibrox primary school this morning, where we had a very good discussion with parents. We talked about those who were already receiving the Scottish child payment and we learned once more what we need to do to encourage those who are eligible to apply. I ask everyone, regardless of their contribution to today’s discussions about social security, to work

with their constituents to ensure that they know about the benefits that are available to them.

I hope that we can have a consensus on the importance of bringing people together and ensuring that they get the benefits that they are entitled to, but we must look at our differences as well. Social Security Scotland is now delivering 14 benefits, seven of which are unique to Scotland. I compare that with an essentials guarantee, on which we cannot even get a reply from the UK Government; a rape clause, on which, with either Labour or the Conservatives, there will be no change; a two-child cap, on which there will be no change; and a sanctions regime, on which there will be no change.

I could go on with the areas where there will be no change, but there is one area where there will be change, and that is work capability assessments—driving more disabled people into the sanctions regime with all that worry and all that stress. Again, that is where those parties are united on the change that they will bring forward.

Once again, the debate has shown that our values in Scotland—the values of this Government—are about dignity, fairness and respect. We are delivering that through 14 benefits, seven of which are unique to Scotland. The values of Westminster, the values of the Conservatives and the values of Labour are not Scotland's values and they are not this Government's values. That is why we will continue to deliver for the people of Scotland with pride, to ensure that they get what is their human right: their social security entitlements.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. That concludes the debate on delivering record social security investment in Scotland to tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality.

Business Motions

16:57

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-12085, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme. I invite the minister to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 20 February 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Working Towards a Tobacco-free Scotland by 2034 and Tackling Youth Vaping

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Building a New Scotland - Social Security in an Independent Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 21 February 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Scottish Liberal Democrats Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 22 February 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice

followed by Ministerial Statement: Grangemouth Refinery

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Income Tax Rate Resolution 2024-25

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 27 February 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Budget (Scotland) (No. 3) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 28 February 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Constitution, External Affairs and Culture;
Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 29 February 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Stage 1 Debate: National Care Service (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: National Care Service (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-12086, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a stage 2 extension. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now. I call the minister to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be extended to 23 February 2024.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 19 February 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

16:57

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-12087, on committee meeting times. I ask the minister, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament following Decision Time on Wednesday 21 February 2024.—[*George Adam*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

16:58

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): I am happy to do so, Presiding Officer.

I move,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 16:58.

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:58

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

The question is, that amendment S6M-12079.2, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12079, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on delivering record social security investment in Scotland to tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:59

Meeting suspended.

17:01

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-12079.2, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12079, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville. Members should cast their votes now.

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)
 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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (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)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (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)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yusuf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-12079.2, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, is: For 30, Against 85, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-12079.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12079, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on delivering record social security investment in Scotland to tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My voting app did not work; I would have voted no.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)

O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

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)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)

McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-12079.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 18, Against 94, Abstentions 3.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-12079, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on delivering record social security investment in Scotland to tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 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, 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)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (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)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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 Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-12079, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on delivering record social security investment in Scotland to tackle the cost of living crisis and inequality, is: For 62, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that social security plays a vital role in tackling poverty and reducing economic and social inequalities, and that the Scottish social security system must have dignity, fairness and respect at its heart; welcomes the Scottish Government’s record investment of £6.3 billion in social security expenditure in 2024-25 and that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has forecast that this is an investment of £1.1 billion more than the funding received from the UK Government through the social security block grant; notes that this investment includes the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods, as well as the landmark, and extended, Scottish Child Payment, which is estimated to lift 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024; recognises that £614 million of Scotland-only benefits are being delivered in 2024-25, which is support that is unparalleled across the UK; further recognises the substantial difference that Social Security Scotland is making through improved disability and carers benefits; notes that Scottish Government support is being delivered despite continued UK Government block grant cuts and continued UK Government austerity, and calls on the UK Government to drop planned Work Capability Assessment changes, introduce an essentials guarantee and immediately scrap the two-child cap and the associated so-called rape clause.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-12087, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee meeting times, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament following Decision Time on Wednesday 21 February 2024.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Deafblindness

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business this evening is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11700, in the name of Rona Mackay, on the definition of deafblindness. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the process towards formal recognition in Scotland of deafblindness as a distinct disability; commends the work of the Cross-Party Group (CPG) on Deafness, whose members have been working tirelessly towards the definition of deafblindness becoming adopted in Scotland, which, it understands, is already the case elsewhere in the UK and within the European Parliament; notes the view that this is a crucial step towards identifying, diagnosing and supporting people with dual sensory loss who live in Scotland, including in the Strathkelvin and Bearsden constituency, and enabling the unique challenges that they face to be addressed; further notes what it sees as the valuable recommendations of Deafblind Scotland, having worked with partners in the CPG to develop a Declaration on Deafblindness; notes the calls from the group for the Scottish Parliament to recognise this low-incidence but high-impact disability in Scotland, and the formal adoption of the Nordic definition of deafblindness; understands that the World Health Organization (WHO) is one of several organisations that has already adopted the definition of deafblindness, and applauds Deafblind Scotland, in Lenzie, and its members, staff and volunteers, for working to ensure that lived experience plays an integral part in informing policy, including the formal recognition of the term deafblindness and its definition.

17:10

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to lead this debate on recognising deafblindness as a distinct condition and specialist disability in Scotland. I am privileged to have Deafblind Scotland's headquarters in Lenzie, in my constituency—in fact, it is about one mile from my house. It is a fantastic organisation, with a caring professional team led by chief executive Isabella Goldie. I am delighted to say that Isabella and many of her team and service users have made the journey from all over Scotland to be here in the chamber, and I welcome them warmly to the public gallery.

Last summer, I had the pleasure of opening a sensory path leading to the organisation's state-of-the-art building, and plans are under way to construct a sensory garden. The innovation and caring never stop at Deafblind Scotland, and I congratulate it at every level.

Few of us can even imagine experiencing the loss of one sense, never mind two. Since being elected in 2016, I have met inspirational people at

Deafblind Scotland who have lost those senses—some from birth and others gradually. Some are blind, some are deaf, and some are deaf and blind. They are brave and strong and do not complain. However, I believe that we, as a Government, have a responsibility to make life more bearable for them in whatever way we can. Tonight, I will mention a few things that we can and should do.

Currently, Scotland lacks a legal definition for deafblindness, which would be a crucial step towards recognising and diagnosing dual sensory loss at the earliest point and addressing the unique challenges that are faced by the deafblind community. Lack of a definition can lead to significant inequalities in access to education, employment, healthcare and public and social services, and it can have a hugely negative effect on a person's cultural and emotional wellbeing.

The impact of the condition can be devastating, resulting in profound levels of social isolation and resulting loneliness. Addressing that demands specialist interdisciplinary approaches and skilled early intervention when it comes to diagnosis. The World Health Organization, alongside other significant health systems in countries, has adopted the Nordic definition of deafblindness, part of which states:

"Deafblindness is a combined vision and hearing impairment of such severity that it is hard for the impaired senses to compensate for each other. Thus, deafblindness is a distinct disability.

To varying degrees, deafblindness limits activities and restricts full participation in society. It affects social life, communication, access to information, orientation and the ability to move around freely and safely."

I believe that Scotland should formally adopt the Nordic definition of deafblindness to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable future for deafblind people. It would enable Scotland to uphold and enshrine the human rights of people who are living with dual sensory loss now and in future. They have the right to live, learn, work and engage in social activities in an environment that respects their unique needs and promotes their autonomy.

I congratulate the cross-party group on deafness on all that it has done in working towards Scotland adopting the Nordic definition of deafblindness. That is a perfect example of a cross-party group working to achieve something that would have a lifelong benefit for the more than 34,000 people who it is estimated live with the condition in Scotland alone. Sadly, that number is set to rise in line with an ageing population.

I will highlight Julie's case, with her permission. Julie lives with Usher syndrome and was diagnosed as dual sensory impaired later in life. She is a teacher working and living in Orkney and

she is also a young mother. Deafblind Scotland supports her remotely. She said:

"I've experienced how essential it is for deafblind people to receive specific support. I grew up as a deaf person but I started losing my eyesight in my late teens.

Suddenly I couldn't use my eyesight to help me manage my deafness and when I was given advice for my sight loss, the advice relied on me being able to hear well. I felt like I was on my own, trying to learn how to cope, work, and lead a fulfilling life.

With this declaration, we can develop a world-class system that integrates knowledge of both impairments for tailored, useful support. This will reduce isolation and increase life satisfaction for so many of us."

Nothing that I could say here tonight could illustrate more powerfully than Julie's story why deafblindness should be recognised as a distinct disability.

Another issue that I have raised several times in the chamber is that of free travel for deafblind companions. There is no national standard fare structure for communicators to accompany deafblind passengers on trains, which makes travel impossible. That is another basic human right that most of us take for granted. I understand that travel is free on some routes but chargeable on others, which leads to geographical inequalities and confusion among rail staff. Free travel for companions would open up a whole new world of freedom for deafblind people. I have had encouraging replies from ministers when I have raised the matter previously, and I hope that it is something that we could deliver sooner rather than later.

Communicators open up a whole new world, acting as the eyes and ears of a deafblind person. Theirs is a highly skilled role that involves many years of training. Sadly, however, the remuneration is poor, which makes recruitment very difficult. I know that finances are tighter than ever these days, but I hope that the issue can be addressed in future budgetary planning in social care.

I hope that tonight's debate shines a light on some of the things that we could do to help our deafblind community. Let the debate be a turning point in doing that by recognising and supporting this distinct disability. It is the very least that we can do for members of the deafblind community.

I look forward to hearing members' contributions from across the chamber. I again thank the Deafblind Scotland team and users for coming to the public gallery tonight.

17:16

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this debate to highlight the progress that has been made towards the

formal recognition in Scotland of deafblindness as a distinct disability. I thank Rona Mackay for using her members' business allocation to discuss this important issue. I, too, welcome the visitors to the public gallery this evening.

For me, one of the best perks about being an MSP is that we can get involved in some varied and interesting groups, where we are given an opportunity to learn from experts in their field. Hopefully, we can then stand up in the chamber to promote causes, speak from the heart, push the debate and really make a difference to people's lives. This is exactly one of those situations, and I sincerely hope that we can use the debate to do just that.

As a member of the cross-party group on deafness, I can add first-hand evidence on all the hard work that has been done by the members who attend the group. In particular, the sub-group has put in a tremendous effort to ensure that the definition of deafblindness is adopted in Scotland. I would love to mention everyone by name, but I have only four minutes. In any case, they did a fantastic job.

After a quick Google search, I stumbled upon the following interesting points: the first time that deafblindness was documented was back in the records of the crusades; the history of deafblind education began in the early 1900s in Paris, with a young lady named Victorine Morriseau; Laura Bridgman was the first deafblind person to be educated in the United States, back in 1837; and the United Kingdom's Department of Health recognised a definition of deafblindness back in 1995.

Given the centuries that have passed, I can only assume that many people will feel frustrated that, here in Scotland, we still have progress to make to formally recognise the definition. I hope that we are on the last lap of that.

I add my request to that of Deafblind Scotland and the CPG on deafness in asking the Scottish Government to recognise deafblindness as a distinct condition and a specialist disability here in Scotland, reinforcing the position of the European Parliament, which is highlighted in the motion, that adopting the definition

"is a crucial step towards identifying, diagnosing and supporting people with dual sensory loss who live in Scotland",

and in encouraging the Government to take strident steps to address the unique challenges that are faced by the deafblind community.

Current research estimates that more than 30,000 people in Scotland live with the condition, and that number is set to rise in line with an ageing population, as Ms Mackay mentioned.

I mentioned the perks of learning something new, and being a member of the cross-party group on deafness has highlighted another issue for me: the links between dual sensory loss and dementia. Considering the number of people who are living with the condition and the aforementioned increase, which will continue as a result of our ageing population, it would be remiss of me not to highlight that connection.

I know that the cross-party group on deafness is already working on the issue. Steps have been taken to formally recognise the deafblindness definition, and the resulting ability to fully diagnose the condition will, it is hoped, pave the way towards a comprehensive screening programme. Not only will early intervention for dual sensory loss have benefits by ensuring that proper support is provided to enhance the lives of people who are living with deafblindness, but it can modify the risk of dementia in later life, and I urge the Scottish Government to engage with the CPG on deafness on that topic.

In conclusion, adopting the definition will enable Scotland to uphold and enshrine the human rights of people who are living with dual sensory loss, now and in the future.

17:21

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate Rona Mackay on bringing this important debate to the chamber. As convener of the cross-party group on visual impairment, I recognise how challenging dual sensory loss can be for people, as that has been raised at some of our CPG meetings in the past. It has also been brought to my attention by a constituent with dual sensory loss; she made me aware of the Nordic definition of deafblindness. I have since set up a meeting with Deafblind Scotland's chief executive, Isabella Goldie, to discuss that in more detail. I believe that she and others who are involved in the work are in the public gallery this evening, and I pay tribute to them and welcome them to the Scottish Parliament.

As per the motion before us, it is clear to see why Scotland needs to adopt a formal definition of deafblindness. First and foremost, that would help us to identify, diagnose and, ultimately, better support people in Scotland with dual sensory loss. Dual sensory loss often occurs over time, which means that the lack of joined-up services can be problematic. For example, if people who are deaf and use British Sign Language develop age-related conditions, they may lose their ability to communicate in their first, and often their only, language. Had earlier support been provided, it would have allowed for tactile communication to be taught. Equally, people with sight loss who lose

their hearing can become isolated, with limited avenues for communication.

That is why I support the adoption of the Nordic definition of deafblindness in Scotland, especially as that has already happened elsewhere in the United Kingdom and in the European Union. It is worth noting that the Nordic countries, after adopting that definition, went on to deliver better services and earlier identification of those who are at risk of a second sensory loss. Scotland can, therefore, learn from other nations about how best to develop care pathways for those with, or at risk of developing, deafblindness.

That is important, as I am told that, apart from Deafblind Scotland, only a few small organisations offer specialist services to people with dual sensory loss. Some will argue that the issue is not a priority, given the low incidence rate of that disability. However, the consequences of not providing the right support can be catastrophic for people and for their families, which is why it is crucial to ensure that the right services are in place. That point is reinforced by the fact that Deafblind Scotland has said that, all too often, it receives referrals for people who could have been provided with better emotional and practical support early in their transition to dual sensory loss.

I understand that the CPG on deafness has set up a short-life working group to look at concerns about dual sensory loss being identified in care home residents. I know that the cross-party group on visual impairment shares those concerns, along with concerns about the correlation with cognitive decline, which we discussed at our most recent meeting.

I believe that Scotland should formally recognise deafblindness so that research and services can be designed to better support people who are affected by dual sensory loss. Once again, I congratulate my colleague Rona Mackay on securing this hugely important members' business debate.

17:24

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Rona Mackay for bringing this important debate to the chamber and, like other members, I welcome everyone in the gallery: the members of Deafblind Scotland, the interpreters and all the families. It is absolutely great to see them here.

As we have heard, deafblindness is a low-incidence but very high-impact disability. I believe that the work by the cross-party group, by members of the deafblind community and by the families involved means that we have made progress. However, this debate allows us to bring the issue to the chamber and, therefore, closer to

the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, who, I hope, will have some good news to bring us in her closing remarks. I know from speaking to members of Deafblind Scotland earlier today that the minister has spent some time with the community, and that is really welcome.

As we have heard, deafblindness is a combination of hearing and sight loss. A deafblind person will not necessarily be completely blind and/or deaf, as was explained to me this afternoon. However, both senses are affected enough to create difficulties in everyday life, in areas that we all take for granted such as communication, assessing information and simply getting around. As I discussed earlier, that is why it is important to get a definition for the disability.

In my time in the Scottish Parliament, much of our debating time has been taken up, quite rightly, by looking at how we ensure that human rights are enshrined in our everyday work, policies and laws. This members' business debate is very much linked to that important aspect, as recognising that those with the disability have human rights will allow us to ensure that services are provided on that basis.

An estimated 31,000 deafblind people currently live in Scotland. As we have heard, however, Scotland lacks a legal definition of deafblindness. In my speaking notes, I have written, "Why is that important?" From talking to those in the community and to Deafblind Scotland, I know that it is important to that community to be recognised, so I want to bring that issue to the chamber—I did not have it in my notes, because I was looking at more clinical policy-based reasons, but it is important to the community that that is recognised.

In reading up on why we, in Parliament, might find that important with regard to legislation and regulation, I found that definition is a crucial step towards identifying and diagnosing people with dual sensory loss as early as possible so that support workers, clinicians and those in the social care network can address, at the earliest opportunity, the unique challenges that people face. That includes the provision of services that are, as we have heard today, unique to individuals in that community. If we miss that opportunity early on, it is a missed opportunity for that person and their life.

The cross-party group on deafness in the Scottish Parliament has been well supported. Rona Mackay has done a lot of good work, and Annabelle Ewing's support in this area is well recognised.

I am running out of time, but I highlight that, from my experience of working with families, we need to understand and believe people who are receiving services and their families, because they

know what we need to do to change lives. I hope that the minister has some good news for us today, because we need a definition to enable us to move on and make proper policy decisions and support commitments to people. That is important. I thank members for their contributions, and I thank those in the public gallery, too.

17:28

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I extend my thanks to Rona Mackay for bringing this incredibly important debate to the chamber, and I welcome people in the gallery.

I have raised my experience as the child of a deaf adult on several occasions in the chamber, and I have given my dad many mentions. However, my experience as a CODA—child of deaf adult—has deeply influenced my understanding of how we should approach disabilities, in particular ones that relate to hearing loss and communication.

The first meeting that I had with a deafblind person was more than 40 years ago. I was just a wee girl visiting Aberdeen deaf club with my dad. An elderly woman was sitting at a table, with a few people surrounding her. A person was crouching down beside her, holding the woman's hand upwards in the palm of her hand. They were using the palm as though it were a drawing board or keyboard.

My dad placed his hand on my back to coax me forward to say, "Hello." I looked back and signed to him, "What is she doing?" He signed to me, "She is deaf and blind, and that is how she communicates."

I went over and waved "Hello" to the person doing the interpreting. They then signed to the deafblind woman that a young girl—Len's daughter—was saying hello to her. She gave me a huge smile and tapped my hand.

What I did not understand then but have a profound understanding of now is the social isolation and loneliness that can accompany living with deafblindness, and how my dad's small push on my back was a small but significant teaching to ensure that I was polite and introduced myself. It also encouraged me to have a go at communicating, regardless of my hesitations at my abilities, because everyone needs connection.

As an adult, I realise that that interaction gave me the opportunity to learn that deafblindness—even within our community of deaf people and CODAs—was a unique experience with distinct communication and interaction support needs.

Dual sensory impairment or loss, or the loss of sight and hearing to the point at which someone's communication and ability to access information

are impacted, is a distinct disability. Deafblind UK explains:

“If you mix the colours yellow and blue together, you get green. Green is completely different to both yellow and blue, it is a colour in its own right.

The same is true of deafblindness. If you have sight loss and hearing loss, then you are deafblind, which is a completely unique condition.”

It bears repeating that, across Scotland, about 30,000 people are living with deafblindness. I just did a wee search—that number is almost equivalent to the population of Dumfries. That is a significant amount of people.

Those people are a wide variety of ages, but deafblindness is more common in older people, such as the lady I met when I was little. As was mentioned, as a result of our ageing population, the number of people living with deafblindness is due to rise.

Some of those living with deafblindness will struggle to see and hear the television, while others might not be able to see or hear anything at all. There is a wide spectrum of dual sensory impairment or loss, which affects everyone differently.

Currently, as we have heard, Scotland lacks a legal definition for deafblindness. I believe that our agreeing on a definition would be a crucial step towards recognising and diagnosing dual sensory loss at the earliest point and addressing the unique challenges that the deafblind community faces.

The World Health Organization, alongside other significant health systems and countries, has adopted the Nordic definition of deafblindness, and the European Parliament recognised deafblindness as a unique disability 20 years ago. It is time that Scotland did the same, and I am grateful for Deafblind Scotland’s work in raising the issue and for the support of colleagues and other stakeholders on the cross-party group on deafness, of which I am a member.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and it is particularly poignant to note that our speeches today could be being uniquely translated, as we deliver them, to those who relate to the deafblind experience. I hope that we have done them justice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sure that you have. Well done, Ms Adam.

17:33

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): First of all, I express my thanks to everyone who has attended the debate today, and I thank members for their insightful and interesting contributions. I

particularly thank Rona Mackay for bringing the issue to the chamber. I, too, add my welcome to members of the Deafblind Scotland community. Welcome to the chamber—you have welcomed me several times to Lenzie, so it is an absolute pleasure to welcome you to my workplace.

It is clear that everyone in the chamber is familiar with sensory loss, whether that be through personal experience or as it has touched the lives of family members, neighbours or constituents. I applaud the hard work of the CPG on deafness and others who have contributed their time and energy on defining deafblindness as a distinct disability and on the planned launch of the declaration in June, for deafblind awareness week.

Many of the contributions today have included excellent examples of the work that is going on the length and breadth of Scotland to support people with sensory loss. Karen Adam absolutely brought to life—as she often does in these debates—the experience of our deafblind community and the impact of sensory loss on the ability to participate in all the things that we take for granted. I am in awe of the people who live with dual sensory loss, and I am keen to do what I can to support both Deafblind Scotland in the incredible work that it does and the community itself.

The Scottish Government supports the social model of disability, which is a way of viewing the world that has been developed by disabled people. It allows us to look at disability through a social lens. In general terms, the definition of “a disability” under section 6 of the Equality Act 2010 will already cover a person with deafblindness, if they have “a physical ... impairment” that

“has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on”

their

“ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

There are protections in the 2010 act against discrimination on the grounds of someone’s disability. Section 20 requires that “reasonable adjustments” be made if certain conditions are met, and a failure to comply with that

“duty to make reasonable adjustments”

would also be discrimination under the act.

I am keen, therefore, to better understand where the definition has been adopted across the UK and what difference that has made in practice. There is the small issue of legislative competence in respect of the 2010 act, as that lies with Westminster rather than in Scotland. Nevertheless, I make a commitment today, in the chamber, to explore all the issues with Deafblind Scotland and with the interested members who have spoken in the debate. I recognise how important formal recognition is to the community,

and I am keen to work with it to resolve the many challenges that I am certain that its members face.

As I said, I was delighted to visit Deafblind Scotland last year to learn about the work that it does to support deafblind people and to hear its insights about improving services at the national level. Creating a fairer, more equal society is a priority for this Government, and our ambitions to achieve equality for all go hand in hand with our ambitions for a strong economy.

I will take the opportunity to share some of the work that the Scottish Government has taken forward to support people with hearing loss, sight loss and dual sensory loss. We are supporting the right to dream project, which is a partnership between Deafblind Scotland and Visibility Scotland to pilot a training course that supports people who are living with a sensory impairment to better understand their human rights. We also support Deafblind Scotland with the BSL cafe project, which increases opportunities at an early stage to reach people who are at risk of a secondary sensory loss and support them to acquire further communication skills.

Our strategy "See Hear: A strategic framework for meeting the needs of people with a sensory impairment in Scotland" supports children and adults who have deafness, sight loss or dual sensory loss to access the support and social care that they need. The strategy, which was published in 2014 and jointly endorsed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, is being implemented by local partnerships across Scotland. Since 2014, more than £5.5 million of funding has been allocated to support local implementation of the strategy and to help to drive progress. This year, a further £600,000 has been committed to invest in the on-going development and delivery of the strategy.

Since 2019-20, more than £11 million of additional funding has been provided to directly support pupils with complex additional support needs and services for children and families. In addition, we have funded the Scottish Sensory Centre and CALL Scotland to provide advice and training to schools on the support that they might need, including on the use of assistive technology for children and young people with specific communication and sensory needs. Our social isolation and loneliness fund supports the British Deaf Association, Seescape and Grampian Society for the Blind to reduce isolation and loneliness among people with sensory loss.

An additional £9 million will be invested to reopen the independent living fund, which will enable up to an additional 1,000 disabled people who face the greatest barriers to independent living to access the support that they need.

Reopening the ILF to new entrants realises our commitment to supporting disabled people who have the most complex needs and delivers on a key recommendation of the "Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland". The investment will provide recipients with the ability to exercise greater choice and control over the support that they receive, thereby enabling them to live more independently. The funding will enable individuals to purchase care so that they can be better supported in their homes and in their local communities. We are working with disabled people's organisations and with other stakeholders to co-design the fund.

We also commit to making Scotland the best place in the world for users of British Sign Language to live, work, visit and learn. To support that ambition, we have published the new "British Sign Language National Plan 2023-2029", which was developed with input from deaf, deafblind and BSL communities to ensure that it was informed by lived experience.

We will all, at some point in our lives, need to access community health and social care support, either for ourselves or for our families, friends and neighbours. Everyone who needs to should have access to high-quality support from those services, regardless of where they live in Scotland. We remain committed to delivering a national care service to improve quality, fairness and consistency of provision in order to meet individual needs. Our manifesto commitment to increase social care spend by 25 per cent over the current session of Parliament will result in at least £840 million of additional investment. That will support a range of investments, including in areas that will move us towards a national care service.

Our focus is on listening to what disabled people have told us about the challenges and obstacles that they face, and on finding solutions that address those challenges. I will carefully consider all that I have heard here today, and I remain committed to playing my part in taking forward this important work. I am heartened to see that other members, on all sides of the chamber, feel the same way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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