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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 7 November 2024

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

General Question Time

Instrumental Music (Education Service)

1. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the importance of instrumental music within the education service. (S6O-03901)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Government has transformed instrumental music tuition in Scotland's schools by supporting councils to eradicate unfair music tuition charges, and it has invested £39 million in the policy since 2021. The most recent instrumental music services survey confirmed that more than 61,000 pupils participated in instrumental music lessons in the academic year 2022-23, which is the highest number since the annual survey began 11 years ago. Those figures alone speak for themselves on the importance that the Scottish Government places on instrumental music.

Brian Whittle: I thank the minister for that answer—and I have raised the issue in the chamber before.

Last week, East Ayrshire Council voted to transfer its instrumental music services to the East Ayrshire Leisure Trust as a cost-saving measure, despite opposition from teachers, unions and parents. In doing so, the council is relying on drawing a distinction between music tuition for Scottish Qualifications Authority qualifications and tuition for younger pupils or extracurricular activity. I am concerned that the degradation of music education sets a dangerous precedent, which puts access to music education for younger pupils at risk. Will the minister agree to meet me urgently to discuss what can be done to ensure that access to instrumental music tuition for pupils in East Ayrshire is protected at all ages?

Graeme Dey: I recognise Brian Whittle's interest in the matter, and I will pass his request on to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. It is, of course, for individual councils to make decisions about their own provision, albeit in a context in which music education is a core part of the curriculum and there is equity of access to instrumental music tuition. Scottish Government officials have engaged with East Ayrshire Council, which has provided assurances that it is not its

intention to reintroduce charging and that the move is, in fact, designed to protect the service from potential cuts to education. I understand that the council has indicated that pupils will continue to have music under the school curriculum, and it has insisted that there are no plans to introduce a two-tier tuition model that separates SQA tuition from non-SQA tuition. Clearly, we will be looking for those undertakings to be delivered.

I hope that that offers Mr Whittle the reassurance that he is understandably seeking, and I will pass his request on to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Cross-border Machinery Theft

2. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding cross-border machinery theft in rural areas, including the Scottish Borders. (S6O-03902)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government regularly engages with the UK Government on a range of issues. The theft of equipment can have severe consequences for farming communities and can put livelihoods at risk. The Scottish Government works with partners through the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime, known as SPARC, which is chaired by Police Scotland, to provide a robust multi-agency approach to rural crime and to support activity at a local level. Police Scotland and SPARC are keen to ensure that Scotland does not offer organised criminals a safe haven, and Police Scotland has undertaken cross-border operations with forces in northern England with the aim of preventing rural crime, including machinery theft, by organised crime groups.

Rachael Hamilton: I thank the minister for that answer. Thefts of quad bikes, farm machinery, trailers and GPS trackers continue to hit rural communities, such as those in the Borders. Last September, the minister kindly assured me that the Scottish Government was looking closely at the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, which was passed at Westminster. Since the election of a Labour Government, however, there has been no firm commitment to share the consultation responses, which would allow me to advance my proposals for a bill in Scotland. I am sure that the minister recognises the urgent need for action. Will she work with me to support my proposals for a rural theft bill in Scotland?

Angela Constance: I very much appreciate that Ms Hamilton has asked a number of questions in that vein, given the increasing cost of rural crime—in particular, the impact of machinery being stolen

or damaged. The link between rural crime and organised crime is very well established.

I have asked my officials to consider the implications for Scotland of the private members' bill that was passed at Westminster last year, and what options are available to Scottish ministers. I can advise the member that although the Home Office is currently drafting regulations with respect to that bill, it is not yet in a position to say when those will be introduced. Nevertheless, I will ensure that I and my officials follow up on that important matter.

Police Scotland (Meetings)

3. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I refer members in the chamber to my entry in the register of members' interests, as my wife is a police sergeant in Moray.

To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with Police Scotland, and what issues were discussed. (S6O-03903)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Ministers and officials meet regularly with Police Scotland. My most recent meeting was on 31 October, with the chief constable and the chair of the Scottish Police Authority. We discussed Police Scotland's three-year business plan, focusing on the implementation and oversight of the plan and how it will positively impact on policing in our communities.

Regular discussions take place on police workforce numbers to ensure that putting front-line policing in the strongest possible position is a priority. Police Scotland is taking on more recruits this year than it has at any time since its formation in 2013, and the chief constable has stated that she expects numbers to reach 16,600 this week.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister told me in the chamber that

"levels of crime in Scotland are currently at 40-year lows".—[*Official Report*, 26 September 2024; c 13.]

In the six weeks since he said that, he has made no attempt to correct the *Official Report*, but the Scottish Government's own figures show that crime has increased by 4 per cent.

Has the Scottish Government published incorrect figures, or has the First Minister misled Parliament?

Angela Constance: It is important that, in exploring both the long-term trends and the year-on-year increases in crime statistics, we all fully understand those appropriately and properly. When we look at long-term trends, the fact remains that Scotland is now a safer place than it was when we took office.

The member raises an important point in that the nature of crime in this country is changing, which means that the response from policing also has to change. That is why my engagement with the chief constable and the Scottish Police Authority is so pivotal.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Given the very distressing scenes in my constituency that occurred over the bonfire night period, what more support could be given to Police Scotland to combat that? Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Act 2022 must now be implemented in full, as a matter of urgency, to help to protect those communities?

Angela Constance: I appreciate the member's commitment in this area and the work that she has undertaken in years gone by, in particular around the 2022 act, the vast majority of which has now been implemented.

I acknowledge that many Edinburgh MSPs, and other MSPs across the country, will be working hard to reassure anxious constituents who have had to put up with considerable disorder over the past few days. I record my thanks to the emergency services—the police, the fire service and the Scottish Ambulance Service. Although injuries to police officers this year have, remarkably, reduced, the level of hostility towards our emergency services is, nonetheless, utterly unacceptable. I take the opportunity to remind members in the chamber, and offenders at large, that there is a major investigation on-going and every endeavour will be made to—

Pardon me: I will put my teeth in. Every effort will be made to find the culprits who have caused considerable anxiety and disorder in our communities.

Community Libraries

4. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to local authorities to help secure the future of community libraries. (S6O-03904)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): As Mr Fraser knows, library policy is devolved to local authorities. The Scottish Government provides general revenue funding to local authorities, which have the financial freedom to operate independently and to allocate the total financial resources that are available to them on the basis of local needs and priorities. The Scottish Government provides targeted support for public libraries through our annual funding to the Scottish Library and Information Council, which includes the public library improvement fund,

which supports creative and innovative public library projects throughout Scotland.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the cabinet secretary for his response. Numerous constituents have contacted me to raise concerns about the proposed closure of seven community libraries in towns and villages across Perth and Kinross as a direct result of budget cuts by the Scottish National Party-run Perth and Kinross Council. Those libraries are not just resources to lend books; they are important community hubs that host a range of activities, and their loss will be significant to the communities that they serve. Given the uplift to the Scottish Government's budget, what additional resource will now be made available to local authorities to ensure that those important local assets are retained?

Angus Robertson: I agree very much with Murdo Fraser about the value of libraries, including the community hub aspects of their work. A lot of very innovative work is going on across Scotland, with libraries providing additional services for communities. Mr Fraser has made a point very strongly about the value of those libraries and I hope that his local authority will listen to it.

On the budget process, Murdo Fraser will appreciate that I am not in a position to give any sneak previews of what might be coming in the weeks ahead but, again, the points that he has raised will have been heard.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary give an update on the work of the Scottish Government's public library improvement fund in supporting the vital role of libraries by helping our hard-working library staff to bring their innovative ideas to life?

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government supports the Scottish Library and Information Council, which provides leadership and advice to Scottish ministers, local authorities and the wider libraries sector. In the year 2024-25, we are providing annual funding of £665,000 to SLIC in recognition of the importance of our public libraries and to support the excellent services that they provide. That includes £450,000 for the public library improvement fund, which supports creative, sustainable and innovative public library projects throughout Scotland, with £200,000 awarded to individual projects. The projects that have been successful for 2024-25 are due to be announced soon.

Oil and Gas Companies (Collaboration with Renewables Companies)

5. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on

the work that it is doing to support oil and gas companies to collaborate with renewables companies to test and deploy new technologies. (S6O-03905)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): We are committed to working in partnership with the energy industry to deliver a just energy transition. Our energy transition fund is supporting projects in the north-east that promote collaboration across offshore energy sectors. Those include the energy transition zone, which is transforming the region into a globally integrated energy cluster, and the Global Underwater Hub, which is using underwater expertise, technologies and skills to drive innovation and accelerate the transition. Separately, successful projects in the innovation and targeted oil and gas leasing rounds are using floating wind to electrify oil and gas infrastructure. That helps to decarbonise production while, crucially, enabling the offshore wind sector to expand.

Audrey Nicoll: Many oil and gas companies are already transitioning to renewables. However, during a recent visit to a company in my constituency that is doing just that, I learned of the challenges that are associated with the complexities and costs of scaling up its testing of floating tension-leg platform technology that could offer opportunities for foundation manufacturing in Scotland. What support can companies such as the one in my constituency access to enable them to scale up testing and move to market entry? Would the cabinet secretary be willing to meet me to discuss that further?

Gillian Martin: First, I would be absolutely delighted to meet the member and the company that she is speaking on behalf of. As set out in our innovation strategy, the Scottish Government is committed to developing world-leading economic clusters, including in offshore wind. Companies and investors who wish to discuss funding and investment opportunities in the offshore wind sector should engage with the Scottish National Investment Bank and the enterprise agencies, which are best placed to advise on what support could be available. I also encourage the company, if it has not done so already, to get in touch with the Net Zero Technology Centre, which provides advice in that area as well as support to companies that wish to innovate.

ScotRail Alcohol Ban (Compliance)

6. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what information it holds on levels of compliance with ScotRail's alcohol ban. (S6O-03906)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Although ScotRail staff will observe

some passengers drinking alcohol on trains and in appropriate circumstances ask that they refrain, staff do not record such observations or action each time it occurs on train services. ScotRail does not record or collate instances of those drinking alcohol network-wide; rather, data is focused on reports of incidents of antisocial behaviour made by passengers or staff to it and British Transport Police, and therefore no information is held. Those of us who regularly travel on our railway know that there are instances of non-compliance with the ban.

John Mason: As the cabinet secretary says, there is frequent non-compliance. I saw it in Dumfries recently when I was on the train, and I see it in Glasgow and Edinburgh frequently as well. Clearly, the ban is not being enforced. ScotRail does not like it and its staff refuse to do anything with it. They joke with passengers who are drinking alcohol and make no effort to stop them. British Transport Police does not agree with the ban either and says that it cannot be enforced. Surely we either have to remove the ban or do something to make it enforceable.

Fiona Hyslop: The member identifies the dilemma very clearly. That is why I am actively looking at the issue. Tackling and preventing violence against women and girls and wider antisocial behaviour has to be the main focus. That was made clear to me in the message that I received from the round-table session on women's safety on public transport that I held on 6 December last year. Broader action on antisocial behaviour—with or without drunkenness—not the alcohol ban was deemed to be the main focus for action at that round table.

All rail unions, ScotRail and British Transport Police are of the view that the ban perversely undermines focus on compliance with what is acceptable or not acceptable behaviour and want the ban lifted. However, we also have the public messaging about alcohol to consider, which is why I am actively discussing the issue with my Cabinet colleagues.

The Presiding Officer: There is a brief supplementary from Graham Simpson.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary has been actively looking at the issue for long enough. I have provided her with a solution, which we discussed in private. I will keep it that way, but is it not time that she makes a decision and removes the ban?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank Graham Simpson for his engagement on the issue to date and his suggestions. I have to consider all the factors, and I have to do that collectively with my Cabinet colleagues. There are issues that we have to consider including the equally safe strategy, and

there is a strategic review by the independent working group on antisocial behaviour, which will present its report to ministers, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Police Scotland this year.

There is a genuine dilemma. I think that everyone in the chamber will have a different view on the issue. I know that some of my predecessors have different views on it, and I have to bring everyone together. However, I am very conscious that, if we have something that is not working, we have to fix it. I intend to do that.

Enterprise Support (Mid Scotland and Fife)

7. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is ensuring adequate provision of enterprise support to businesses in the Mid Scotland and Fife region. (S6O-03907)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): Businesses of all sizes and types in the Mid Scotland and Fife region can access support from a wide range of public sector organisations, including Business Gateway and Scottish Enterprise, through the findbusinesssupport.gov.scot website. A hundred companies with the potential to make the greatest impact on the Scottish economy also receive one-to-one account management support from Scottish Enterprise. In 2023-24, Scottish Enterprise will work with businesses in the region on projects that are projected to deliver 1,127 real living wage jobs, £36 million in innovation investment, £25 million in capital investment and £188 million in international sales.

Claire Baker: This is Fife business week, with a focus on skills delivery and adapting to agile business models through digital technology and solutions. I know from conversations that I have with businesses in Fife that increased use of digital technology can increase their competitiveness and efficiency. Since the popular digital boost grant funding was discontinued, can the minister provide an update on what digital programme support is now available, how that is an improvement on the digital boost grant and how it will benefit businesses across my region?

Tom Arthur: As Ms Baker recognises, the digital boost schemes are still paused, as I confirmed in a letter to her in her capacity as convener of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

Despite those specific programmes not being live, helping businesses to harness the power of technology is a core part of modern business support. As such, the support to digitise is embedded across many business support functions, including Business Gateway, the

innovation centre programme, the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and many sectoral business accelerator programmes.

Remembrance Day

12:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I invite the party leaders to make some brief remarks to mark remembrance day.

The First Minister (John Swinney): On Sunday, Scotland pays tribute to the brave men and women who laid down their lives to protect our country and the freedoms that we all enjoy. Their bravery and their sacrifice make possible the peace and the liberty that we all so rightly cherish today. We remember them in our hearts and we commit ourselves to work for the peaceful and democratic way of life for which they made the ultimate sacrifice. [*Applause.*]

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): This week, we solemnly remember all those who made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our country and in protection of our values. Those who fought in the first world war are no longer with us, and those who witnessed the horrors of the second world war become ever fewer. As conflict continues to claim innocent lives around the world, I and my party pay tribute to Britain's armed forces for keeping us safe. For all of the fallen and for all those who continue to serve, we will remember them. [*Applause.*]

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): This weekend, we will mark remembrance Sunday—the day when we remember all those who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our country and to face down tyranny. It is also a day when we recommit to the cause of peace across the world—a cause that has never been more important. As we prepare for remembrance Sunday, we must come together to remember the lives that we have lost and to commit to supporting our current serving men and women.

“At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.”

[*Applause.*]

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): Presiding Officer, thank you for giving us this time today to remember and be grateful. I grew up in a time of peace and plenty. I have never known war, and I am so grateful to the people and democratic institutions that have made that possible. We said “never again” after the wars of the early 20th century, and yet violent conflict once again tears our world apart, destroying homes, lives, communities and futures. War crimes and genocide have not been banished to the past; they are being committed today, as the world looks on and is complicit.

I fear for the future. As existing conflicts escalate and democratic ideals retreat, will children in the future be able to grow up in peace and plenty? We take this moment to acknowledge everyone who has suffered and is suffering because of war, and to remember our responsibilities in creating and nurturing peace. [Applause.]

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Every year, as they plough their fields, the farmers of Arras, Thiépval and Passchendaele unearth bullets, shrapnel and other material of war. It is called “the iron harvest” and, more than a century later, it serves as a reminder of the supreme sacrifice made by so many for the freedoms that we all enjoy today.

I am struck that, right now, that same material of war is being buried in the soils of Ukraine, as the fighting men and women of the armed forces of Ukraine fight as a firebreak to protect the freedoms of the democracies that we all enjoy. This remembrance Sunday and every remembrance Sunday, we will choose to remember those who have fallen in the supreme service of this country and those who are falling still to protect the freedoms that we all enjoy. [Applause.]

First Minister’s Question Time

12:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is First Minister’s question time.

Taxation

1. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** One of Scotland’s most successful businessmen, Sir Tom Hunter, responded to Labour’s tax rises last week by saying:

“There is no economy in the world that has ever taxed its way to economic growth”.

Does John Swinney know of any examples?

The First Minister (John Swinney): What I know is that we have to be prepared to invest in economic growth. I have set out my firm view that investing in economic growth means investing in the infrastructure and the capacity of our country and investing in the public services on which a great deal of economic foundations are founded. I also understand the importance of creating, encouraging and stimulating private economic activity in our economy, which is why one of the four priorities of my Government is supporting and nurturing economic growth.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney surely knows that high tax kills growth and costs jobs but, in his topsy-turvy world, hitting hard-working Scots with high taxes will somehow boost our struggling economy. Even his own MSPs are worried. Today, the Scottish National Party-led Finance and Public Administration Committee has said in a report that it is

“deeply concerned about the Scottish Government’s ... approach”.

In the report, Professor David Heald of the University of Glasgow called elements of Scotland’s income tax rates “ludicrous”. The report quoted the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce as saying:

“the tax burden on businesses is extremely high; this penalises success”

and

“reduces profitability”.

Does John Swinney accept that its concerns are valid?

The First Minister: Anyone who looks at my track record knows that I engage closely with the business community on all these questions. I also understand that there is a vibrant debate about the economic choices that are to be made. From Russell Findlay’s questioning, I suspect that he is

on one side of that argument and that I am on the other, because I believe in using investment to stimulate growth. We have had an example over the past 14 years of what the constraining of investment does—it reduces life chances, opportunity and growth. That has been an unmitigated disaster for the country, and that is the record of the Conservative Party.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney talks about investment stimulating growth, but the point is that there has been no return on that so-called investment by the Government. The independent Fraser of Allander Institute found that only 9 per cent of firms in Scotland say that the SNP Government understands the business environment.

Over the past three years, SNP ministers have received more than £600 million from the United Kingdom Government to provide rates relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure sector, but struggling Scottish businesses have barely received one tenth of that figure. Michael Bergson of the Buck's Bar group has told us that the SNP's failure to pass on rates relief was a "disgrace". Stephen Montgomery of the Scottish Hospitality Group has said that,

"at the very minimum, tax relief should be passed on in full and with no cap".

Scottish businesses urgently need more help, so will John Swinney do the right thing?

The First Minister: I will make a couple of points at the outset in responding to Mr Findlay's latest question. First, he says that there is no evidence of growth. Scotland's gross domestic product per capita has grown faster than the United Kingdom's since 2007—if we account for population growth since 2007, GDP per person has grown by 10.5 per cent in Scotland, compared with 6.3 per cent at the UK level. I remind Parliament, so that it has the complete information, that 2007 was the moment when the Scottish Government was elected. Therefore, in this Government's lifespan, we have delivered more growth per head than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Russell Findlay rose—

The First Minister: The second point—we are on helpful clarifications here, Presiding Officer, if you will forgive me—is that most of the taxation that is imposed on business is not determined by this Parliament; most of it is determined by the United Kingdom Parliament. With regard to business rates, we have the most comprehensive business relief scheme for small businesses. That means, in our estimations, that about 50 per cent of the hospitality sector pays absolutely no business rates whatsoever in Scotland. That is

where we take our action to support the sector in Scotland.

Russell Findlay: I apologise for standing up too soon. I thought that John Swinney had finished, but he was still going.

When faced with the reality of what businesses are saying, John Swinney reaches for his big book of selective statistics. However, everyone—business owners, hospitality groups, chambers of commerce, academics, the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee and even SNP back benchers—is pleading for the SNP to change direction.

Scotland's tax system needs to change. Higher taxes are stopping businesses growing and preventing them from creating jobs, which would generate more money for public services. Scotland's businesses need more than rates relief—they need a game-changing tax cut. In this year's budget, will John Swinney start to repair some of the damage that has been inflicted by the SNP?

The First Minister: I have already put on the record the fact that the Government has delivered more growth per head in Scotland than the United Kingdom has done.

On the tax changes that the Government has presided over, people such as Mr Findlay told us that there would be an exodus of people from Scotland because of the tax situation. However, we have seen a net in-migration to Scotland over the period of those tax changes being in place.

Of course, there is a budget to be gone through, and the budget cannot pass in Parliament without the agreement of members beyond those of the Government party, because we do not command a majority in Parliament. Led by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, discussions are under way to construct agreement in Parliament about what the budget will look like.

The implications of Mr Findlay's point on cutting taxes are that we will have to cut public expenditure, too. If people are going to come forward with substantive propositions in the dialogue with the finance secretary, they should at least have the democratic responsibility to set out not only where the tax cuts will come but where the spending cuts will come. If we dabble with the financial madness of the Conservative Party that we got under Liz Truss, we all know where that will end up.

National Health Service

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Statistics obtained by Scottish Labour show that almost 9,000 Scots waited more than 24 hours in accident and emergency up to the end of September this

year—that is a full day waiting for treatment. That is more than the entire number that waited a full day in 2023 and, unbelievably, almost 200 Scots waited more than two days in A and E.

That is just a snapshot of the crisis in our NHS. Week after week, I come to the chamber and expose how the Scottish National Party is failing staff and patients in our NHS; week after week, John Swinney plays it down and tries to explain away the deadly crisis on his watch. Will he finally admit that the SNP cannot be trusted with our NHS and that we need a new direction?

The First Minister (John Swinney): No. We do not need a new direction; we need to sustain the investment that the Government has been making in the national health service for the past 17 years. The Government has gone beyond the investment that has comparatively been undertaken by the Barnett consequentials from the United Kingdom Government. The Government has been prepared to invest in the NHS in excess of the Barnett consequentials on health, because we have taken the tough decisions to do so.

I acknowledge that there are challenges in the NHS—I do so on every occasion that members come forward with their points—and I apologise to any individual who waits longer than they should do. However, the Government is focused on ensuring that we deliver an effective health service that meets the needs of people in Scotland, and that is the direction that we will follow.

Anas Sarwar: Week after week, John Swinney comes to the Parliament and apologises for the performance of his Government. He says that there is no need for a new direction, but the reality is that John Swinney and the SNP have no meaningful plan, no strategy and no ideas to save our NHS. The situation has actually got worse since he became First Minister: by September, more people had waited 24 hours in A and E than did in the entirety of last year.

Scots cannot continue to pay the price of SNP incompetence. We do need a change of direction. As part of Labour's transformative budget, the Scottish Government will receive an additional £789 million for our NHS this year and an additional £1.72 billion for it next year. However, that vital new money cannot be wasted by continued SNP financial mismanagement and incompetence. Put simply, more of the same will not cut it. Will John Swinney commit to using that money to tackle long waits and to reform our NHS so that it is fit for the future?

The First Minister: In the past 12 months, there has been an increase in the number of operations performed in the NHS. In the 12 months to June 2024, outpatient activity increased over the previous 12 months. There have been more than

1.5 million attendances at A and E departments, and, on this Government's watch, there has been an 82 per cent increase in the A and E consultant headcount, compared with 10 years ago. I say to Mr Sarwar that we are investing, and that we are fully aware of the challenges that we face and are addressing them.

Mr Sarwar went on to talk about the budget. From what I said last week, he knows that I welcome the investment that has been made in public expenditure as a consequence of the budget, and I give him the absolute assurance that that will be invested in strengthening, reforming and improving the national health service. However, there is one challenge in all of that: that expenditure will be able to be deployed only if there is a parliamentary majority in favour of supporting our budget. So, Mr Sarwar is not an innocent bystander on that question. If Mr Sarwar wants the money to be spent, he should vote for the budget.

Anas Sarwar: New money is one thing; what is done with that money to change the direction of our country is another, and I note that there are actually 50,000 fewer planned operations compared with pre-pandemic levels.

Scottish Labour has a plan to fix the NHS and make it fit for the future by cutting bureaucracy, investing in new technology, prioritising wraparound community care and creating dedicated teams to clear the backlogs. However, all we have from this SNP Government is continued denial and a hunt for excuses.

On John Swinney's watch, one in six Scots is stuck on an NHS waiting list, delayed discharge rates are sky high, cancer treatment standard targets are missed again and again, families are being forced to take out loans or remortgage their homes to pay for private treatment, and NHS staff are feeling burnt out and let down. That is the deadly legacy of the SNP's incompetence. The Scottish Government has the money and it has the powers, and it has now run out of excuses. Will John Swinney tell the people of Scotland when they will finally have an NHS that is there when they need it, or do we need to wait for a change of Government in 2026 for us to get our NHS back?

The First Minister: I do not think that Mr Sarwar listened to my second answer, which was quite clear. I set out the strengthened measures that we have taken to expand the capacity of the national health service—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I acknowledge the challenges that we face in the NHS, and I welcome the fact that we have the opportunity for further investment as a result of the United

Kingdom budget. I do not know why Mr Sarwar cannot just embrace my positive and constructive contribution to the discussion.

If Mr Sarwar wants to have an engaged conversation about how we can deliver investment to the NHS, I suggest that he takes seriously the offer from the Government to engage around the budget process. I come back to my fundamental point: it is all very well getting the allocations of money from the UK Government, but that money cannot be spent unless this Parliament approves a budget, and that places a responsibility on Mr Sarwar and the Labour Party.

US Election (Scottish Government Response)

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Yesterday, the First Minister offered congratulations to the convicted felon Donald Trump on his re-election. Writing officially on behalf of the Scottish Government, he said that he is sure that Scotland's cultural and social ties with the US will "flourish" during the presidency of a misogynist, a climate-change denier, a fraudster, a conspiracy monger, a racist and a far-right politician who tried to overturn an election result both covertly and by inciting violence. Words fail me.

What social and culture ties does the First Minister really think will benefit from a relationship with such a man? More importantly, what has the First Minister done so far to reach out to the marginalised and vulnerable people whose lives are most directly threatened by a second Trump term?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have a duty as the First Minister of Scotland to engage with other Governments and to represent the people of Scotland in that process. As part of that duty, I wrote the letter in question that Mr Harvie cites.

There are deep cultural, social and economic ties between Scotland and the United States of America, and I think that they are important. They are important for employment in our economy, for the cultural expression of our country and for the way in which we are able to pursue our objectives.

Although there are very big differences in expression, priority and way of life between me and Donald Trump—clearly, because of what I said before the presidential election—I cannot deny the existence of links between Scotland and the United States, and, regardless of the presidential choice in the United States, I want to maintain good relationships between Scotland and the United States.

Mr Harvie knows me well enough to know that the concerns of people who feel marginalised in our society and who feel under threat are

concerns that I wrestle with every single day as First Minister. I stood here and pledged to be the First Minister of all of Scotland, and that is entirely what I intend to do.

Patrick Harvie: Big differences of priority—that sounds like extraordinary complacency at a time of incredible danger for the world. The re-election of Trump is particularly dangerous for climate policy, as he has peddled climate conspiracy theories for many years.

Such threats exist in Scotland, too. The First Minister's Government is on the verge of making a decision on a new fossil fuel power station at Peterhead. Last week, researchers at Carbon Tracker revealed that the emissions from the power station could be five times worse than the companies that would profit from it have admitted. The First Minister has the power to demand a new environmental impact assessment to ensure that those companies come clean about the pollution that their scheme would cause. Will he do so, and does he accept that, until he does, ministers could be breaking the law if they sign off that reckless fossil fuel development?

The First Minister: The application at Peterhead is live, and I would be breaching the ministerial code if I were to make any detailed comments about it. There will be processes of scrutiny to be undertaken, which ministers will undertake, on the basis of the information. Of course, all decisions of the Government can be subject to legal challenge because of the Parliament's constitution.

The Government takes incredibly seriously our obligations on tackling climate change. On Tuesday, the acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy steered through the Parliament the final stage of the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill, and the Government is considering all the issues in relation to the tackling of climate change in the budget priorities that we take forward. I assure Mr Harvie of our absolute determination to do so. No change of Government in the United States is going to change this Government's attitude about the imperative of addressing the climate emergency.

Online Misinformation and Disinformation

4. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills to recognise online misinformation and disinformation. (S6F-03493)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Keeping young people safe online is of paramount importance to the Scottish Government, and

prevention is key. Since 2020, we have invested more than £400,000 in supporting young people to navigate online spaces and use screen time in a safe way and in ensuring that parents and carers have the information to guide young people and recognise risks.

On 9 August, I wrote to social media companies X, Meta and TikTok, asking them specifically how they are combating the spread of misinformation and what steps are being taken to address racist and hateful speech across platforms.

Although regulation of the internet remains a reserved matter, we have successfully engaged with the United Kingdom Government on its Online Safety Act 2023 to strengthen protections for young people.

Karen Adam: In the public gallery, we are joined by teachers and pupils of Banff academy, who have been drafting their very own parliamentary bill to tackle misinformation and disinformation. Will the First Minister join me in welcoming them and congratulating them on their engagement with our democracy? Will he outline how young people are being included in the decision-making process for policies that affect the online space and digital landscape?

The First Minister: I am delighted to welcome the pupils of Banff academy to the Parliament. I look forward to seeing their bill, as tackling misinformation is an issue that is challenging societies across the world. I am pleased that those young people recognise that important principle and that they are taking action that shows that they are keen to engage in our democratic processes.

It is essential that we understand the impact that online harm, such as that caused by misinformation, has on our young people. We provide funding for and work with a range of organisations, including Barnardo's and NSPCC's Childline, which support children and help us to develop policies and design services that safeguard young people and provide the right support when they need it. In addition, we will continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government and Ofcom on the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 to help to keep children and young people safe online.

A9 Dualling (Funding)

5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the concerns expressed by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee regarding funding to complete the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness by the new target date of 2035. (S6F-03503)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the report on the committee's inquiry. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has already made it clear that we will carefully consider and respond to its recommendations.

The Government remains fully committed to progressing A9 dualling in line with the delivery plan that was announced in December 2023. We have made good early progress through the procurement of the Tay crossing to Ballinluig project, which began in May 2024, and the construction contract for the Tomatin to Moy project, which was awarded in July 2024.

Murdo Fraser: I am sure that the First Minister will want to join me in paying tribute to the committee members for their work on the report and to the petitioner, Laura Hansler, for assiduously pursuing the project to dual the A9, which is of vital importance to people in Perthshire, in the Highlands and across Scotland.

As the committee noted, the project should have been completed by 2025. That broken promise means that, tragically, more lives will be lost every year from now on. Given that the committee has expressed its concern about the fact that

“there is already an anticipated delay”

in progressing the Tomatin to Moy section, how can we have confidence that the new target date of 2035 will be met? Does the First Minister agree with the committee that, in order to provide appropriate parliamentary oversight, a dedicated committee should be established, with the sole remit of ensuring that this vital project is completed on time?

The First Minister: That last issue is not a matter for me; the Parliament decides on what committees it has. Once the Parliament has decided on that, ministers will engage fully and substantively. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport already reports regularly to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. If the Parliament chooses to change the committee arrangements, the Government will respond accordingly, and we will engage with all parliamentary scrutiny, as is our duty.

I pay tribute to the campaigners who have argued on the issue. I have been a strong supporter of A9 dualling for all my parliamentary life, and we have made substantial progress with the dualling of the Kincaig to Dalraddy stretch, the Luncarty to Pass of Birnam stretch and the improvements at the Ballinluig junction in my constituency. In addition, of course, the next steps are being taken on the Moy to Tomatin section. I am delighted that construction work will start there soon.

I give the Parliament an assurance that the Government is absolutely determined to ensure that the project progresses.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In paragraph 138 of its inquiry report, the committee stated—based on evidence from Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government—that, since the promise was made to dual the A9 by 2025, transport projects in central and southern Scotland have been prioritised. Given that fact, will the First Minister be prepared to come up to the Highlands and meet campaigners and people on the ground to convince them that his word will hold true this time, when the Government’s word has not held true in the past?

The First Minister: Such contributions do not help with the reasoned deliberation of policy in the Parliament. As I pointed out last week, I came into government in 2007 committed to A9 dualling. The Parliament took a decision that stopped me from spending £500 million on A9 dualling: the Conservatives, the Labour Party, the Liberals and the Greens forced me, as a minister in a minority Government, to spend £500 million on the Edinburgh tram project when the Government had made a commitment to spend it on A9 dualling. In the subsequent period—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Colleagues are muttering, “17 years ago.” If we had been able to proceed with projects at that time, we would have had £500 million at our disposal to dual the A9, which would have helped.

I am a bit perplexed by which projects Mr Mountain did not want us to take forward. Did he not want us to take forward the Queensferry crossing? Did he not want us to take forward the Aberdeen western peripheral route? I see Mr Burnett sitting in the chamber. He will be driving on the Aberdeen western peripheral route, and so will Liam Kerr. Do they not want such projects to be delivered in different parts of the country?

The Parliament needs to have a reasoned debate about the limitations of resources, and we need to have less posturing from the Conservatives.

Families in Temporary Accommodation

6. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what plans the Scottish Government has to end the reported increase in families in the central belt living in temporary accommodation, in light of reports of almost 2,000 children in Glasgow living in unsuitable bed-and-breakfast accommodation in 2024 and more than 4,600 households in Edinburgh projected to be

living in temporary accommodation by 2040. (S6F-03507)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Additional investment of £42 million in affordable housing this year has been targeted at the local authorities in the central belt with sustained temporary accommodation pressures. That funding is to increase the supply of social and affordable homes, including properties that are suitable for larger families, through acquisitions and, where appropriate, to bring long-term-empty social homes back into use.

We are providing record funding of more than £14 billion to local authorities in this financial year to deliver a range of services, including homelessness services, and we are introducing new homelessness prevention duties. We are investing more than £90 million in discretionary housing payments to help families to meet their housing costs and to sustain tenancies, and we recently announced measures on rent controls to help to protect tenants and keep people in their homes.

Mark Griffin: First Minister, a key pillar of your agenda is—rightly—to focus on eradicating child poverty, but how can we do that when 10,000 children are in temporary accommodation and there is a tenfold increase in kids living in bed and breakfasts? Some are telling heartbreaking stories about how they are having to boil eggs in toilet water for their dinner.

The finance secretary promised that, if the Government received additional funding, its number 1 priority would be to reverse the cuts to the affordable housing supply programme. Now that the incoming Labour Government has delivered that additional funding—£1.5 billion this year and £3.4 billion next year—is that still your Government’s top priority, given that the best way of getting those 10,000 children out of poverty is to give them the homes that they desperately need?

The Presiding Officer: Always through the chair, please, Mr Griffin.

The First Minister: Mr Griffin raises a number of very significant and serious issues. I would be the first to accept that the position on homelessness and temporary accommodation is not where I would want it to be at this moment. Mr Griffin and I can probably agree that that is a product of the financial constraints that we have had over the past 14 years from Conservative-led austerity. I welcome, as I did last week, the investment that has been announced by the United Kingdom Government, which will provide us with more scope to address the issues that Mr Griffin puts to me.

My answer to Mr Griffin’s direct question about whether the improvement of the housing situation

remains a priority for the Government is yes, it does. I am happy to confirm that. I will be working with the finance secretary during the budget preparation to address that very issue. It was a matter of great regret to the Government that we had to reduce funding for housing because of a very abrupt reduction in spending on financial transactions by the previous Conservative Government. We now have more options available and I give Mr Griffin the assurance that that will be uppermost in our thinking.

However, I come back to the point that I made to Mr Sarwar. If that money is to be spent, there will have to be more people voting for the budget than just my colleagues, so I invite Mr Griffin to encourage some constructive discussion in the Labour Party about how we might make progress on the budget so that we can address the legitimate points that he puts to me.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): This Government has had 17 years to fix the problem, but it has failed. A quarter of all households with children have spent a year or more in temporary accommodation and almost 8,000 households in need were not offered temporary accommodation. It is time for action, not words.

The Scottish National Party has failed to turbo boost housebuilding and families are now stuck on accommodation waiting lists. Will the SNP finally tackle the housing emergency, or will that continue to be another ball dropped by the SNP Government?

The First Minister: My goodness, Conservative members of this Parliament have brass necks. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: For 14 of the past 17 years, this Government has railed against the austerity that was inflicted on us by Meghan Gallacher's Conservative Government. After all the damage that was done in what we all agree was a disastrous period of austerity, and despite that austerity, this Government has built more affordable housing per head of population than in England or Wales. Despite that Conservative Government austerity, we have invested in housing.

Do we have a housing emergency? Yes, we do. Have we built more houses per head of population than in the rest of the United Kingdom? Yes, we have. Are we glad to see the back of the Conservatives and the impediments that they put in our way? Yes, we are, and we will focus on delivering for the people of Scotland.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): As the First Minister is aware, temporary accommodation is a problem not only across the central belt. In South Scotland, 354 households are in temporary accommodation in East Lothian and 50 of those include children. Is temporary accommodation adequate housing in line with article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and our own United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024?

The First Minister: That is a slightly more definitive question than I can answer in the chamber today.

However, I can say to Mr Whitfield that there is good evidence of progress in tackling the temporary accommodation issue through some of the action that has been taken on voids. For example, the City of Edinburgh Council has reduced the overall number of voids in its properties by 500—500—to 970. I pay tribute to the City of Edinburgh Council for what it has done.

The Government wants to work constructively with local authorities to ensure that we make as much progress as we can in the short term on reducing the number of voids. We will be happy to discuss those issues with East Lothian Council, Scottish Borders Council or Dumfries and Galloway Council in Mr Whitfield's region. If we all use the resources, flexibilities and powers that are available to us, we can make an impact on those issues, as the City of Edinburgh Council has demonstrated, and improve the quality of life for families in our country.

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

University Tuition Fees

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Does the First Minister find it concerning that the Labour United Kingdom Government has announced that university tuition fees will rise to £9,535 per year? Michael Marra has hinted that Labour would examine models to reintroduce some form of charges in Scotland and the Tory leader, Russell Findlay, has spoken openly about ending free tuition. Does the First Minister agree that education should always be based on the ability to learn, rather than on the ability to pay?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree with Mr Adam on the principle that education should be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay. As a consequence of the policy stance that the Government has taken, record numbers of Scots secure a university place in Scotland and record numbers of Scots from deprived areas secure places at university without having to face the tens of thousands of pounds of

debt that the Opposition parties seem determined to saddle them with.

That is what people get from the Scottish National Party Government delivering for the people of Scotland, delivering access to higher education and ensuring that people are not saddled with the debt that they would be saddled with if the tuition fees in other parts of the United Kingdom were applied.

Additional Support Needs (Training and Resources)

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): My constituent Vicki Tocher's son, Isaac, is a seven-year-old child who has a brain disorder and autism, which has left him with the developmental age of a one-year-old. At school, Isaac was segregated and became distressed. He was left alone for so long that he banged his head off a wall to the point of injury. Horrifyingly, that happened while he was being watched from behind a closed door by members of staff. The door was kept closed on him when he tried to come out, and staff failed to report to his parents what had happened. That is unacceptable. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that all schools in Scotland have specific training and resources to make sure that what happened to Isaac never happens again?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very concerned at the details that Roz McCall has put to me. The whole question of support for young people with additional support needs in our schools is very clearly set out in guidance. There are no circumstances under which what Roz McCall has recounted should take place, given the guidance that is available to the school system.

I have extensive experience of such issues from my years as education secretary, during which I engaged with Beth Morrison and with one of my constituents who has done significant work in raising awareness about the issues that Roz McCall has put to me. I cannot conceive of a circumstance under which any of the detail that Roz McCall has put on the record would be justifiable under the guidance. I assure her that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is actively engaged on the question in relation to the formulation of further guidance, and we are engaging on some of the questions that arise in that respect in the bill that has been brought forward by Daniel Johnson.

Huntington's Disease

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): During this parliamentary session, members from every party have acknowledged that Scotland has a much higher prevalence of Huntington's disease than the global

average, and there is a growing need for specialist Huntington's disease services to be provided to national health service patients throughout Scotland—especially in North Lanarkshire, where the prevalence is higher still. In light of that, and as the Scottish Huntington's Association approaches its 35th anniversary and family gathering in Dundee on 9 November, will the Scottish Government meet representatives of the charity to discuss what the Government can do to assist it to deliver on both the call for increased services and its mission of achieving the best possible care and support for everyone who is impacted by Huntington's disease in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thank Fulton MacGregor for raising an important issue. I recognise that Huntington's disease is a devastating condition, and I absolutely agree with him that all who are affected should be able to access the best possible care and support.

Through our neurological framework, we have been working hard to improve neurological services across Scotland. My officials previously met the charity to better understand the needs of people with Huntington's disease. The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health will be happy to meet the charity's representatives to further discuss the provision of Huntington's care in Scotland, and I will be delighted to encourage the taking forward of dialogue with the Scottish Government neurological conditions team.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (Higher History Review)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Yesterday, the Scottish Qualifications Authority published its review into the collapse in higher history attainment, saying that a poor standard of learner performance accounts for the drop. After marking its own homework, essentially, the SQA has said that there was no problem—despite teachers and pupils saying otherwise. One teacher has said of the review:

"it's ... a gut punch. It makes liars out of all the teachers who were in that room".

In 2020, the First Minister presided over an exams fiasco that punished the poorest pupils, and here we have another. How many more exams fiascos is the First Minister happy to oversee before he accepts that his Government's so-called reforms are nothing more than a rebrand?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The higher history review was published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. The report was independently reviewed and endorsed by the director of qualifications and assessment at the Welsh Joint Education Committee, which is the largest awarding body in Wales, so there has been

no example of anybody marking their own homework. The report has been independently reviewed.

Obviously, this is a matter of distress. I understand the concerns about the performance of young people when they do not get the qualifications that they hoped to achieve. However, what has been undertaken is a thorough and independent review of the concerns, which has been peer reviewed by another awarding body.

Scotch Whisky Duty

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I remind members that I am the co-convenor of the cross-party group on Scotch whisky. I am deeply concerned about the impact of Labour's budget on the whisky industry, which is a key sector of Scotland's economy. The Scotch Whisky Association said:

"This duty increase on Scotch Whisky is a hammer blow, runs counter to the Prime Minister's commitment to 'back Scotch producers to the hilt' and increases the tax discrimination of Scotland's national drink."

Does the First Minister share my and the industry's concerns about the impact of Labour's budget on the industry?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The chancellor's decision to raise alcohol duty while reducing draught duty increases the disadvantage that is facing the spirits sector. As Mr MacDonald correctly puts on the record, the Scotch whisky industry plays a vital role in our economy and supports tens of thousands of high-value jobs, especially in our rural and island regions. I therefore agree with the concerns expressed by Mr MacDonald. Last week, I set out alternative taxation proposals that the United Kingdom Government could have made to avoid tax increases of that nature.

Yesterday, I was delighted to visit the Scotch Whisky Experience in Edinburgh to hear more about the jobs that the industry supports and the formidable impact that it has on the Scottish economy in many localities. The changes that have been made by the UK Government are a matter of concern.

Prostate Cancer Screening

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I am sure that the First Minister will join me in commending Scotland's greatest ever Olympian, Sir Chris Hoy, and the way in which he has faced devastating news with such courage and strength. *[Applause.]*

This week, Sir Chris called for more and earlier screening of prostate cancer. The United Kingdom Government has said that it will review the

screening programme in England. Will the Scottish Government also conduct a review of prostate-specific antigen testing to try to detect more prostate cancers earlier and improve the outcomes for many men?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am happy to associate myself with the remarks made by Douglas Lumsden. During his sporting career, Sir Chris Hoy demonstrated absolute and total courage and dedication to what he was doing. In facing up to what he is facing now, he is demonstrating courage and dedication to achieving all that he hopes to achieve. I commend him unreservedly for all that he has done. I wish him and his wife well with their diagnoses, and I send their family all good wishes at this challenging time.

The policy point that Sir Chris Hoy makes about prostate screening is very important. We need to do all that we can. We must constantly challenge whether the testing regime is adequate and appropriate, so the Government will take forward the priority that Mr Lumsden has put to me. I am grateful to Sir Chris Hoy for putting such impetus behind the requirement to do so.

National Insurance

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The Labour United Kingdom Government's decision to increase national insurance contributions could have a substantial financial impact on Scotland's public sector, potentially costing our public services hundreds of millions of pounds, and on the third sector, costing as much as £75 million. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the member.

Audrey Nicoll: It is vital that the UK Government provides clarity as a priority about whether Scotland will receive additional funding to cover the cost of the tax rise. Will the First Minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the UK Government in that regard?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The finance secretary has written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on this important issue, because we need clarity for our own budgeting purposes about what compensatory effects will be allocated to public funds to deal with the increased costs that will arise from the increase in the employers' national insurance contribution. That will apply to clearly identifiable public service organisations, but there is also a question about whether it will apply to organisations that are not classified as being in the public sector but provide public services, such as care providers, third sector organisations or,

further afield, universities and colleges into the bargain.

There is significant uncertainty about whether that will be adequately and properly covered in the budget, and that will be the subject of detailed discussions between the Scottish Government and the UK Government as we proceed with our budget steps.

Adapted Housing

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): My constituent Andrea cares for her daughters, who are full-time wheelchair users. Her home is not large enough for wheelchairs or for the specialised bed that has been recommended by her daughters' physiotherapist. Andrea has applied for adapted housing but, despite her daughters living in pain, there are not enough suitable homes, so they are stuck on a waiting list. Will the First Minister look into my constituent's case? Does he recognise that the severe shortage of social housing for disabled people means that Andrea's case will be far from unique?

The First Minister (John Swinney): If Mr Choudhury provides me with the details, I will certainly have a look at that case. The provision of such accommodation is obviously a decision for local authorities, and I cannot intervene in decisions by local authorities on the allocation of housing: I would be acting inappropriately if I did so.

I would make two substantive points in response to Mr Choudhury's question. First, as part of our investment programme in housing, we need to work to ensure that our housing stock reflects the needs of the population, so accommodation that is suitable for wheelchair use is important.

Secondly, I had a discussion this morning with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the provision of funding for adaptations in housing to make it more suitable for the needs of individuals, allowing them to be sustained in their own homes. Those issues will be considered as part of the budget process. I look forward to engaging with the Labour Party on how we might be able to take forward some of those priorities—which will happen only if there are enough votes in Parliament to support the Government's budget.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions.

12:51

Meeting suspended.

12:53

On resuming—

North Lanarkshire School Bus Campaign

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-15006, in the name of Gillian Mackay, on the North Lanarkshire school bus campaign.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with regret the reported reduction to school buses in North Lanarkshire; understands that, following the reported reduction, pupils who live less than three miles from school have to walk or get a service bus; notes that there have been reports of buses not stopping or being too full for pupils to get on; recognises that some parents believe that many of the proposed alternative walking routes are unsuitable, especially during the winter where some are unlit; understands that there are plans to extend this reduction to include primary school pupils; congratulates parents from across North Lanarkshire on their campaign, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to engage with North Lanarkshire Council to urgently resolve this issue, and to work with all local authorities to ensure that travelling to school is safe and affordable, including through school transport guidance, the promotion of municipal bus provision and ambitious investment in safe active travel routes to school.

12:53

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank all members who signed the motion and so enabled this debate to happen. Before I go into detail about the motion, I extend my thanks to the many parents across North Lanarkshire who have contacted me to share their personal experiences of how the proposed cuts will affect their families. They include Laura, Jim, Leonna, Diane, Lorraine and Kerry Anne, who join us in the public gallery today. The determination, commitment and continuous campaigning by those parents has been inspiring and uplifting, and it should be a reminder of the power and importance of local issues.

Some 590 parents have signed the petition to overturn the decision to reduce the number of children's school buses across North Lanarkshire. The decision is a disaster for children's safety. I hope that North Lanarkshire Council and the Scottish Government can take immediate action to deliver a workable solution.

For background, for those members who represent other areas of the country, I highlight that in North Lanarkshire, local councillors have implemented cuts to school buses for secondary pupils by increasing the qualifying distance that children have to live from their school from two miles to three miles, and have also proposed a

similar approach for primary schools, with the qualifying distance moving from one mile to two miles. That will have a significant impact on a large number of young children, causing them to rely on their parents to drive them to and from school every day. Families and teachers from across the region have already spoken out against the decision.

It is clear that these cuts will put children's safety at risk by packing more cars on to the already crowded streets around school grounds—areas where children are walking and cycling in large numbers. It will also increase pollution and carbon emissions around schools at a time when we are becoming increasingly aware of the damage that that can cause, and it will add an extra burden on parents and carers, who are already struggling.

It is already having an impact on secondary schools, with some reporting an increase of up to 30 per cent in the number of cars, with pupils leaving the campuses to get to parents' cars, which are waiting in queues, and pupils having to walk along the grass verges of dual carriageways. How on earth can anyone think that that is safe?

My inbox has been inundated with correspondence from parents, teachers and members of the local community, who are rightly very concerned about children's welfare. I have had particularly moving conversations with parents of children with additional support needs, who rely heavily on their school buses and the importance of routine that the school bus allows their children. I will share some words from a parent to whom I spoke recently. She said:

"My child doesn't have social awareness or safety awareness due to his autism. On walking from home to school, he would need to cross two very busy main roads and cross through a park which another high school sits at.

On Hamilton Road there is a gap of roughly half a mile between traffic lights to get safely across the road, and on Airbles road the distance is longer. He wouldn't be able to process when was best to cross the road between traffic which would lead to a breakdown with anxiety over how to get across.

It's the same with trying to access public transport. Most buses are either full or nearing capacity when they reach his stop. The heightened noise on the buses would be over stimulating for him and this could also lead to a stressful and traumatic experience.

I believe there has been a gap in understanding of the needs of all children with Additional Support Needs and not just the ones with mobility issues."

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Is not the point, though, that there has been so little consultation with the parents? It is not just that they have not been listened to, but that they have not even been spoken to properly.

Gillian Mackay: There has been an element of consultation in some places—the parents definitely do not think that it is enough—but in others, schools were told that they did not have to engage with the consultation process, and then found that their buses had been cut, so I agree with Mr Kerr on that point.

It has been suggested by members of the local authority that children and young people should simply use the service buses instead. However, we have had reports of buses not stopping, and of buses that are overly busy. In some places, there is only one bus an hour, and if it is full, children face a long walk or a wait outside school for the next one. North Lanarkshire Council says that it is following Scottish Government guidance, but there seems to be no consistency across local authorities as to how that is being interpreted.

As an MSP from the Scottish Green party, which proudly introduced free bus travel for everyone under 22, I find the suggestion that children as young as four years old should use public transport as an alternative to their school bus to be concerning. Since the scheme was introduced, thousands of young people have benefited, taking more than 50 million bus journeys, and it has saved family members money during a cost of living crisis. However, it should not be used to plug gaps.

Yesterday, I walked one of the proposed walking routes with parents and pupils in Motherwell. I sincerely hope that other members will take up the opportunity to walk the route; I know that some have already been out, and the parents were really pleased by the support. The route is simply not safe. We walked along busy roads and narrow paths, and over broken glass. One of the children told me that they would not be comfortable walking the route without an adult because they did not feel safe.

We, as politicians, try to put across arguments in a compelling way, but it is only fitting that the final words of my speech are from one of the pupils who has been affected. Ella, who is 10 and from Motherwell, sent me a video detailing the challenges as she sees them. She said:

"The people in charge of North Lanarkshire Council have decided to stop our school buses in order to save money. I don't think this is fair. It's the wrong decision.

The school bus gets lots of children to school safely and on time. If I didn't get the school bus, I'd need to walk a really long way in the rain to and from school. Between my house and school, there are big dangerous roads that are especially dangerous for young children like my brother and sister. They'd be tired and cold before we even get to school. 129 children from our school will lose their bus next year. I worry that our school campus will get really busy and dangerous with lots more cars.

This is also bad for climate change. I thought grown-ups were trying to stop as many cars being used on the road.

Then why take away our buses? It doesn't make sense. I want the grown-ups in charge to put our safety first before saving money."

I share Ella's concerns. The proposed cuts will put children's safety at risk by packing in even more cars. For some parents, having to take children to or from school will cause more hassle in the mornings, as they will be trying to get children to both secondary and primary schools because of the cut to the buses.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I do not disagree with anything that Gillian Mackay is saying, but does she know how much the council is forecast to cut over the next three years? Does she agree that we will be discussing a lot of those sorts of issues in relation to what services will need to be cut because of the budget settlements that will be delivered to local government?

Gillian Mackay: We will be discussing those issues, but we need to hope that councils will take sensible decisions that will not put children's safety at risk, which is why this is such a disastrous cut, and because of the lack of consultation, as Stephen Kerr has pointed out.

I realise that I am running out of time, Deputy Presiding Officer, so I will finish. I am calling on the Scottish Government to look again at the guidance to ensure that this cannot happen in another local authority area, and for the Scottish Government and North Lanarkshire Council to do the right thing for children by reversing the decision for secondary school pupils and committing to protecting the current bus entitlement for primary school pupils.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate and will have speeches of up to four minutes.

13:01

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank Gillian Mackay for securing the motion for debate in the chamber and allowing us to discuss an important issue. Like Ms Mackay, I have received a significant number of inquiries from constituents regarding the changes to provision. As my colleagues have done, I have written to North Lanarkshire Council on numerous occasions, representing my constituents' views and ensuring that their dissatisfaction with the changes is made known. In May, along with Clare Adamson, I met the minister, and we asked her to write to North Lanarkshire Council and encourage it to meet the communities that are affected as well as elected representatives to help us all understand how the assessments were being

made and to allow the council to hear the on-going concerns.

In my constituency, Coatbridge and Chryston, three main routes are affected by the proposed changes to secondary school transport provision, resulting in an approximately 2.8-mile walk to Coatbridge high school and St Ambrose high school from Bargeddie, a walk of between 2 and 3 miles from Stepps to Chryston high school—depending on where pupils live in Stepps—and a walk of more than 2 miles from some parts of Carnbroe and Coatbridge to Coatbridge high and St Andrew's high school.

I agree with Gillian Mackay's motion in that walking routes should be suitable. We should not expect children to have to walk via an unlit canal on dark, cold nights—a route that has been deemed suitable by North Lanarkshire Council for those who are walking more than 2.5 miles from Bargeddie—or to have to walk alongside dual carriageways. That is the reality facing children who live in Bargeddie as well as those from Stepps, who are expected to walk alongside the busy Glasgow road and A80, respectively. Both roads had speed cameras until recently and are often considered accident hotspots by local people in the respective areas.

As well as the obvious impact on the safety of pupils when getting to and from school if they walk, there will also be an impact on traffic, as parents resort to driving their children to school, which is not exactly good for the environment. Worse, I have concerns that some parents will simply keep their child off school on days when it is dark, snowing or blowing a gale, if their child is expected to walk more than 5 miles a day, carrying their books, which would not be good for closing the attainment gap.

Although I appreciate Ms Mackay's call on the Scottish Government to ensure that school transport guidance is suitable, the criteria for safe walking routes is currently decided by local authorities, and North Lanarkshire Council has failed to review the criteria for its area since 2018. It is for local authorities to determine the nature of the provision that they offer. This decision lies solely with North Lanarkshire Council. It is my hope that the member-officer working group, which was recently proposed by the council's Scottish National Party group, will remedy that.

Gillian Mackay: I absolutely agree that the guidance on safe walking routes is a matter for the council, but because the council is using the Scottish Government's school transport guidance as an excuse, does the member not think that we should tighten that up to make sure that it cannot be used by another council to make the same decision that North Lanarkshire Council has made?

Fulton MacGregor: I will come back to what we can perhaps do. Everything is on the table, but where decisions are local authority decisions we have to respect that. The main issue at play with that particular decision is that of parental engagement.

For me, this is not a bash North Lanarkshire Council session, as there are many good things that my local council area does. Just this week, for example, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee heard from the head of the housing at the council about some of the great work that has been done in the housing sphere.

However, the council and the councillors from the ruling group have simply imposed the decision on secondary school transport and the soon-to-be-implemented decision on primary school transport without relevant engagement with the communities. They have not taken the people with them, which all elected members can see in the amount of correspondence that we are receiving. Indeed, my constituent, Diane, who is in the chamber today, believes that the lack of engagement is contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006, and I know that she will have made those feelings known to the council.

I have been given full reassurance from the North Lanarkshire Council SNP group leader that she will push for parents' representations to be heard on the member-officer working group that has been set up to review and update the criteria used in the existing school transport provision. I am also told that that has been communicated to key figures in the community, including those on the grass-roots NLC transport action group. I pay tribute, as Gillian Mackay did, to the members of that group, including Marisa, Lesley, Diane, Lorraine and many others—there are far too many names to mention, but it is not my intention to leave anybody out.

The SNP has shown an unwavering commitment to preventing the cuts. The North Lanarkshire Council SNP group was the only group that presented a fully costed budget proposal in 2023 that did not include cuts to school transport.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is about to conclude.

Fulton MacGregor: For those who are unfamiliar with the set-up, the cuts were implemented as a result of the Labour-Conservative joint budget. I would like members across the chamber, including Gillian Mackay and any Conservative members who are going to

speak, to consider how councillors voted on the cuts.

Free bus passes are welcome, but they are not without issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr MacGregor, you will need to bring your remarks to a close, please.

Fulton MacGregor: I had more to say, but I will stop there.

13:07

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I am not going to make my comments party political. I do not think that children's safety is an issue that should be party political. I will present an idea to the minister at the end, because I am one for solutions. He knows that.

North Lanarkshire Council has got itself into a bit of a mess. Part of the reason for that is the way in which it consults, or does not consult, with parents. It is not the only council that does that in a cack-handed manner. Often, decisions are imposed on people—in this case, parents. Councillors are reassured by officers that processes have been followed when perhaps they have not been. I am not going to stand here and blame councillors for taking a decision that takes a council to the legal limit, because I have been in that position myself as a councillor in South Lanarkshire. These are tough decisions to take, and all councils are up against it budget-wise. That is why they end up in the position that they are in.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): Graham Simpson mentioned budgetary challenges. There are budgetary challenges, but the fundamental point in this case is that there was a group of councillors—SNP councillors—who identified funding. There was an underspend of £8 million by North Lanarkshire Council and the SNP councillors identified just over £2 million of that to keep the bus service going and continue to provide school buses. That was voted down by a combination of Labour and Conservative councillors.

I should declare an interest, Presiding Officer, being the father of two children who have lost their school bus provision.

Graham Simpson: I said that I was not going to make it party political. I am not going to make it party political. I am describing the challenges that councillors face. However, we end up in a situation where school buses are being withdrawn, which puts some children—not all children—at risk.

I, too, have walked one of the routes. That was from Stepps to Chryston and it was along a busy dual carriageway. Would I walk that route to work?

No, I would not. Would a teacher walk that route to work? No, they would not, so why would we expect a child, possibly at the start of their high school journey, to do the same? I do not think that we should.

I suggest that we look at the issue in the round and accept that there is a problem throughout Scotland with the school run. Too many cars are being used to take kids to school, so we need to rethink things. We have council officers, perhaps even Government ministers, in an entrenched position, saying, "Well, that's the legal limit—that's all we have to do". In fact, we should be looking at the whole issue of there being too many cars on the road taking kids to school.

There is perhaps a role for Government here in rethinking the issue and considering whether we can do come up with a different system whereby councils—it could be councils—organise buses. Maybe some parents could be asked to contribute towards that. I know that a lot of parents will not like that, but the issue is that there is a lack of provision in a lot of council areas to get kids to school, so they are put in cars. That adds to congestion, which is also a safety issue.

We need a rethink. If the minister, whom I do not think will not come up with any solutions today, can accept that we need to rethink the matter and end the school run throughout Scotland, we might get something positive out of this.

13:11

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): In the same vein as Mr Hepburn, perhaps I should declare an interest, in that two of my children will cease to get their entitlement to the bus provision next year.

The motion in front of us states:

"the Parliament notes with regret the reported reduction to school buses in North Lanarkshire".

Of course we note that with regret, just as every councillor who made the decision to reduce school transport provision regrets that they felt that they had no other option but to make that change in the face of budget cuts from the Government. However, I find it strange that, in the motion, there is no mention of regret about the cuts to local council budgets that have forced councils to make that decision. There is no context at all around the financial situation in which councils of all political persuasions across the country find themselves.

North Lanarkshire Council raises less than 20 per cent of its own revenue—

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Griffin: I will just get to the end of this point. North Lanarkshire Council raises less than 20 per cent of its own revenue, in line with most other councils, so the cuts that it has been forced to make are a direct result of budget decisions made by the Government. We should be clear and honest about that when it comes to criticising decisions that are made by councils.

Jamie Hepburn: This is another attempt to make the point that I just made to Mr Simpson. I do not underestimate the challenges for local authorities, but will Mr Griffin reflect on the fact that an £8 million underspend at North Lanarkshire Council was identified by SNP councillors? They said that £2.2 million or thereabouts could have been used to maintain bus services, but that was voted down by a combination of Labour and Conservative councillors. Will he not accept that as fact?

Mark Griffin: Single-year underspends and raiding reserves—we hear the same things over and over. Those can be spent only once, and the bus provision is a recurring cost to the council.

MSPs have rightly criticised the cuts to the Scottish Government budget over the years, but the same MSPs seem to be strangely silent when those cuts are multiplied and then handed on to councils. Councillors are now left to choose between lots of bad things. There are no more positive choices to be made in the world of local government—only where to make cuts after a decade of deprioritisation of council budgets.

Councils must choose between teachers and school buses; between teaching assistants and school buses; between breakfast clubs and school buses; and between swimming pools, libraries, dealing with potholes, grass cutting or play parks and school buses. All those council services are being pitched against school buses. Twenty-seven other councils have already made that decision—some now provide only the statutory minimum—and yet we have no motions of regret here about those decisions.

Government ministers and back benchers regularly tell Opposition MSPs that, if they want to spending cuts to be reversed, they need to say where the alternative cut should be made. Those ministers and members need to start practising what they preach when it comes to council decisions, because councils all over the country are now reverting to statutory minimum levels of services across all departments, not just on school buses, because of those Government cuts.

I agree with the motion that all walking routes should be robustly assessed for safety, and if a route is not safe, free transport absolutely should be provided. I also agree that the Scottish Government should engage with councils on that

issue, because the guidance on assessing the safety of school walking routes is set nationally by the Government. I am sure that the parents who are here in the chamber and across the country will be interested in hearing from the minister about any proposed change to that guidance.

North Lanarkshire Council has been clear that, if the Government wants to revise the national policy to reduce the mileage limits or the guidance on safety, it should provide the appropriate funding nationally. If there are to be any substantial changes to that policy, given the in-year increases to the Government's budget and the substantial increases to its budget for next year, I understand that North Lanarkshire Council stands ready to look again at its decision in the light of those changes to guidance and of increased funding.

13:16

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, albeit that MSPs have no jurisdiction to reverse the decision to cut school buses in North Lanarkshire. It is an important debate all the same.

In the interests of being open and transparent, I say that I was a councillor between 2017 and 2021, and I also led the Conservative group on North Lanarkshire Council.

Regrettably, it comes as no surprise to me that North Lanarkshire Council eventually took the difficult decision to reduce bus services to the levels required by statutory guidance. That guidance, as was rightly pointed out by Gillian Mackay, was created in Parliament. This particular cut was on the table when I, as a councillor, was leading my group through budget processes, and it has been on the table year on year. That does not make the decision right, but I am hoping to use my time today to present a timeline of events that puts the decision into context.

We can all agree that cuts have consequences and that budget-setting processes in councils are becoming near impossible. If we look at council budgets in the round, we see that council tax payments from taxpayers make up roughly 14 per cent of the full core budget. The rest of the budget relies on funding from the Scottish Government, and that comes at a heavy cost. Ring fencing is restricting choice for councillors, who face impossible decisions while searching through a menu of cuts that are outlined by council officers in order to pass a balanced and legal budget. When education takes up roughly 50 per cent of the budget in North Lanarkshire, there is little to no wiggle room to fund any service that is non-statutory.

That is why North Lanarkshire has lost services such as club 365 and the Kilbowie outdoor centre.

It will now charge for brown bins, it has removed librarians and it will reduce the number of classroom assistants. We are considering closing swimming pools and community centres. I do not think that any politician in their right mind would reduce or close services unless they absolutely had to in order to get a balanced budget.

The forecast of cuts over the next three years for North Lanarkshire Council—this is a really important point, and it is why I asked the question of Gillian Mackay earlier—is about £60 million, and that will come on top of the £0.25 billion that has already been cut since 2013. The communities that Gillian Mackay, Fulton MacGregor, Mark Griffin and I represent will need to brace themselves for more pain and suffering this year. That could have been reflected in the motion. Like many of us, I am completely fed up with the state of local government, and I am completely scunnered that communities bear the brunt of poor political choices.

I move on to the buses. When I was a councillor, I fought hard not to cut school buses at a time when the council was skint. Councils are not skint now—they are at the brink of bankruptcy. We have completely surpassed the point of councils being skint. I do not think that I would want to be an elected member of a local council now, having to face communities knowing that any decision that the council takes will impact the poorest, the disabled, the elderly and our children.

North Lanarkshire Council has agreed to review walking routes to schools that are deemed as not safe by a member-officer working group. Given that they were not safe when the matter was reviewed back in 2019, I do not know why the situation would have changed and why we are now having a repeat of the discussions that took place back then.

When we look at this issue in the round, we see that it all comes down to children and their safety. I am disappointed that parents' groups have been excluded from the decision-making process; after all, it is their children who will be directly impacted. Therefore, I ask the council in my contribution to apply some common sense and ensure that the UNCRC is adhered to and that parents can be actively involved. They do not want to cause trouble; they just want to make sure that their children are safe getting to school and getting back home. As a parent, I understand the fear of having children walk dangerous routes, because the council has supplied no buses to get them to school. I would not tolerate my daughter being placed in such a dangerous situation, and the same goes for any child in North Lanarkshire.

The decision to reverse the cuts to school buses is ultimately one for councillors, because this Government will not step in. I applaud the parents

who are taking a stand today and who are with us in the public gallery, but I am fearful that this is only the beginning of many unpalatable and difficult decisions that will need to be taken over the next three years. It is incumbent on us, as MSPs, to continue to fight for local government so that we do not have to debate more motions in this place on cuts to local government funding.

13:21

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank Gillian Mackay for securing this debate on behalf of her constituents, who are here in the chamber today, and I congratulate those constituents on raising the profile of the often very complex issue of school transport on the national stage. I am sure that their campaign is really resonating with communities across Scotland.

Getting the wee ones out safely to school in the morning and back in the afternoon is a real challenge for many families. It defines the working day for many people. Indeed, I fondly remember those days myself. I am minded to think back to my former role as a councillor in Dunblane, where I supported many families who had similar school transport problems.

In the case of Dunblane, a commercial bus service linking both sides of the town was withdrawn, leaving many pupils stranded, and, in the dark and wet, children like Ella would struggle to get to school, while half-empty buses carrying distance-entitled pupils would go past, unable to stop. The distance-entitlement criteria meant that some of their friends in neighbouring streets could get the bus, while they could not. In the end, more parents drove to the high school, causing more parking safety issues. Some of those who managed to walk did so on unlit paths, while those who cycled had the benefit of the national cycle network in the town, but unsafe crossing points still had to be negotiated, which put off many children.

At that time, there was no concessionary travel for children over five years old. Today, there is free bus travel for all under-22s, which has provided flexibility for young people and supported commercial bus services. That said, there is a critical need for councils to co-ordinate services between education buses and fare-paying services. As many members have reflected, the critical elements are parental engagement and planning.

At the start of last term, students in Dunfermline were desperate to get on commercial buses going to Woodmill high school, but, given the numbers of under-22 card holders and fare-paying passengers, there was overcrowding to the point that some buses drove past students, leaving

them stranded on the pavement. Some buses were late, while others did not arrive at all, which made it stressful for families and forced teachers to challenge lateness. One of my constituents told me:

“Having to provide comfort and support for my daughter as she transitioned to high school is naturally being part of a parent, but having to manage unreliable bus services and to tell her that it is not her fault that the bus did not stop or was a no-show was painful.”

This term, in Dunfermline, a new commercial bus service has been introduced to plug the gap and meet demand, but that could have been anticipated by Fife Council much earlier in the summer. The fact, though, is that parental engagement and planning are really important.

It is also important that councils consider how we make walking, wheeling and cycling to school more accessible, safer and fun for young people. Councils need to keep working on creating safer routes from the streets where young people live to their schools.

The first step in that respect is safer 20mph speed limits. The next step is proper investment in walking, wheeling and cycle paths away from traffic, with better crossing points and other improvements. That will require funding in next year's Scottish budget, so that councils can deliver the tier 1 projects at pace and finally complete their planned roll-out of 20mph speed limits. I hope that the transport minister is listening to that point and will reflect on it when closing the debate.

In particular, the national cycle network is a great resource that connects many local streets to schools, but it requires investment to make it more accessible and safer.

Of course, all those investments support health, road safety and traffic and pollution reduction. All schools must be supported to deliver bikeability training on the streets around schools, while building a confident school cycle culture, with bike buses and other programmes.

Again, I thank Gillian Mackay and the campaigners. I wish them well and hope that other school communities and councils across Scotland will take inspiration from their campaign, get the engagement right and design the right school travel solutions for their communities. A package of solutions is needed. Buses and active travel are part of that, and parents and pupils must be at the heart of that conversation.

13:25

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber.

In April 2023, I ran a consultation on the safety concerns about the reduction in school bus services. I had an overwhelming response, with those taking part saying that they could not see how the reduction would improve pupil safety. I also walked from Cathedral primary school to Adele Street with pupils, parents and carers, including Kerry Anne Ferrie and some of the campaign supporters who are in the public gallery today. The walk crosses Airbles Road, a partially dualled carriageway, which is due to undergo major extension work in order to join the M74 to the M8. Two of the busiest roads in Scotland will be joined in an arterial route through Motherwell, which is declared a safe walking route for primary children. That pan-Lanarkshire link will have a big impact on the area, and it is still in its development phase. While that work is completed over the next four years, it is likely that there will be additional traffic on the surrounding roads, too, which will create a dangerous hazard for our young people.

On that walk, we had to negotiate traffic that was stopped across the pedestrian crossing on Windmillhill Street. I am well known in the Parliament for campaigning on safety issues and starting the cross-party group on accident prevention and safety awareness. That is because my teenage niece was killed on a pedestrian crossing in 2003. The vehicle that was involved in that accident with Mairi could not see her and was not in a position to see her because traffic was stopped across a pedestrian crossing. We can imagine the same situation happening not just with a teenager but with a primary 1 or 2 pupil trying to negotiate gridlocked traffic at rush hour in Motherwell. That is of great concern to me.

I am a member of the Catholic community in North Lanarkshire and a supporter of Catholic education in the area. Education Scotland's His Majesty's inspectors of education 2023 report on the proposals highlights that inspectors had met church representatives from the archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, the diocese of Motherwell and the archdiocese of Glasgow, who reported a concern that the proposals would impact Catholic education, because the catchment areas for Catholic schools tend to be larger for both primary and secondary schools.

That makes it all the more unbelievable that there was not an equality impact assessment as part of the decision-making process in North Lanarkshire. There was no engagement with the dioceses and no risk analysis that would provide confidence for parents and guardians. There was no meaningful engagement, as has been said, and there was no consultation with the young people who will be affected. That flies in the face of all the work that we have been doing on young people's rights to be heard on issues that will directly impact them.

In addition, I do not believe that there has been any additional investment in safe walking and cycling education or road safety education in those areas. As Mark Ruskell pointed out, the funds were there for active travel measures such as improving safe cycling and walking routes. North Lanarkshire Council could have engaged in those processes before making its decision, which has had a devastating impact on our young people.

Finally, we know that budget issues are a problem for councils, but we also know that the unallocated reserves in North Lanarkshire Council's general fund run at 16 per cent—at £39 million—whereas the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Accounts Commission have said that a reasonable level of unallocated reserves for a council to hold is 3 to 4 per cent. There is money available, as identified by the SNP group on the council. I hope and trust that the working group will look at the safety issues and reverse the decision before any damage is done.

13:30

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I thank Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the Parliament. I do not represent North Lanarkshire, but I represent one of the 27 other council areas that Mark Griffin referenced. I am absolutely behind parents who are campaigning on the issue because, as the motion states, the situation across Scotland is unacceptable.

I believe that the policy and guidance on the distance limits lie at the heart of the issue. It is not a coincidence that 27 councils—with more to follow, I suspect—are coming to the same decision. That guidance was written for a different age.

We are forgetting that, at the heart of the debate are children, who do not make a choice to go to school; we make that choice for them—they have to go. They do not choose where they live, either. As MSPs and politicians, there is always a danger that we accept the myth that all parents think that it is important to get their kids to school. Yes, there are some parents in the public gallery who are campaigning passionately on the issues, but there are other parents for whom that is not their priority. Likewise, it is not their priority to think about what their kids will have for lunch at school. On some of those issues, there is a strong case for universal provision and making sure that our guidance is fit for purpose.

In my constituency, children are told that it is safe to walk down 60mph single-carriageway roads, with no pavements and often with ditches at the side. They are told that they can walk through fields in the rain—often fields that have livestock in them for half the year. They are told that they can

get on public buses that do not exist or that do not run to timetable and get them to school on time. Best of all, we have had council officers—I do not blame them, because they have the hard job of defending some of the changes—saying that, because of health and safety at work regulations, they cannot walk routes with parents or young people because those routes are not safe. Something not right is happening in the background.

We have to be willing to go back to the guidance because, as several members have said, the policy should be based on safety and not distance. The proposals should also be equality impact assessed. As well as the fact that there are more cars on the road, which is clearly a problem, I suspect that many young people are giving up on school and are absent more often, perhaps because they do not have the support that we would all like them to have from their families. Those young people are disproportionately impacted by the changes.

The motion touches on the provision of buses more widely and investment in active travel. I believe that, if the guidelines were changed, there would be greater encouragement for local authorities and other interested parties to work on safe active travel. As a rural member, it often seems that such projects are seen as being too difficult, too expensive or not important enough.

I draw the minister's and members' attention to a project at Penpont in my constituency, which has involved millions of pounds being spent on a safe route for cycling and walking, which is allowing young people who live at the boundary of the three-mile limit to cycle and walk to school. These things can be done if the will is there, but the Government needs to make changes to encourage local authorities to think again.

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

13:34

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Like Graham Simpson, I will very much attempt to keep away from politics because a lot of local politics have been described today.

I thank Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber and everyone who has contributed to what has been a really interesting debate.

I have engaged considerably with Fulton MacGregor and Clare Adamson over a long time. People are clearly talking about the issue and looking for a solution to it. I also give credit to the campaign groups that are in the chamber today. They have been working hard over a long time.

Delivery of effective, fair, safe and climate-friendly home-to-school transport is an important responsibility for all local authorities, and I know that they do not take it lightly. It is also of central importance to the Scottish Government's priorities of tackling child poverty, ensuring high-quality, sustainable public services and tackling the climate emergency. It is therefore critically important that we work together to ensure that school pupils in Scotland can travel to and from school safely.

Local authorities rightly have wide discretion on how they meet their statutory obligations on home-to-school transport. They are best placed to make those decisions, based on local knowledge of the transport network and the needs of all the pupils in their council area. That said, the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 sets out statutory walking distances. Those are a long-standing feature of our education system and they broadly reflect the statutory position in other United Kingdom nations. I can confirm that there are no plans to change those.

Gillian Mackay: Will the minister reflect on the situation now, compared with the 1980s, and the fact that those limits were put in place before I was born? With regard to the level of traffic, we are living in an entirely different time to the time when those limits were created. Roads are now much busier and much more dangerous for children. The fact that those limits have not been reviewed in so long demonstrates an absolute failure on our part to ensure children's safety.

Jim Fairlie: I very much take on board Gillian Mackay's point. However, as I said, there are no plans to change the limits. I absolutely accept that infrastructure has changed over that time, but I will come on to talk about the safety element of what local authorities should be considering.

It is important to be clear that statutory walking distances are only one element to be considered and that they do not negate the duties of local authorities in relation to pupil safety. Oliver Mundell also made that point. Where routes are considered to be unsafe, alternatives should be considered, including the provision of transport, even if the distance involved falls short of the statutory eligibility criteria.

Stephen Kerr: The minister said that alternatives should be considered, but does he not agree that they must be considered?

Jim Fairlie: Local authorities have a statutory duty to consider these positions, and I would expect any local authority to have taken that point on board.

The Scottish Government expects local authorities to keep the school transport eligibility criteria under review, taking into account factors

that might affect pupil safety, and to meaningfully engage with pupils and families when considering the impact of changes. That point has been made a number of times today in relation to the consultation process.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the minister give way?

Jim Fairlie: Yes.

Meghan Gallacher: I thank the minister for giving way, and I promise that I will not take too long.

These are just words. It would be helpful if, today, the Government were to agree to a review or to consider a review. That would benefit not only parents, but children and their safety, which is what we are talking about today.

Jim Fairlie: I am going to keep moving on, and, perhaps, without more interventions, members will get answers to some of their points.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I have commissioned an update to the Scottish Government's school transport guidance for local authorities to provide further clarity and to highlight the points that I am making this afternoon and that have been made by a number of people in the chamber. The updated guidance will set out our expectations in relation to factors that local authorities should consider when making decisions on the provision of school transport.

I understand the disappointment of pupils and families in areas such as North Lanarkshire where a local authority has chosen to bring in changes to the distance in relation to eligibility for where dedicated school transport is provided.

In June, together with Christina McKelvie and Monica Lennon, I met members of the North Lanarkshire transport action group, and we heard directly from parents' groups from North and South Lanarkshire about concerns over proposed changes, in particular around the safety of the journey that some children will be asked to make to school.

I welcome North Lanarkshire Council's decision to set up a working group to review school transport provision for its primary schools in advance of the proposed reductions to eligibility for school transport for those pupils next year. I strongly encourage that council—and, indeed, all local authorities considering changes in provision—to ensure that the views of young people and their families are included in that exercise.

Members have also referenced the young persons free bus travel scheme. It is a transformational policy that is opening up opportunities to young people right across

Scotland in leisure, learning, work and social activities—and in keeping family ties very close—that would not otherwise be available. At the same time, it is encouraging bus use among young people in order to create travelling habits, helping us to meet our climate ambitions.

However, I would stress that that scheme does not change the specific responsibilities and duties of councils in relation to the provision of school transport. It was not designed to replicate dedicated home-school transport. The scheme gives young people access to an entitlement that allows them to travel independently, for free, across the whole country.

To mitigate potential child safety risks, parent or guardian consent is required for under-16s. That allows those who know the child best to make a careful judgment about whether they are suitably equipped to exercise their entitlement responsibly and safely. That right should not be used as a proxy to remove the obligation to provide school transport for young people when that is required. Mark Ruskell eloquently described some of the issues that that causes. He also talked about home-school transport going beyond the school bus.

Over the past four years, the Scottish Government has invested more than £500 million in walking, wheeling and cycling, including £157 million this year. For 2024-25, the delivery models for infrastructure and behaviour change projects have changed. They now provide direct funding to local authorities and regional transport partnerships, so that they can drive forward local priority projects, including those that will support pupils and their families to walk, wheel or cycle for the school run.

In respect of safety, we have supported the delivery of the bikeability Scotland programme through Cycling Scotland, with more than £2 million of funding for 2024-25. A record number of Scottish councils delivered on-road cycle training at every local primary school last year. There is continued investment in that area, which is critical to the safety of school children on our roads.

I reiterate my thanks to members for their valuable contributions this afternoon. It is of key importance that all parties involved in the discussions in North Lanarkshire—and in other local authority areas in similar circumstances—reach a settled position to minimise disruption and concern for young people in their areas.

13:42

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio questions, and the portfolio on this occasion is social justice. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Questions 2 and 3 are grouped together, so I will take any supplementaries after both substantive questions have been asked. There is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions, so I ask for brief questions and responses.

UK Budget (Impact on Social Justice)

1. **Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact it anticipates that the recent United Kingdom Government budget will have on its aim to deliver social justice. (S6O-03893)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Chancellor of the Exchequer's budget was a missed opportunity to shift the dial on tackling poverty. Decisions to freeze local housing allowance rates and proceed with cuts to the winter fuel payment will increase financial insecurity among thousands of households.

Meanwhile, retaining the two-child limit and the rape clause, the benefit cap and the bedroom tax will leave hundreds of thousands of children across the United Kingdom facing poverty and hardship. It is also concerning that the UK Government will continue the previous Government's welfare reforms targeting disabled people.

As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said, ultimately, it will take investment in our social security system to seriously bring down hardship.

Kevin Stewart: The UK budget has failed to scrap Tory austerity measures that we know are drivers of poverty—policies such as the benefit cap, the bedroom tax, the two-child limit and the freeze on local housing allowance rates. Will the cabinet secretary call on UK Government counterparts to reverse those punitive policies? Will she continue to use the limited powers of devolution to mitigate, where possible, the worst effects of Westminster austerity?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Kevin Stewart is quite right to point out the disappointing nature of

the budget. The Government will continue to push the UK Labour Government to deliver a social security system that is fit for purpose and to deliver progress towards an essentials guarantee. Until then, now that the budget has passed, the two-child cap is now the Labour two-child cap and the benefit cap is now the Labour benefit cap.

It is also disappointing to see the freeze on the local housing allowance, given that the freeze is one of the main drivers of homelessness. We need to prevent homelessness as much as we can.

As Kevin Stewart said, the Government does a lot to try to mitigate the worst excesses of UK Governments, both Tory and Labour. We have spent about £1.2 billion mitigating the impacts over 14 years, including £134 million this year alone on discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund, as well as nearly £500 million on the Scottish child payment. We will continue to protect people who are on low incomes.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

2. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work regarding the social isolation and loneliness strategy, particularly in relation to rural areas ahead of the winter months. (S6O-03894)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): To support the delivery of our social isolation and loneliness delivery plan, we implemented the social isolation and loneliness fund in March 2023. In communities across Scotland, 53 projects are currently operational, providing opportunities for people to connect. At the end of year 1, projects reached 11,293 individuals, with a focus on priority groups that are most at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

We know the impact of social isolation on mental health, and that is why we continue to support the national rural mental health forum to build the confidence of rural organisations to deliver mental health support to their members and networks.

Emma Harper: I understand what the minister is saying about mental health. Loneliness affects about one in eight people over the age of 65, and Dumfries and Galloway has one of the highest proportions of older people in Scotland, with about 33,000 people within that age bracket, which means that we have about 4,000 older people in the region who are struggling with the negative feelings that result from feeling lonely. Added to that in Dumfries and Galloway is the issue of rurality. Can the minister comment on whether its "A Connected Scotland" policy is likely to be updated with a specific focus on rurality?

Kaukab Stewart: Ten out of the 53 projects that are funded by the social isolation and loneliness fund are based in rural locations. Befriending Networks Scotland receives £40,000 a year for three years from the Scottish Government, and approximately one in four of its 118 Scottish members are independent community organisations that operate in rural areas.

“A Fairer Scotland for Older People: A Framework for Action” was published in 2019 and has successfully delivered a range of policy measures, including the reduction of social isolation. The Scottish Government is undertaking a refresh of the framework, which includes a round-table meeting in Dumfries to hear from older people.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

3. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address social isolation and loneliness. (S6O-03895)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government published “Recovering our Connections 2023-2026”, the delivery plan for our social isolation and loneliness strategy, in March 2023. The plan aims to better understand social isolation and loneliness, to reduce the harm that is caused by it and to tackle that public health issue. There are a number of actions in it, including funding to support 53 organisations across Scotland delivering community-led activity that responds to local needs. The Scottish Government will continue to work with the social isolation and loneliness advisory group to help us to deliver the plan and to collaborate on ways to tackle loneliness for those who are most impacted.

Alex Rowley: I have certainly read the strategy that you have highlighted. It is important work.

Recently, I have visited many local and community organisations such as Lo’gelly Lunches, Grow West Fife, Kinross day centre and, in my home village of Kelty, Oor Wee Cafe. All those organisations and many more do an amazing amount of work, and they are community based. Although the strategy is welcome, do you accept that it is at community level that we can make the difference? Will you look at the impact of council cuts on many local organisations that are key to making the strategy work?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Kaukab Stewart: Alex Rowley raises important points, and I am well aware of the value that is added by local groups. Of course, Fife Council is Labour-led, and I ask all councils to consider the point that he has raised.

I highlight the work of Befriending Networks Scotland, which I mentioned earlier as receiving £40,000 a year for three years, covering 2023 to 2026. I have visited some of its projects. It supports befriending services across Scotland and currently has 118 Scottish members. Approximately one in four of its members are independent community organisations that operate in rural areas. Several national organisations serve rural communities through telephone befriending or commissioned services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementary questions, which will need to be brief. The responses will need to be brief, too.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members’ attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests.

Winter is often a tough time for farmers—especially this year, after a difficult harvest. We have wonderful charities such as the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution, which does amazing work in providing emotional, practical and financial support. Is there any more that the minister can do to ensure that people know that help is available?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Tim Eagle for raising the amazing work that that organisation does. The Scottish Government is committed to continuing to support the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution to provide emotional, practical and financial assistance to people who live and work in Scottish agriculture.

We have provided funding of a total of £50,000 to support RSABI in financial year 2023-24, taking the total Scottish Government support to £565,000. We are in discussion with RSABI on future funding requirements. The funding supports it to deliver important services such as emotional, practical and financial assistance to those in the agricultural sector.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): In its delivery plan for the social isolation and loneliness strategy, the Scottish Government commits to tackling the digital divide. In rural and island areas especially, older people rely on communications infrastructure to keep connected with family, friends and care services.

Given that telecom companies are planning to end the use of traditional copper network land lines and move to broadband-based phones, what work is the Scottish Government undertaking to ensure that rural areas with not-spots, poor broadband connectivity and emergency alarms that are reliant on land lines are smoothly transitioned for older people, who are more likely to have a traditional land line than to have a mobile phone?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We must have briefer questions and briefer responses, or we will not get through the questions on the order paper.

Kaukab Stewart: I will give a brief response. Beatrice Wishart has raised many issues that also cover colleagues' portfolio areas, so I will connect with them and issue a more detailed response.

Third Sector (Sharing of Learning)

4. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the third sector to ensure that learning can be shared and successful local models can be rolled out nationally. (S6O-03896)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government provides £11.6 million of funding to national infrastructure bodies, such as the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations and Volunteer Scotland, as well as providing dedicated local support through the 32 third sector interfaces—one in each local authority. By providing learning and sharing opportunities for the wider third sector through networks, events, training and information sharing, those bodies enable organisations to share ideas and best practice and to collaborate.

The Scottish Government also supports a wide variety of shared learning platforms across all portfolios, in relation to many of which it has a facilitative role.

Evelyn Tweed: Stirling Community Enterprise's resilient futures project, which tackles antisocial behaviour, is proving to be very successful. What steps can the Government take to support the roll-out of such projects and models in other places that might benefit from that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Evelyn Tweed for her question and for highlighting the important work that the resilient futures project does. I am aware that the Minister for Victims and Community Safety visited that project in April this year. It is very important that we learn from the success of such projects so that others can learn from best practice and can consider adopting it.

We look forward to receiving the report and recommendations from the independent working group on antisocial behaviour, which is undertaking a review of antisocial behaviour with a view to a more strategic approach being taken that involves focusing on preventing antisocial behaviour and supporting people.

I again thank Evelyn Tweed for raising awareness of such an important project in her constituency.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I recently attended a physical activity class that is run by Killie Heartmates in conjunction with the cardiology rehabilitation unit at Crosshouse hospital. I noticed the impact that that class has on people's quality of life and on preventing recurrence of heart problems and stroke. Does the minister agree that that initiative is exactly the sort of a collaborative third sector initiative that the Scottish Government should be rolling out?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member raises another example of the fantastic work that goes on in our third sector and community groups across the country.

We are keen to ensure, whether through national Government funding, local government funding or funding from trusts and foundations, that we continue to share best practice, what works and the impact that that is having on the lives of people in communities throughout Scotland.

I thank the member for raising yet another excellent example of what can happen.

Support for People Seeking Asylum

5. **Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what it is doing to support people seeking asylum in Scotland. (S6O-03897)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government continues to deliver a range of interventions to support people seeking asylum who live in Scotland. Working with partners, we have reaffirmed our approach of supporting integration from day 1 in the third new Scots refugee integration strategy delivery plan.

Many of the essential services that support people seeking asylum are devolved and are delivered inclusively for everyone who lives in Scotland, as far as that is possible within United Kingdom immigration legislation and rules. This year, we are providing £3.6 million of grant funding to the Scottish Refugee Council for a comprehensive nationwide refugee support service.

Paul Sweeney: There was dismay and frustration when, a few months ago, the Government abruptly abandoned its commitment to provide free bus travel for people who are seeking asylum. Asylum organisations and MSPs on a cross-party basis have been campaigning on the matter for three years now. I was pleased to hear the Government reaffirm its commitment to implementing free bus travel for asylum seekers in the chamber last month, but we now need clear actions. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the policy will be delivered by the end of the current session of Parliament? If so, will she set out a

clear timeline for the next steps and say which implementation options are being considered?

Kaukab Stewart: It is estimated that a third of the people living in Scotland who are seeking asylum may already be eligible for free bus travel through the national concessionary travel schemes on the basis of age or disability, because those schemes are delivered inclusively. We are committed to exploring whether we can extend free bus travel to all people who are seeking asylum before the end of the current parliamentary session, subject to the successful passage of a Scottish budget that contains the issue and an agreed way forward in terms of practical delivery. I call on Paul Sweeney to urge members on his benches to support that budget in order for that to take place.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): People who are seeking asylum are facing impossible choices every day—I know that the minister knows that—and provision of the bus pass would represent a small but important freedom. How will the minister build confidence with the community that it is now going to happen? For the past three years, we have had a cycle of hope, with a promise from the Government and then a commitment, only for it to be dropped. As the minister knows, the community is desperate and it has no faith that this is going to happen. How will she restore faith?

Kaukab Stewart: I understand Mark Ruskell's frustration and I am on the record as sharing that. This is not a position that the Government wanted to be in. We have had a very challenging fiscal climate and we have had to make incredibly difficult decisions in order to deliver balanced and sustainable spending plans for the financial year 2024-25. At that time, it was unaffordable to progress the piloting of free bus travel for all people who are seeking asylum in Scotland. I took responsibility by making that announcement in person.

I refer the member to my previous answer regarding the forthcoming budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Humza Yousaf joins us remotely.

Ministerial Population Task Force

6. Humza Yousaf (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of its ministerial population task force. (S6O-03898)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The task force met on 25 September and discussed delivery of the addressing depopulation action plan's new place-based interventions, with six local authorities receiving total funding of over £420,000 to support sustainable communities.

Members of the task force agreed that the next national islands plan should include an overarching strategic focus on supporting our island populations. The task force also agreed an evaluation approach for Scotland's migration service. That will support employers and inward investors to use the immigration system effectively to meet their needs and assist individuals to relocate to and settle in Scotland. The minutes for the meetings will be published in due course.

Humza Yousaf: I thank the minister for her comprehensive response. Studies show that immigration over the decades has been good for both Scotland and the United Kingdom. Extreme anti-migrant rhetoric that seeks to divide our communities was once the exclusive territory of the far right, but it is now being adopted by mainstream political parties in the UK. Does the minister agree that, instead of becoming insular as a country, we should note that immigration is vital for our nation's prosperity? Does she further agree that the best thing that all politicians can do is to confront the far right rather than appeasing it by adopting its rhetoric?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Mr Yousaf for making the case for immigration very successfully. Scotland is an outward looking and welcoming nation and we can be proud of being such a welcoming country. We celebrate, value and protect diversity in our communities.

We all have a responsibility to confront hatred and prejudice wherever and whenever they appear. Scotland is a diverse, multicultural society, and that diversity strengthens us as a nation. The delivery of our new Scots strategy is a crucial way to help us to build inclusive and cohesive communities.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Will the minister update Parliament on the work that the task force is undertaking on the challenges that are caused by the increasing population in the east of Scotland, including in my constituency of Edinburgh Northern and Leith? Will she tell us whether, how and when public spending allocations will be adjusted to meet rapidly growing demand?

Kaukab Stewart: The task force includes members from many Government portfolios, in recognition of the crucial relationship between population, public services and communities. We continue to work closely with local authorities and with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

I recognise the importance of engaging with and supporting areas, such as Edinburgh and Lothians, that are experiencing population growth. COSLA is a member of the population programme board and, along with the Scottish Government, jointly chairs a local government population round

table. COSLA is also taking forward a discrete piece of work with local authorities to better understand the specific challenges of population growth. The population programme will consider the outputs of that work in due course.

Homelessness

7. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to end homelessness. (S6O-03899)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): We are making more than £14 billion available to councils in 2024-25 to deliver a range of services, including homelessness services. That is topped up by our multiyear £100 million ending homelessness together fund. We are also introducing new homelessness prevention duties.

The United Kingdom Government's decision to freeze local housing allowance is disappointing and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that private renters will feel let down by that choice.

We are also investing more than £90 million in discretionary housing payments to help families meet their housing costs and, on Thursday, we announced further rent control measures to protect tenants and keep people in their homes.

Roz McCall: To be frank, the current action is not working. Figures that were released last month revealed that more than 15,000 children in Scotland are homeless and that the average time taken to access support is worsening. It is a fact that the Scottish Government has failed to tackle homelessness for the past 17 years. Does the minister agree with Shelter Scotland that those figures are "shocking and indefensible"?

Paul McLennan: I remind the member of her party's involvement in austerity during the 17 years that she mentions. The local housing allowance that I mentioned was frozen by her party for a number of years.

On top of the figures that I mentioned, we have made an additional £40 million investment in affordable housing this year to deal with voids and acquisitions, taking our overall investment to more than £600 million. We are also providing an extra £2 million to local authorities facing the most significant pressures on temporary accommodation and are supporting councils to target plans that will address local challenges.

If the member wants to see the continued investment that I have mentioned, I hope that she will vote for the Scottish Government budget, which will be brought forward in the next few weeks.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): What action is the Scottish Government taking to

address the impact of the housing crisis on women and children, given last month's joint report by Shelter Scotland and Engender, which showed that women are disproportionately affected by the housing crisis and that they face unique challenges in accessing safe and affordable housing or single-sex temporary accommodation?

Paul McLennan: The member makes an important point and raises a number of issues. The prevention duties and domestic abuse protocols are very important and we have been engaging on those with local authorities and Scottish Women's Aid. Her point about single-sex temporary accommodation is an incredibly important one that I raise with local authorities when I meet them. I would be happy to engage further with the member on that point.

Carer Support Payment

8. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the national roll-out of the carer support payment. (S6O-03900)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am delighted to confirm that the carer support payment was launched nationally on Monday and I urge unpaid carers across Scotland to check their eligibility and to apply. We have worked extensively with carers and those who represent them to deliver an improved benefit, which, for the first time, extends support to many full-time students. We are continuing to transfer the benefits of carers allowance clients in Scotland to the carer support payment and will make further improvements to support for carers after that case transfer process is complete.

James Dornan: I am also delighted to see the carer support payment being rolled out nationally, but many of my constituents may not be aware that that benefit has wider eligibility than the carers allowance that it replaces. Will the cabinet secretary outline who is set to benefit most from the devolution of that important social security payment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Since 2018, all carers in Scotland who get carers allowance—and, now, those who get carer support payment—have benefited from the extra support of the carers allowance supplement. We have also worked with carers to design the carer support payment to work better for them. As I mentioned in my original answer, that extends eligibility to many in full-time education who were not able to get carers allowance under the Department for Work and Pensions. I hope that that removes further barriers to study from unpaid carers. We expect that to benefit around 1,500 people.

We have also reduced the past presence test in comparison with carers allowance, so that some carers can get support sooner, and we are designing communications to help carers to find wider support that they may be entitled to.

As I also said in my original answer, we are already committed to further improvements once case transfer is complete.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Paul O’Kane, who also joins us remotely, has a brief supplementary question.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice will join me in welcoming the announcement from the United Kingdom Government about the increase in the earnings threshold for carers allowance to £45 a week, which will benefit people elsewhere in the UK by 2029. That will mean a block grant adjustment to Scotland, and I am keen to understand the cabinet secretary’s intention for that. Will she change the regulations on the carer support payment in order to increase the earnings threshold, to ensure that nobody in Scotland loses out as a result?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Paul O’Kane has raised an important point. We are keen to look at the DWP’s plans and the timeframes for those. As I have already alluded to, case transfer is continuing for the duration of this year and into next year, but we need to look very carefully—particularly once case transfer is complete—at the changes that we can make that may be different from what happens down south. On this aspect, we are keen to work with the DWP to understand its timeline and the block grant adjustment that will come our way, to ensure that we do all that we can to support carers. As I have alluded to, we have already taken that decision through much of what we have done, including the young carers grant and the additional payments, and we are keen to work closely with the DWP to understand what is coming and when.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on social justice. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow the front benches to change.

Brexit (Impact on Rural Economy)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15253, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on Brexit impacts on Scotland’s rural economy. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

14:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The opportunity to have this debate is both welcome and timely, given the lingering effects of Brexit and what can only be described as a perfect storm of post-Brexit implementation issues that are still having serious knock-on implications for our rural communities and our invaluable £15 billion food and drink sector in Scotland. Those effects and issues include: previous United Kingdom Government migration policy announcements and the on-going impacts of those on the already chronic post-Brexit labour shortages for the sector; barriers to trade and the timing of new border checks as part of the border target operating model roll-out; a lack of financial certainty with the removal of ring-fenced funding for the sector; and ambiguity around UK trade deal negotiations—the confusion and uncertainty that persist around trade deal negotiations further demonstrate that Scotland’s trading interests would have been best served by remaining in the European Union.

Overall, I am sure, members will agree that that is an unedifying list and that those issues, individually and collectively, have beset a sector that was already beleaguered by a long series of crises in recent years, including Brexit, the pandemic and the on-going cost crisis.

Only last September, the Parliament debated and recognised the importance and value of Scotland’s vibrant food and drink sector to our national and local economies. I talked then with reference to a series of facts, or impacts on industry, that have arisen largely as a result of Brexit. It is undeniable that, one year on, issues related to Brexit still pervade. That is why it is important that we debate again its impact on our rural communities.

Many of the issues that we are still dealing with are legacy choices that can be laid squarely at the former United Kingdom Government’s door—a set of arbitrary and unnecessary choices or decisions that were taken proactively by the UK Government. The impact of that would have been particularly difficult for the sector during what was already a tremendously challenging period.

Throughout all that, the sector has endured, and the farmers, fishers, crofters, food manufacturers and producers at the heart of our rural, coastal and island communities have shown remarkable resilience and worked tirelessly to continue to supply our food each and every day. What thanks do they get?

It is bad enough that we can attribute on-going issues to Brexit, but many of those choices by the previous UK Government only add insult to injury for those who work in this vital sector. That is at the heart of the issue and it is the reason for the debate this afternoon. We are at a pivotal moment, with a new UK Government having been installed at Westminster, where very different choices can now be made. That was then and this is now.

I want to make my comments today not by referring to a series of facts but by referring to a series of decisions that the new UK Government could take and how it could choose to do things better and differently. For example, it was a former UK Government choice to consider extending the not-for-EU labelling requirements beyond the terms of the Windsor framework so that they could apply to certain agri-food products Great Britain-wide, rather than just those products that are destined for Northern Ireland. If implemented, that could have an impact on a large number of businesses in Scotland, as adding costs arbitrarily to all businesses, rather than targeting those that trade specifically with Northern Ireland, seems disproportionate and wholly inappropriate, particularly when consumers are already bearing the burden of added food costs.

We are hopeful that the new UK Government has chosen to take a different tack by announcing on 30 September that it will work intensively with industry to monitor supplies to Northern Ireland and ensure that they are maintained as the Windsor framework implementation continues. The Scottish Government and the businesses that are affected now need to hear some more of the detail behind what the UK Government has said publicly, so that we can be reassured about the impacts.

It was also a former UK Government decision to reduce our seven-year EU common agricultural policy budgets to yearly allocations from HM Treasury. That uncertainty was compounded by the former UK Government's failure to collectively agree the principles of future funding allocations, which was a Bew review recommendation that it chose to accept but then chose to ignore. It is beyond disappointing that the new UK Government has chosen to follow the approach of its predecessor and to simply impose a settlement on us.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I question the cabinet secretary's being

selective with her facts. She points out that the Labour Government chose to ignore the Bew review when it came to formalising agricultural funding and the Barnett formula, but she did not point out that the Bew review also suggested an uplift in payments to Scottish agriculture, which the cabinet secretary then failed to deliver. The Bew review identified £46 million of funding that went to other sectors.

Mairi Gougeon: I would have thought that the member who raises that point would have understood the Bew review recommendations and what was left outstanding. Again, that is a separate issue. We are talking about the new funding and the discussions that should have taken place with this Government that did not.

I have already been clear, as has the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, about the savings that were made in previous years and the fact that they were ring-fenced and would be returned to the portfolio. That commitment remains. However, we need to be clear about the issues and the facts—as the member says—and not confuse them with unrelated issues.

Coming back to the point that I was making, the settlement from the new UK Government fails to address the real-terms loss of previous years and fails to respect devolution by engaging with us. It fails to recognise the potential of our land for nature and climate outcomes, and it ignores the unified voices of our farming industry and our environmental non-governmental organisation base. That is a result of Brexit and of choices that have been made elsewhere.

It was also a former UK Government migration policy choice to adjust the skilled worker visa salary thresholds to increase the minimum earnings threshold from £26,200 to £38,700, which was unfathomable, given the potential to seriously impact our food and drink sector, including our sensitive red meat and seafood sectors.

A joint public letter from industry representatives to the former UK Government in February cited those choices as

“the biggest threat to the meat industry this year”.

Their view was that bringing in labour at the new minimum rate could place a significant cost burden on businesses, and that many businesses will not be able to manage those extra costs. The decision, which was taken summarily by the former UK Government, only served to exacerbate acute post-Brexit labour shortage impacts on the sector—impacts that industry and Scottish ministers had repeatedly highlighted to the UK Government. I am hopeful that the new UK Government will choose to consider the most

serious issue of labour shortages in the spirit of collaboration.

We are already delivering our addressing depopulation action plan by working with local authorities to support local priorities around population attraction and retention. We will launch Scotland's migration service before the end of this year to support employers navigating the UK immigration system to recruit internationally and to support individuals seeking to relocate to Scotland. We are clear that Scotland's distinct demographic and economic needs require a tailored approach to migration, so we urge a collaborative approach to be implemented between the Scottish and UK Governments to develop a tailored route that would benefit Scotland's economy, public services and communities.

This Parliament previously endorsed a tailored migration approach for Scotland, which included voicing strong support for our rural visa pilot proposal. It is important to note that that, or a Scottish visa, could be delivered within the current UK immigration system to address population and workforce issues across a range of sectors and regions within Scotland. The fresh talent initiative, which was delivered in collaboration between previous Scottish and UK Governments, is a model example of how that could be done. UK Government policies could limit labour migration in areas of Scotland that already face challenges of depopulation. The availability of an appropriately skilled workforce is vital, but exit from the European Union and the loss of the single market has compounded difficulties faced by rural employers in recruiting skilled workers.

I now turn to fisheries. It was a former UK Government choice to ignore the on-going inaccessibility of labour for our seafood industries. The UK skilled worker visa rules have consistently failed to address that, and I have repeatedly raised the matter with successive UK Government ministers. The new UK Government could choose to do things differently, and we wait to see what approaches it takes to support our commercial fishing industry in Scotland—a sector that, incidentally, comprises a significant proportion of the United Kingdom's fishing industry, with landings by Scottish vessels accounting for 62 per cent of the value and 67 per cent of the tonnage of all landings by UK vessels, according to our latest published Scottish sea fisheries statistics from 2022.

There have been continued complexities and delays in introducing the post-Brexit regime of checks and controls under the border target operating model, which was published last year. Overall, additional trade barriers and red tape are hampering business and trade flows with the EU,

and the Scottish Government is clear that the best set of trading relationships for Scotland remain to be found as an independent member of the EU.

The new UK Government has indicated a willingness to open negotiations with the EU on a sanitary and phytosanitary—SPS—and veterinary agreement to remove the need for many checks, and the Scottish Government stands ready to work together to achieve the best results possible for Scotland's interests. If there is one thing that could make a significant difference, such an agreement could. It could have significant benefits for key Scottish export products, as well as reducing barriers to trade with the EU, our largest single export market. It would also benefit our partners in the EU by reducing both cost and complexity for EU traders, and it would improve our relationships with the EU in general. I am nothing if not an optimist, and I think that the new UK Government's opening gambit in relation to the agreement gives us overall cause for hope for better working in the future, in the interests of people and businesses.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary tell the Parliament why the Scottish National Party did not pursue one of its flagship manifesto commitments to set up a Scottish veterinary service?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the interventions, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: The former UK Government slashed our capital, which meant that we could no longer take that proposal forward. I wrote a letter to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, outlining why that could not happen.

While it has been necessary for me to recite the sheer litany of challenges that are still facing our rural communities, it is important to remember that there are very real people and real businesses behind all of the decisions that we make as Government ministers. We are in office to represent each and every one of those people and businesses. We cannot lose sight of that, and I, for one, will put my shoulder to the wheel to support them. I will be making a similar plea to my new UK Government counterpart ministers to do the same, including at our next interministerial meeting later this month.

However, the time for action is now, and the stakes could not be higher. With this debate coming hard on the heels of UK Government budget announcements last week signalling that there are yet more challenging times ahead, we are, in addition, poised to debate in the chamber next week progress on the trade and co-operation agreement, which set the foundational framework

for Brexit. That debate should lay bare, in a more forensic way, the impacts of Brexit on business and trade.

We have said that we want to work more collaboratively with the new UK Government to deliver on shared ambitions for Scotland. Effective joint working now could very well unlock some answers to previous decisions that were taken at UK level, and which are still impacting on our rural communities today. There is no room for procrastination or complacency, with yet more challenging headwinds ahead.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the ongoing harm caused by Brexit to Scotland's rural economy, such as barriers to trade, loss of EU funding and post-Brexit labour shortages; acknowledges that these barriers have severely impacted Scotland's world-class food and drink sector, which is of particular importance to Scotland's rural and island communities, and calls on the UK Government to consider changes to the current Brexit arrangements that would address these barriers and impacts, including through the pursuit of a comprehensive veterinary agreement with the EU.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is a little bit of time in hand; certainly members will get the time back if they take interventions. I would be grateful if members who are asking for interventions could press their request-to-speak buttons as well.

15:10

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a farmer and a former land agent. I welcome the debate, which gives me an opportunity to open for the Scottish Conservatives for the first time in my new role.

There will be times when the cabinet secretary, the minister and I have common ground. We clearly share a passion for farming, and I respect anyone who, like me, has been there themselves, working to produce food for our great country. However, there will be times when we disagree and, sadly, today is one of those times.

The cabinet secretary's speech was not about the future but about grievances. It was about Brexit, and the Scottish Government's constant grievance with it. Our rural Scotland has so many opportunities, and we should be approaching the debate on the positive issues.

The fact that, almost eight years after the UK voted to leave the EU, the SNP still blames every problem on Brexit, rather than acknowledging what is needed and what it can do to highlight the wonder of our Scottish produce, is a real pity. To be frank, the discussion on how we help our rural

communities to thrive deserves so much more than this SNP Government motion.

However, while the SNP Government has its problems—I intend to touch on them later—it would be remiss of me not to start with more recent events. The decision that was taken by the UK Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, to impose a family farm tax on some of our most hard-working people is not just shameful—it is a spin so fast that it is worthy of a place on "Strictly Come Dancing". Before the election, Labour promised that it would not do that. I do not think that the Labour Government even knows how much of an impact the policy will have.

The National Farmers Union argues that the Treasury has got its numbers wrong—it will not be 25 per cent of UK farmers who are affected by the tax change, as Labour claims; it will impact almost every food producer in the country. The Scottish Conservatives and others have written to the chancellor to demand that she reverse that damaging and thoughtless measure and ensure that that vital relief is restored. Otherwise, it could spell the end for family farming in Scotland.

Labour also announced its plan to apply the Barnett formula to funding for agriculture and fisheries, contrary to the recommendations in the Bew review, in a move that was ruled out by the previous Conservative UK Government. That could have serious implications for budget planning.

Not content with taking our land and changing the budgets, Labour made it a triple whammy by changing rules on pick-up trucks, which are the modern workhorse of many farms and commercial businesses. I say to Labour, "Don't worry, we have heard you loud and clear—you don't like rural Scotland; it's fine."

Labour has shown very early that it does not have the interests of rural communities at heart but, to be frank, does the SNP? The cabinet secretary paints a happy picture, but the simple fact is that decisions—

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Will the member give way?

Tim Eagle: I will take an intervention.

Angus Robertson: I am sympathetic to the criticism that Tim Eagle outlined in relation to recent decisions by the UK Labour Government. For the record, and for members of the farming community and exporters, who are keen to understand the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party's position, will he clarify whether his party is in favour of a veterinary agreement with the European Union?

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

Tim Eagle: I am in favour of any agreement by which we can get the best outcome that we can, but we need to discuss the positives of Brexit, because that was the democratic decision of the United Kingdom. We have opened up new markets around the world as well.

The SNP Government is about debating the grievance of Brexit; the Scottish Conservatives are about debating the future of the country—that is what we are here to do.

Mairi Gougeon: Will the member take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: Was that a yes?

Tim Eagle: Yes—I will take an intervention from Mairi Gougeon.

Mairi Gougeon: I would appreciate Tim Eagle's views on an article that was published earlier this week, which said that the

"Worst of ... Brexit ... is still to come".

I appreciate that the Tories would still like to gloss over Brexit because it does not suit their narrative, but does he recognise the damage that some of the trade deals that he is lauding in the chamber are doing to our food and drink industry in undercutting our farming businesses in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members not to shout from a sedentary position. As I said, there are ample opportunities for interventions. If you want to make an intervention, please request one. I can give you the time back, Tim Eagle.

Tim Eagle: I love the passion that is being shown about farming, and I will always love that. I guess that I find it a little hard to take criticism that comes from a party that wants to split up the United Kingdom, when 60 per cent of Scotland's trade goes to the rest of the United Kingdom; yet here they are attacking me about Brexit. It is some cheek, is it not? John Swinney likes to talk about a brass neck—well, I am afraid that you are titanium.

The simple fact is that the decisions that are taken by the Scottish Government—and sometimes the lack of them—have had a profound impact on rural and island communities. The Government's record on paying farmers and crofters support payments is hardly perfect. The minister and cabinet secretary must know how difficult this year has been. Just this week, I was in Stornoway, where hay is as much as £75 a bale and harvest yields are down. In all seriousness, I urge the cabinet secretary to do all that she can to get the remaining payments out as quickly as possible. I am worried, because there are rumours

that the Scottish Government's rural payments information technology system is, yet again, buckling under pressure. I hope that that is not true.

The sector also has the uncertainty of having to wait until autumn 2025 before the Scottish Government publishes its rural support plan, with no planned parliamentary scrutiny and no commitment yet from the Scottish Government to multiyear funding. Farming requires long-term planning. The rural support plan should have been out months ago, when we debated the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024.

Mairi Gougeon: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: Absolutely.

Mairi Gougeon: We really have to clear some things up. It is very difficult for the Scottish Government to give a commitment on multiyear funding, which we would love to do. Guess what—before Brexit, we had that: we had a seven-year programme that we could commit to, and we knew what was coming down the line. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry, Presiding Officer—I would like to make my point.

The former Tory Government could have decided to provide the Scottish Government with multiyear funding, but it did not. It committed to engaging with the Scottish Government on how the allocations would come to us, but it did not do that, which is why we are in the position that we are in. We will continue to do all that we are doing for Scottish farmers and crofters to protect them throughout all the changes as much as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I suggest that interventions need to be slightly briefer. I will give you the time back, Tim Eagle.

Tim Eagle: I beg to differ with the cabinet secretary, as I think that you did have that in place—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, Mr Eagle.

Tim Eagle: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Jim Walker, former president of NFU Scotland, said earlier this year:

"Scottish farmers have been waiting three years for some kind of direction—but we are still in the dark."

Cabinet secretary, I am afraid that that is very true. It is not just farming that is impacted by the Government's inertia. We are all aware of the impact of rural depopulation and what has caused it. That includes a lack of affordable homes in rural Scotland and a lack of investment in rural transport infrastructure, whether that be the lack of upgrades to the A9, the A96, the A83, the A82 or

the A87—I could go on. There is the Government's failure to deliver superfast broadband to 100 per cent of homes and businesses, which was supposed to have been delivered by 2021, and then 2026; the date is now 2028, but I have no doubt that the deadline will be pushed even further. There is even the Government's failure to deliver new ferries to support our island communities. Could I tell members the horror stories that I hear on the islands about ferries?

All those failures, and many more, have had the effect of hollowing out many of our once-thriving rural and island communities. No number of SNP task forces, reports or working groups will resolve those long-standing problems.

I will touch on one aspect of the SNP Government's motion, which is labour shortages. We know that, across a range of sectors, labour shortages and issues with skills gaps existed long before Brexit came into being. The answer to that problem is not in devolving responsibility for immigration. The previous UK Conservative Government showed that it could address the needs of particular sectors through the creation of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme—for example, for the fruit-picking sector. We know that immigration to the UK continues to be far too high, but immigration to Scotland is far lower. I say to the cabinet secretary that blaming Brexit gets us nowhere. A positive working relationship with the UK Government to develop reasonable solutions to shared problems is the answer.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Probably not, at this stage.

Tim Eagle: I apologise—I have taken a few interventions already.

Rural and island communities deserve a Scottish Government debate that focuses on their actual priorities, rather than the arguments of old, but they did not get that from the cabinet secretary, and I suspect that they will not get that from the SNP back benchers in the debate.

It feels wrong that this type of negativity comes to the chamber when morale is already low over the family farming tax. We have fantastic farmers, resilient rural communities, super sheep, cuddly coos, happy harvests, fabulous food, stunning scenery, top-class tourism and proud people. The SNP can blame Brexit all it wants but, as the new Scottish Conservative spokesman for farming, rural affairs and fishing, I will spend all my time building up the industry, fighting for its future and making sure that the Scottish Conservatives'

policy is focused on working with it to build a new, long-term and prosperous economic future.

I move amendment S6M-15253.2, to leave out from "the ongoing" to end and insert:

"that those working in Scotland's diverse agricultural sector are the custodians of the countryside, and that they are vital for the economy and ensuring that food security is protected; believes that many of the issues facing rural and island communities stem back many years as a result of what it believes to be the failures of several Scottish National Party administrations; understands that such issues include the lack of affordable homes, poor local infrastructure and transport options, and issues with accessing health and social services; recognises the need for common sense solutions to support Scotland's rural and island communities; expresses concern at the announcements from the UK Government about changes to agricultural property relief and the integration of agricultural funding into Scotland's block grant, and calls on the Scottish Government to prioritise the real issues facing those in rural and island communities as opposed to dealing in grievance politics."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Colin Smyth to speak to and move amendment S6M-15253.1. You have around six minutes.

15:20

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The Labour amendment in my name recognises that the overwhelming vote for change on 4 July heralds an opportunity to reset the United Kingdom's relationship with our European friends, to recognise the realities of our status outside the EU but grasp the opportunities to be a leading nation in Europe once again, and to move on from 14 years of chaotic Tory foreign policy by reinvigorating our international alliances to fix the Tory Brexit mess. That is why the new UK Government is committed to using the review of the trade and co-operation agreement next year to improve our trade and investment relationship with the EU, tearing down the unnecessary barriers to trade between our partners.

Tim Eagle: Will the member take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: Will the member take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Do you want to take an intervention from Mr Eagle or Mr Robertson?

Colin Smyth: I will take an intervention from Tim Eagle.

Tim Eagle: Will Scottish Labour give a guarantee today that it will not trade away fishing when trade and co-operation agreements open next year for the fishing sector? Will it make sure

that our Scottish fishermen get the best possible deal, not trade them for the things that it wants?

Colin Smyth: I will tell Mr Eagle one thing that we will not do: we will not follow the Conservative Government, which sold out our fishing sector when it arranged that deal with Brexit.

I will take an intervention from Mr Robertson as well.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful to Colin Smyth for taking interventions so early in his speech.

I asked this of the new Conservative Party spokesman on the subject, who could not answer the question. Will Mr Smyth tell us the position of the Scottish Labour Party in relation to a food and drink agreement or a veterinary agreement, which would be transformational for the sector? Is he impressing on his colleagues in London the fact that support for such an approach goes wider than the Scottish Government? Is that something that the Scottish Labour Party can get behind?

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

Colin Smyth: I thank Mr Robertson for his intervention. It is not something that I need to impress on the UK Government, because our manifesto across the UK included a commitment to seek that veterinary agreement to prevent the unnecessary border checks and to help tackle the cost of food. We will also use the reform of that agreement to secure a mutual recognition agreement for professional qualifications to help open up markets for UK service exporters.

We need to turn the page on a Tory Brexit deal that has caused so much chaos. The world has become increasingly volatile, with a major war in Europe for the first time in a generation and ever greater threats to working people's living standards. The age of insecurity that we face requires Governments at all levels to step up, not step aside, as the last Tory Government did.

I understand why, in their amendment today, the Tories airbrushed out all mention of Europe. Frankly, I would be embarrassed to associate myself with their Brexit deal, too. However, our rural communities can see, every single day, the impact of a deal that burned bridges with our allies and built barriers for our businesses. There may be zero tariffs and zero quotas on trade in goods between the UK and the EU, but those considerable non-tariff barriers have left businesses that trade with EU nations drowning in a sea of red tape.

Rural firms, particularly in agriculture, which rely on non-UK, often seasonal, labour, are being hit by staff shortages, and that is before we consider the impact of the loss of that free flow of goods to EU nations and the consequences of trade deals

that undermine UK businesses, particularly in our food and drink sector. We cannot reopen the divisions of the past, but we must resolve to fix the mess left by the Tories and deliver a deal that seizes the opportunities ahead.

I recognise that the challenge facing our rural communities did not start with Brexit. After 17 years of decline under the SNP and 14 years of chaos and austerity under the Tories, Scotland faces our biggest ever housing crisis, which threatens economic growth in our rural communities. A week rarely goes by when I do not speak to a business that is facing labour shortages and struggling to recruit, but more and more of those businesses are telling me that, even when potential employees are interested in taking up posts, they often cannot do so because there is no suitable affordable housing near the place of work.

In the past year, in my local area of Dumfries and Galloway, the number of homeless people placed—

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I will.

Craig Hoy: When Colin Smyth is speaking to those businesses, what are they telling him about the impact of the imposition of a national insurance tax on jobs in rural areas?

Colin Smyth: That is the challenge that we have from the Conservatives. After so many years of austerity, I would have thought that there would be some humility about the state of the public finances that they left the Government. We are fixing that particular mess. Mr Hoy may not believe in the national insurance changes or in the inheritance tax changes that are being made, but he would be leaving a black hole in the public finances of billions of pounds. He needs to say where the cuts would be made. Would he close community hospitals? Would he close rural schools? Would he cut rural transport projects? Would he be prepared to take the tough decisions when it comes to taxation?

As a result of austerity from the Tories and the mess of the public finances, in Dumfries and Galloway, the number of homeless people placed temporarily in bed and breakfasts has tripled in the past year. We have even had families being housed by the council in caravans, yet we are seeing the housing budget decimated. At a time when the population of rural Scotland sits at 17 per cent, no Government minister has ever explained to me why just 10 per cent of the Government's target for new planned affordable homes in Scotland will be in rural areas.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I am happy to take an intervention, but I am conscious that I am using up quite a lot of time.

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

Rachael Hamilton: Does Colin Smyth agree that Rachel Reeves's attack on family farms with the family farm tax will lead to further depopulation in rural areas?

Colin Smyth: The biggest challenge in rural areas is the lack of affordable housing. If Rachael Hamilton and her colleagues keep opposing any additional funding for public services and the public sector, that will continue. The biggest threat to rural communities would be more austerity under the Tories, who are not prepared to say where the funding would come from. We can only assume that they would make more cuts, as they have done over the years.

The lack of housing is holding back the local economy. It is stifling growth, fuelling depopulation and blocking the ambitions of those who want to get on in our rural communities. We are simply not building enough affordable homes to meet demand and to meet the needs of our rural communities. That is partly because of house-building capacity. National house builders have no interest in building what they view as small-scale developments in rural areas, and we have seen a decline in the number of locally based house builders. The house builders that exist are increasingly facing skills shortages, and they cannot get local contractors—yet, astonishingly, we have seen funding cuts to colleges, which have led to Skills Development Scotland reducing apprenticeship contracts. At my local college in Dumfries and Galloway, place numbers were cut by 13 per cent, at a time when demand for apprenticeships is at a peak level. The college now has a waiting list for apprenticeship places in construction. That is the economics of the madhouse.

We have also seen a lack of investment in construction when it comes to our infrastructure. The A75 and the A77 are key trunk roads to the ferry terminal at Cairnryan, which is the gateway to Ireland and, for many businesses, to the EU. Despite roads being a devolved issue, the only planned investment for the A75 is coming from the new UK Labour Government, after years of promises that were never delivered on by the Tory Government.

I could highlight, too, the uncertainty for our rural communities that was caused by the Scottish Government's eight years of dithering while it developed a new rural support scheme, the ferry fiasco or the dismantling of our bus network in rural areas.

It is already clear from the debate that, yes, we need to reset that relationship with our EU partners to get the trade and co-operation agreement right after the failure of the previous Tory Government, but we must also get our own house in order by delivering the jobs, housing and infrastructure that Labour's UK budget will make possible with the record investment that we will see in Scotland.

I move amendment S6M-15253.1, to insert at end:

“; welcomes the UK Government's commitment to reset the UK's relationship with the EU, and calls on the Scottish Government to prioritise the use of all the levers already at its disposal to improve the economy of Scotland's rural areas, through supporting jobs, providing housing, progressing infrastructure and improving transport links.”

15:28

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): In the years that I have been in this role, I have continued to see and hear about the troubling impacts of Brexit across the whole of Scotland's economy. Before I speak specifically about the challenges that Brexit has brought to our rural economy, I will make a couple of broader points.

The Office for Budget Responsibility's latest fiscal outlook, which was released alongside the UK Government's budget on 30 October, stated that export growth would average 0.5 per cent from 2026 to 2029, and that import growth is expected to average 1 per cent over the same period. It went on to say:

“Weak growth in imports and exports over the medium term partly reflect the continuing impact of Brexit, which we expect to reduce the overall trade intensity of the UK economy by 15 per cent in the long term”.

Further, in a written statement by UK Treasury minister, Tulip Siddiq, which was published on 29 October, she said that we are still yet to see most of Brexit's impacts on the economy. She wrote that the OBR has estimated that

“productivity will be 4% lower in the long run than it would have been had the UK not withdrawn from the EU, and that imports and exports will eventually both be 15 per cent lower than had we stayed in the EU. The OBR estimated in March 2024 that 40% of this impact has already materialised.”

I turn to the impact of Brexit on Scotland's rural economy specifically. My proposed amendment

“calls on the UK Government to grant the Scottish Government the powers to set its own priorities for immigration to support the rural economy.”

I was driven to lodge the amendment by a wealth of evidence that indicates that our rural labour market desperately needs inward migration. The Scottish Government's action plan to address depopulation noted that

“14 rural council areas are projected to decline”

in population

“over the next decade”.

Angus Robertson: I commend Ariane Burgess for bringing up the advantages of differentiated immigration systems. Would she acknowledge that they work perfectly well in Canada and Australia? If it is possible to have differentiated immigration systems in such countries, why would it not be possible to have one in the UK, and why would it not be sensible to suggest that the new UK Government should look at that?

Ariane Burgess: If such differentiation works in other countries, I absolutely agree that we could do it in Scotland and the United Kingdom. We have the level of intelligence—we can figure it out.

A Scottish Parliament information centre briefing that was issued at that time stated:

“Stakeholders and communities across Scotland have repeatedly highlighted that the current UK immigration system—particularly following the ending of Freedom of Movement—does not meet the needs of rural and island communities.”

Scotland’s population strategy, which was published in 2021, notes:

“Scotland’s seasonal industries are particularly reliant on migration. Those industries are particularly significant in rural and remote areas where populations tend to be older and population growth lower. While 8.3% of Scotland’s overall employment was made up of non-UK workers in 2019, this rose to 16.0% in Food & Drink and 15.0% in Tourism.”

As a specific example in the farming sector, under freedom of movement, agricultural workers could easily get to the UK from Europe to work on Scottish farms as needed. Since Brexit, the UK Government has operated the seasonal agricultural workers scheme—as we have been discussing—which grants short-term visas to migrant crop pickers. For the 2025 harvest season, 43,000 UK visas have been granted, which is 2,000 fewer than in 2024. The UK growing industry has repeatedly called for around 60,000 visas per year. According to reporting by *The Scottish Farmer*, approximately £60 million-worth of crops were lost in 2022 due to a lack of labour. There are also concerns that SAWS is opening migrants up to exploitation.

I have been told that the lack of labour and the complexity of the post-Brexit system have already led to the closure of one organic growing business, which said that it simply did not have the time to grow food and find workers.

Food standards, public health and animal welfare in abattoirs are also at risk due to a sharp reduction in the number of available veterinarians since Brexit. Members of the UK Parliament’s Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

reported that there are significant shortages of vets. The committee said that

“The number of EU vets registering to work in the UK has more than halved since leaving the EU”,

with those vets now harder to recruit due to current minimum salary visa thresholds for skilled workers.

My constituent Jo Hunt, from Knockfarrel Produce, told me that he has seen a 100 per cent reduction in available labour from two EU sources. The first source was volunteers with World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms—WWOOF—and Workaway. The other was sustainable agricultural student placements from three EU universities. That led to the company having to pay an additional £17,000 in labour costs and still having gaps in labour availability and less motivated workers. The additional costs moved it from being a low-profit organisation to one that posted a significant loss from operations. As a result, it has ceased to produce food.

How much time do I have left, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): About a minute, Ms Burgess.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you.

Jo Hunt went on to tell me that, at the same time, large farms have reduced their seasonal overseas pickers and weeding labour by about two thirds, due, largely, to a lack of availability and increased transaction and bureaucracy costs.

On the Opposition amendments, although I support the sentiment of the Labour amendment, which the Scottish Greens will support, we cannot overlook the fact that, as I have laid out, Scotland would be far better off remaining in the EU.

As for the Tory amendment, it skirts around the real issues that leaving the EU has brought to bear. To pick one specific point, we have serious rural housing challenges, as has been discussed, and one part of that problem is the lack of skilled labour, which freedom of movement could have helped with.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that, at this point, we still have a bit of time in hand.

I call Beatrice Wishart, who joins us remotely.

15:35

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): A cornerstone of the EU’s single market has been a reduction in trade barriers; the nature of Brexit has been to build up barriers. Whether through new checks on fresh food, which affect the fishing, seafood and aquaculture sectors; the lack of a full e-certification system for exports, which means

that the salmon sector is absorbing £3 million of costs per year under the current outdated system; or the ending of the free movement of people, which has had an impact on those on whom we previously relied to pick our fruit and veg, Brexit is about closing things down, in vast contrast to the liberal instinct of opening things up.

Brexit brought uncertainty, which no economy of any size thrives in. Scotland's rural economies are intrinsically linked to our agriculture sector, and it was only this year that the Scottish Government's Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill was passed. It took years to develop detailed proposals on future farm support and the future of the industry, which pushed crofters, farmers and growers into uncertainty.

Exports of Scottish seed potatoes have been impacted by barriers to trade with Europe, so those exports have been limited to Morocco, Egypt and Ukraine, where the illegal invasion makes for a volatile market. Now, UK growers are importing seed potatoes, which further constricts the Scottish industry.

Small businesses are struggling with the time and costs involved in post-Brexit trade with the EU. The Federation of Small Businesses warns that almost one in 10 have simply given up on importing and exporting. With 93 per cent of the market for smaller exports, the EU represents almost the entire overseas market, but the increased paperwork, higher costs and supply chain and logistical issues mean that many small businesses feel that it is no longer worth their while. Things are not smooth for those who do continue to trade, with more than half reporting high shipping costs, losses and delays in transit.

The war in Ukraine and the Covid pandemic have exacerbated the issue of food prices and, without the willing workers who used to come from the continent, food has been left to rot in the fields.

Brexit enthusiasts told us that we would be first in line for top trade deals and that countries would be queuing at our door to sign deals with us. However, the UK Government's approach to trade deals has risked undermining Scottish and UK agriculture, because it has undercut the goods that we produce to high environmental and animal welfare standards.

NFU Scotland has described post-Brexit trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand as

"one sided, with little to no advantage for Scottish farmers"

and as posing a

"long term threat to key Scottish agriculture sectors, such as beef, lamb and dairy."

Scottish Liberal Democrats reaffirm our position that all trade deals should meet UK standards in environmental protection and animal welfare.

Scotland's tourism sector also plays a key part in our local rural economies, but Brexit has built a new barrier for EU citizens who come here. The UK Government website advises French citizens, for example, that, although they do not need a visa for tourist travel, they might need to prove at the UK border that they have arranged accommodation, that they or someone else are able to pay for a return or onward journey and that they will leave the UK at the end of the visit. That all seems somewhat off-putting when they could simply travel elsewhere in Europe. We should do all that we can to make things easier for tourism and business.

I have long argued that infrastructure is one of the greatest tools in our arsenal to address and reverse depopulation in our island and rural areas. We do not need to look beyond Shetland for evidence of that because, when Burra and Trondra were connected to the Shetland mainland by bridges, the populations on those islands grew. A commitment to connect Shetland's island communities via tunnels would provide certainty in rural areas and attract people back to places where they grew up, as well as bringing in new people to the area, thereby boosting the economy. We have seen that in the Faroe Islands, following the positive impacts of the expansion of the tunnel network there.

Germany and Denmark are undertaking a €10 billion tunnel project, which will cut travel times from a 50-minute ferry journey to a 10-minute car journey through the new tunnel. The EU will be contributing €1.1 billion to the project. Before Brexit, we could have bid for EU cash to help us to invest in rural Scotland. Now, every time I see a project in Scotland that is emblazoned with an EU funding sign, I consider just how much we have lost.

The experience of breaking away from a wider bloc and building up new barriers has not been a positive one for our country. I would like us to return to those liberal values of openness and co-operation.

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

15:40

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Forgive me, but I will start with the bad news. In the referendum on whether to remain in or leave the EU, commonsense Scotland voted 62 per cent to remain—it did not matter which part of Scotland you lived in; every council area in Scotland, urban

and rural, voted remain. That was in 2016. The result was that David Cameron resigned and in came Theresa May, who was dispatched quite quickly and was followed by oven-ready Brexit Boris, with that £350 million a week so-called Brexit bonus for the national health service plastered on the side of a bus—oh, and, apparently, a queue of other countries just itching to do trade deals with a liberated UK.

I recall President Barack Obama warning that, after Brexit, the UK would be at the “back of the queue” for trade talks with the USA, and President-elect Donald Trump is going one better by threatening tariffs of 10 per cent to 20 per cent on imports to the USA, which is the UK’s biggest trading market. There are tough times ahead for food and drink exports from Scotland. Beatrice Wishart was quite right about that so-called queue of people waiting for trade deals.

Interestingly, before the referendum, Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne issued extremely dour predictions on the effect of Brexit on the economy. Those predictions went all the way to 2030. He is better than Mystic Meg, as his predictions have come to pass. Fast forward eight years and the independent Office for Budget Responsibility has said:

“weak growth in imports and exports over the medium term partly reflect the continuing impact of Brexit”,

which it expects to

“reduce the overall trade intensity of the UK economy by 15 per cent in the long term.”

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: I will shortly.

Furthermore, rather than our having that £350 million a week Brexit bonus that we saw on the side of a bus, the UK Treasury has been forced to admit that the UK has already paid to the EU £23.8 billion as part of its financial settlement agreement and will pay a further £6.4 billion. I do not call that a benefit.

Then there was the Boris battle cry that, after Brexit, the UK could control immigration. How has that gone? As a matter of fact, immigration from the EU was largely economic, based on job seeking, which is much less true of immigration from outside the EU.

I say to Tim Eagle that the present and the future are predicated on the past. No wonder he and the Tories have lodged an amendment that would delete from the motion any reference to Brexit.

The rural sector, like others, is feeling the impact of Brexit—one that Labour will not reverse.

That sector comprises 26 per cent of Scotland’s economy.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: If you are going to tell me a benefit of Brexit, I will listen.

Tim Eagle: *rose*—

Christine Grahame: Oh, Mr Eagle is going to tell me a benefit—good.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Grahame, from whom are you taking the intervention, please?

Christine Grahame: Well, I do not know—what a choice. I will give way to my friend Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: I thank Christine Grahame for finally giving way, which has interrupted her long list of grievances and what I view as faux outrage, because is it not the case that Scotland and the rest of the UK would still be in the customs union were it not for the fact that SNP MPs at Westminster vetoed that? Can she explain why they took Scotland out of a customs union with the EU?

Christine Grahame: Interestingly, my letting you make an intervention, Mr Hoy, was predicated on your giving me a benefit of Brexit, but, as usual, you neatly avoided that.

I note that 26 per cent of Scotland’s economy is rural.

Tim Eagle: Will Christine Grahame give way?

Christine Grahame: I will, but a little bit later, Mr Eagle, if you do not mind.

The rural economy puts food on our plates, leads the fight against climate change and nature loss, and delivers significant value for taxpayers’ investment. Rural businesses are at the forefront of our efforts to tackle the nature and climate crisis, and, at the same time, they provide jobs that boost our economy and support Scotland’s food economy. It is a fantastic sector. Rural businesses are the custodians of the land that they farm, and, if only on that, I agree with that part of Mr Eagle’s amendment.

I turn to the labour market. Much of the rural economy was dependent on EU workers, who were often seasonal. That has pretty well ended, and we have heard of produce dying and rotting in the fields for want of labour. Is that one of the benefits of Brexit, Mr Hoy?

I turn to the possible veterinary agreement with the EU.

Tim Eagle: Will Christine Grahame take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: I would like to get on. Is it about the veterinary agreement? [*Interruption.*] Is this a benefit?

Tim Eagle: Yes.

Christine Grahame: Is it a Brexit benefit, Mr Eagle?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Grahame, are you taking the intervention or not?

Christine Grahame: I was pondering, but I think that I will.

Tim Eagle: I did not want Christine Grahame to finish speaking without giving her a benefit. One of the serious benefits of Brexit to the whisky industry is the opening of emerging Asian markets, which represent the future for the whisky sector. That could not have happened if we were in the EU. I was speaking about this up in Moray just the other day. The India market will be massive, and we can access it from outside the EU. That is a benefit that we can get if we take the opportunities of Brexit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: An intervention should be a wee bit briefer than that.

Christine Grahame: That was more of a speech, and it was not really worth it. When you think of the tax that is now being levied on the whisky industry, which the sector is up in arms about, and the levies that the USA is about— [*Interruption.*] I am coming to the lovely Tories. As I was saying, 10 to 20 per cent tariffs on whisky exports to the USA might be coming. I cannot see that as a benefit of Brexit.

I return to the veterinary agreement, which Tim Eagle did not want me to talk about. Such an agreement would ensure that UK and EU standards were equivalent or aligned. That is important for animal welfare, the biosecurity of plants and so on. The Labour Party made a manifesto commitment to pursue such an agreement, which would aid a new trading relationship with the EU. For many years, the Scottish Government has called for a comprehensive veterinary and sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, which would substantially reduce the barriers to trade that have been put in place following Brexit. I hear that the cabinet secretary is hopeful that that will come to pass. Let us watch this space.

I have lost my speech now—excuse me a minute. I never should tamper with technology. Oh, something strange has appeared. I will go back to it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Grahame, in any event, you should bring your remarks to a conclusion now.

Christine Grahame: I am going to. I have a paper back-up.

I have not had time to mention national insurance or agricultural property tax relief. That would have been an attack on Labour—it deserves it, too.

When it comes to the good news, I have a problem. While any Government in this Parliament has to rely on the bulk of its budget coming from Westminster, while macroeconomic policies such as national insurance and inheritance tax are reserved and while the UK Government has ruled out rejoining the EU in any shape or form, there is very little good news on Brexit until we are—here is the word that the Tories like—independent and can rejoin the EU. Frankly, I agree with George Osborne and his dire predictions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members that they must speak through the chair.

15:48

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): As members are possibly aware, the latest series of “I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here” is about to hit our screens. However, before Mairi Gougeon gets excited about the prospect of escaping to the sunshine, I should warn her that it is probably more likely that Angus Robertson, with his impressive air miles, will be taking the trip to Australia.

I want to indulge in a game today, but it is not “I’m a Celebrity”. It is a game that members on the SNP benches will have to be content with playing. However, it is their favourite game. It is called the blame game. Blaming others for its incompetence and financial mismanagement has become something of an art form for the SNP Government. How many times have we sat in this chamber and heard Scottish ministers blame Westminster for their own inevitable failings, whether in relation to ferries that do not sail, education standards that were once the envy of the world nosediving, or climate change targets that are never met and then dumped? On top of that, we have another of the nationalists’ diversionary tactics—their customary frequent references to Brexit.

However, the fact of the matter is that this Government—we should not forget the SNP’s previous playing partners, the Greens, who, if they were still in government, would be continuing to destroy Scotland’s rural communities and to marginalise our indigenous rural population—has already done much damage through its ill-thought-out Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 and Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024, which attack our country way of life and our rural population because of the urban-focused lens through which this Government views rural

policy. It wants to appease the wine bar socialists of Morningside, instead of ensuring that rural land managers have the tools that they need to protect our invaluable rural flora and fauna or protecting our rural families, who, for generation after generation—for hundreds of years—have made Scotland a beautiful and productive country that is envied the world over.

The fact of the matter is that it is not Brexit but the SNP's total mismanagement and its failure to understand the needs of rural Scotland, whether in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries or further afield, that are at the root of rural problems.

One shining example that we have already heard about is the need for affordable rural homes in order to encourage the young lifeblood of our communities to remain and prosper where generations of their family have lived for years. Only this week, we learned that more than £100 million that had been earmarked for rural housing has now been handed to councils to build homes in the city. According to Scottish Land & Estates, instead of being spent on bolstering rural communities, that cash is being spent in Gilmerton in Edinburgh and Dyce in Aberdeen, right next to the city's international airport.

Mairi Gougeon: I come back to the point that it is important that we are clear when we talk about such issues. I appreciate that the issue of the figure that Finlay Carson mentioned was raised by SLE. However, it is important to point out that funding for the affordable housing supply is not ring fenced for urban or rural areas. The share of funding that each local authority receives through that programme is informed by the strategic investment framework that is agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

It is important to recognise that the overall funding that is provided through the affordable housing supply programme is complemented by the rural and islands housing fund, which is a demand-led scheme that is open, and the rural affordable homes for key workers fund. When it comes to the amount of rural housing that we have delivered overall, I am sure that the member welcomes the fact that around 16 per cent of the houses that have been built between 2016 and 2023 have been in rural areas.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was an extremely lengthy intervention, so I will give the time back to Mr Carson.

Finlay Carson: One of the main issues is the fact that an arbitrary target of 10 per cent of the national house-building target has been set for rural areas. The Government has not looked at what rural areas need and set a target based on

their needs. An arbitrary 10 per cent target is absolutely not what is required.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Anna Gardiner, SLE's housing policy adviser, has argued that Scotland's rural communities are being short-changed by the flawed criteria for the urban-rural classification system. Rural areas receive a lower proportion of the funding in the first place, and the funding that was previously earmarked for rural local authorities is now being spent by their city counterparts.

The same goes for agriculture: the Scottish Government has failed to deliver millions of pounds that were earmarked for farmers and crofters. That additional funding was hard won by Jim Walker and the previous rural affairs secretary, Fergus Ewing, as part of the Bew review. The current rural affairs secretary has already admitted that more than £46 million is still due to be returned to the rural portfolio, with only £15 million having been paid back to date. It is little wonder that that has attracted widespread criticism, most notably from Fergus Ewing, who described it as "disgraceful" that the money had been siphoned off for other purposes.

Scotland's farming sector is essential to our food security, but it has been repeatedly failed by the SNP Government. The farmers are now under attack from the Labour Government, which is jeopardising succession planning through its ill-thought-out inheritance plans.

However, it is not just the agriculture industry that is at risk. The body that is charged with attracting investment and creating jobs in the south of Scotland has also had its budget slashed. South of Scotland Enterprise, which supports 1,300 groups, has seen a £3 million cut this year, and next year its budget will be further reduced to £27.4 million. Exactly how will significantly reducing its budget help to reverse the shocking rural depopulation in the likes of Galloway or help rural communities where people are already struggling on lower wages? How will it encourage people to stay? Is it any wonder that rural Scotland is facing that depopulation?

Colin Smyth: Finlay Carson is right to mention low pay, given that he represents the lowest paid constituency in Scotland. Does he therefore welcome the Labour Government's budget move that will increase the minimum wage to a real living wage, boosting the wages of many of his constituents?

Finlay Carson: I have spoken to businesses and the most important thing to consider is that the changes to national insurance will lead to employers laying people off, so I say to Mr Smyth that there will be no living wage. There will be no wage at all.

It goes without saying that people who live and work in Scotland's rural communities are more concerned than ever about their future. We have a chronic shortage of general practitioners due to the SNP's inept workforce planning and we have the highest taxes in the UK, not forgetting our dire dental crisis. There is nothing to smile about. As we heard, the Government's flagship reaching 100 per cent—R100—broadband scheme was supposed to deliver by the end of 2021, but it is now not even likely to deliver this decade.

The upcoming Scottish budget will give the Scottish Government an opportunity to show a solid commitment to supporting our farmers. It can start by ensuring that farming businesses are guaranteed multiyear funding at a significantly higher rate than the Scottish Government has provided up to now, in order to ensure a meaningful just transition to more environmentally and financially sustainable food production. However, given its drive towards an urban-centric policy-making position, I am not going to hold my breath.

15:56

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I start by recognising, despite certain colleagues' refusals to do so, that Brexit is not an historical event that is over and done with. It is not grievance politics to acknowledge that Brexit is still damaging our economy—particularly our rural economy, and particularly the food and drink industry, given that food and drink is our biggest non-energy export. Brexit is still badly impacting the Highlands and Islands and preventing rural economy growth across the board, and we do not know yet how big the ever-growing Brexit bill will end up being.

It will take a long time to recover from the massive labour shortages that have been caused by cutting off EU nationals from the market here, and it is still unclear where the UK Government expects those workers to come from. As someone who represents many rural areas and grew up around farms and appreciating local food, I find it devastating every time I see reports of crops rotting because staff are not available to pick them. That food should be on plates.

It is bad enough that Brexit is still costing billions and that billions more in contributions to the economy from our rural sectors are being put at risk by decisions that were taken on our behalf but without our permission, but there are cultural, climate and cost risks here, too. Farmers in Scotland are growing varied nutritional and quality foods that we do not have to import, that provide local jobs and that make use of our natural resources. Pretending that Brexit is now neutral is not forward looking or clever; it is fiction, and it

excuses the timidity of the majority of Westminster parties, who refuse to consider reversing Brexit despite the continuing and obvious harm that it causes.

That is before we even consider all the lost opportunities in innovation, research and investment. Beatrice Wishart outlined an experience that I have regularly, too: travelling around the Highlands and Islands and noting how many operations in the region benefited from EU funding in the past. Who knows how many projects and programmes have not even got off the ground thanks to the removal of that opportunity and aspiration? Tim Eagle said that he wants to talk about the future of the country, but we have to ensure that there is a future for the rural economy to speak of. That requires accepting that Brexit has had impacts, including an impact on recruitment that we cannot solve without changes to immigration policy.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On recruitment and staffing, does the member accept that, eight years ago, there was a completely different outlook on working patterns, which meant that people were prepared to work longer weeks? Since Covid, people now like to work a four-day week and have a day's work at home, which means that many rural jobs, including working on a farm, are no longer suitable to many young people. That is why it is difficult to find employees.

Emma Roddick: I do not accept that that is why it is difficult to find employees. That is not where the drop in employees came from; it came from an overnight message from the UK Government of "We are no longer welcoming EU nationals." There is certainly more flexibility in the job market—which I think is a good thing—but let us not pretend that there are not people out there who would be very willing to work in Scotland's agricultural sector if we made it clear that they were welcome.

During discussions of a rural visa pilot, I have often found myself having really positive and agreeable discussions with folk who otherwise detest my politics but who are desperate to support an approach that is tailored for this country. I was not alone in feeling a glimmer of hope at reports a few weeks back that the new Labour Government was considering having a Scottish visa. That is necessary, which is why it was so gutting to hear the very quick climb-down and the clarification that Labour is actually not interested even in thinking about change, let alone delivering it.

It is clear that no party in London is willing to implement an immigration system that works for Scotland and that, in that refusal to act, Keir Starmer, his Labour colleagues and the Tories

before him have proved that those decisions must be taken in Scotland. Our needs and demographics are different, so the policy should therefore also be different. Simply remaining wilfully ignorant of the need to address that glaring imbalance will never result in positive change for Scotland.

We know that Scotland is an attractive place to live and work. Last year's population growth, as mentioned by other speakers, proves that we need migration in order to prevent a fall in our population and also shows that folk are willing to come here. In the past couple of days, many news outlets have reported a rapid increase in Google searches by Americans trying to find out how to move to Scotland, for some reason. If people want to come here and we need more people, why would we not make it easier to match those needs and wants? There is a rich history of migration to Scotland, and that must continue if we want to have enough people living here so that the public services that the Scottish Government is investing in can function, and function well.

I would love to see an independent Scotland implement the kind of immigration system outlined in the Scottish Government's migration white paper. In lieu of that, there is no good reason at all—nor has any recent UK Government tried to offer one—for Scotland not being able to have a tailored approach within the UK. The cabinet secretary has already pointed out that there are examples of different approaches for rural areas in Canada and Australia. It is not a new idea, but it is a good one and it should not be normal for the UK Government to keep refusing ideas that would be good for Scotland.

Scotland did not vote for Brexit and we did not vote for the door to be closed on EU nationals or to have our workers targeted with hostile immigration policies. I do not believe that Scotland would vote for those things, and it is unforgivable for Labour to refuse even to seek a solution to the acute problems that we are suffering as a direct result of decisions taken against our best interests. The only way back is for the UK Government to now do the right thing by engaging with the Scottish Government on immigration efforts, devolving immigration powers and letting us sort out the mess that we have been left with.

16:03

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Can I start by introducing some objective—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat. There is a point of order from Edward Mountain.

Edward Mountain: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry to interrupt the

member—I thought that I had pushed the button early enough.

When I spoke regarding employment in rural areas, I should have reminded members that I have an interest in a family farm in Moray. I apologise for not drawing that to members' attention. I know that it is not the most important subject on some people's agenda, but I should have pointed out that interest in a family farm.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mountain; that is now on the record.

Richard Leonard: Can I begin by introducing some objective economic facts? Pre-Brexit, 150,000 non-UK EU nationals were in employment in Scotland, representing 6 per cent of the workforce in 2017. Post-Brexit, 170,000 EU nationals are in employment in Scotland. That is 7.4 per cent of the workforce in 2022. Pre-Brexit, just 70 private firms accounted for half the total value of Scotland's international exports. Post-Brexit, that export base has narrowed even further and just 60 private firms now account for half of Scotland's international exports.

So our export base is too narrow and it is getting narrower, but it has been too narrow since way before Brexit. In 17 years of the SNP in office, there has been no dynamic industrial strategy, no economic planning, no regional policy and no export strategy to address that either. In fact, there has been no rethink of the SNP's economic strategy post-Brexit at all. It remains completely wedded to foreign direct investment and, as a result, Scotland has more of its economy under overseas ownership and control than any other nation or region of the UK. That means that we are more of a branch plant economy and so are much more vulnerable to economic shocks.

Here are some more economic facts. The value of our exports to the rest of the UK is one and a half times the value of our exports to the whole of the rest of the world put together, and it is three times the value of Scotland's exports to the EU. So when the nationalists, who want Scotland to leave the UK, lament the economic impact of our leaving the European Union—"devastating" is how the cabinet secretary described it in the Parliament yesterday, I think—I hope that they will reflect on the economic damage and impact that would be caused by withdrawing from the UK.

Today, as we debate the impact of Brexit just hours after the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House, we should also not forget that the USA is Scotland's single biggest export market outside the UK, worth £5 billion, and that the incoming President is promising to put up tariff barriers of 20 per cent, so I hope that this is something that we will be debating in the Parliament in the coming months. How can we

diversify our export base? How can we diversify our export markets? How can we support more businesses, including smaller businesses, to export?

We have heard in this debate of the new Labour Government's plans to end the 100 per cent relief on inheritance tax for those with farm assets worth more than £1 million. Below that threshold, 100 per cent relief will continue to apply to farm buildings, farm cottages and farmhouses. There will still be no capital gains tax to be paid, and there will still be roll-over reliefs for the sale of farmland for redevelopment. Agricultural land and buildings will still be 100 per cent exempt from non-domestic rates. Farmers will still be entitled to use red diesel, paying a rebated rate of duty of 11p, instead of 58p, per litre.

Rachael Hamilton: Richard Leonard is working on the presumption that land prices have stayed stagnant. They have not done so. They have increased. For example, the price of some land has gone from £1,000 to £14,000 an acre. That is not the fault of a family farmer who wants to pass on a family farm. That £1 million also takes into account the growing price and inflationary aspects of the capital value of machinery on that farm.

Richard Leonard: I thank Rachael Hamilton for her remarks, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the changes

"will affect a remarkably small number of some of the most valuable farms".

Let me return to the litany of other tax exemptions and reliefs that farmers get. They will still pay the reduced VAT rate of 5 per cent on domestic heating and electricity costs. There will continue to be a zero rating on most agricultural products, and VAT exemption on insurance and bank interest. Farm income from subsidies and grants will still be outside the scope of VAT altogether. So the major tax advantages for farmers as farmers remain in place. This is a question about how we equalise the taxation of inherited wealth. This is about how we tax wealth.

I attended a conference recently where the Minister for Equalities was a keynote speaker. We were told that Scotland was a welcoming, safe and fair place and of our humane and principled approach to migration, but as she spoke, I thought of all those migrant workers across rural Scotland who I have met, listened to and heard, thanks to the migrant workers centre, 90 per cent of them in tied accommodation, with no rights to protect them, who describe their living conditions in metal boxes as unhygienic and overcrowded, with no heating.

The cabinet secretary and the Minister for Housing have given an undertaking to Parliament that they will address that, which we welcome, but

we are repeatedly told that we have to beware of unintended consequences of ending it. Surely what we have to deal with in the end, in the here and now, are those actual existing intended consequences that result in that inhumane treatment.

There has been an impact of Brexit in rural Scotland, but it has not been felt equally. The people who suffer the most are those on the lowest pay, on the most precarious employment contracts, agency workers and those migrant workers, many from central Asia, who are living in uninhabitable accommodation, enduring the worst exposure—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Leonard, you need to bring your remarks to a close, please.

Richard Leonard: They are the ones hit hardest. They are the ones whose lives are damaged, and it is on their side in their fight for justice, in their fight for dignity, in their fight for not just workers' rights but human rights—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

16:11

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Emma Roddick was correct when she said that Brexit is not just a historic date that has happened, and that is it—"It is done; move on." The impact is on-going. The cabinet secretary outlined that Scotland is paying a high price for a failing Brexit that Scotland did not vote for. As I said, the full economic consequences of exiting the EU are still to be realised eight years on from that June 2016 Brexit vote.

Today, however, I will focus my comments specifically on agriculture and the impact of Brexit on Dumfries and Galloway, on our standards and quality of food and drink and on our food security. Scotland's rural economy is a major source of growth for Scotland. It delivered an economic contribution of more than £39 billion in gross value added, which is 26 per cent of the Scottish total, in 2021 alone.

The rural economy in Scotland is still bearing the brunt of Brexit because of the negative impact of the labour shortages on the food and drink industry. Indeed, in Dumfries and Galloway, I hear daily from farmers and employers in agritourism businesses and those in the food and drink sector about how they cannot recruit staff to keep their businesses floating. One prominent business restricted and reduced its opening hours, including during the peak summer season this summer, because it cannot find the right staff—any staff, I should say.

In Scotland as a whole, food and drink jobs alone equate to approximately 129,000 in 17,000

businesses, many of which are in rural areas with fragile economies, as in Dumfries and Galloway. There is absolutely no doubt that Brexit is a key cause of the struggles that the industry continues to face. Scotland could—here it comes, Presiding Officer—do better with the full powers that any normal independent country has at its disposal.

As I indicated earlier, Scotland is paying a high price for a failed Brexit that we did not vote for. The Brexit vote was eight years ago, and the full economic consequences of exiting the EU are still to be realised in the years to come. Just this week, the UK Treasury minister, Tulip Siddiq, said that 60 per cent of the impact of Brexit is yet to materialise. That is an astonishing percentage.

Research by the London School of Economics and Political Science centre for economic performance suggests that UK households have paid £7 billion to cover the cost of post-Brexit trade barriers to food imports from the EU. That has pushed up the average household food cost by £250 since December 2019 and has disproportionately impacted on low-income households, who spend a greater proportion of their income on food. The Tory-created cost of living crisis is exactly that—it was created by the Tories. Tory ideological party shenanigans have led to people in Scotland suffering.

Many Scottish food industries are suffering from lower volumes of exports to the EU, including a 59 per cent fall in fruit and vegetable exports and a 29 per cent fall in meat exports in the year ending March 2024, but that is not all. The research and development associated with food and drink and agriculture is also affected, with millions of pounds of EU funding now inaccessible to business.

I will again pick up on the matter of labour shortages, because that really does have an impact on us in Dumfries and Galloway. Migration is possibly the biggest challenge facing Scotland's economy right now. It is unforgivable that every Westminster party is completely ignoring Scotland's specific needs. The UK parties are too busy fighting for right-wing voters in England. UK migration policies are actively harming Scotland's economic growth and prosperity, and a tailored migration system suited to Scotland's specific circumstances is long overdue. A rural visa pilot scheme would mitigate the effect of labour shortages, it would facilitate routes for workers to come to Scotland and support our public services, and it would help businesses to reach their full potential.

During the general election campaign—

Finlay Carson: Will Emma Harper take an intervention?

Emma Harper: I ask Mr Carson to give me one wee second. I knew that he would be on his feet during my speech.

During the general election campaign, Jackie Baillie said that Labour was open to talks, but there has been no progress on the matter so far, despite the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands consistently raising the issue with UK ministers.

Finlay Carson: I thank Emma Harper for taking my intervention. I do appreciate it.

Can Emma Harper say whether she believes that a lack of rural broadband, a lack of good road infrastructure, a lack of rural housing, a lack of general practitioners and a lack of dentists are having a positive impact or a negative impact on rural depopulation?

Emma Harper: I absolutely get what Mr Carson is speaking about regarding many of the things that he mentions. One thing that Scotland has done to address issues around rural GPs is the Scottish graduate entry medicine programme. Everybody forgets to big up ScotGEM, but it has been so successful for Dumfries and Galloway. Of course we have challenges with housing and so on, but today we are supposed to be focusing on the impact of Brexit. That is what we are focusing on today, eight years down the line.

Scotland could do better by making our choices for ourselves. The impact of Brexit on Scotland is disproportionately and negatively huge. I agree with the cabinet secretary's motion, urging the UK Government to address the "barriers and impacts" caused by Brexit and to make the required changes to policy.

16:17

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Because I represent Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire, I see at first hand how our farmers, businesses and fishing communities are adapting to ever-increasing challenges, but this afternoon's debate sums up the SNP's lack of understanding of communities like those in the Borders. Can SNP members really sit here with straight faces and pretend that it is not their policy decisions that have been the single biggest blow to the rural economy? The SNP, aided and abetted by the Greens, has brought a series of wrecking balls to the rural economy.

Nowhere was the disdain for our rural communities more apparent than with the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Bill and the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill, which sought to demonise rural estates and rural land

workers and put aside any intention of pursuing evidence-led policy decision making.

The coalition of chaos should have ended much sooner than it did, and rural communities have paid a price for that. Why should we be surprised? If the SNP really understood rural areas, it would have actually delivered for residents in rural areas. For example, it would have used the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill to create a bespoke funding scheme with the interests of Scottish farmers and crofters at its heart. It would not have snatched £46 million from the agriculture budget—despite the empty promises from the cabinet secretary. She has left the chamber, but I am sure that she can answer this later. I would like to know when that money will be returned.

If the SNP really understood rural areas, it would have delivered on its rural action plan for housing, rather than giving £100 million that was ring fenced by the Scottish Government for rural homes to developments in cities instead. It would have invested in key rural infrastructure projects, such as dualling the A9, on time. It would not have had to U-turn on banning fishing in 50 per cent of Scottish waters.

Ultimately, if the SNP really wanted to deliver for our rural community, it would—as I said—have ended its disastrous partnership with the Greens a long time ago.

In bringing this debate to the chamber, the SNP Government has chosen to waste precious time rather than discuss the issues that exist right here, right now, over which it has presided for 17 years. Those are the issues that we hear about from our constituents, who are being affected by them daily.

On Monday, I was speaking to residents in the Borders about the issues that affect them most. I can tell members that nobody—not one person—mentioned the impact of Brexit. Instead, they told me about the lack of affordable housing and the poor transport links between their homes and between towns and villages.

They told me about the difficulties of finding well-paid jobs away from the central belt, which forces people to make the decision between having a long commute and finding work that bears no resemblance to the skills that they have been trained in. They told me about how difficult it is for young people to build a life in the community in which they grew up.

All those issues are the responsibility of the devolved Scottish Government, and we should have been discussing them this afternoon. My constituents in the Borders deserve a Government that is proactive and ambitious, rather than one that is anti-business and anti-rural. However, the SNP Government's title as the most anti-rural and anti-business party in the UK is under threat, with

Labour's high-tax budget last week giving the SNP a run for its money.

The cut to the agricultural property relief, the Barnettisation of the agriculture budget, and the increase in tax on pick-ups will have a communal, cumul—I cannot say that word. It will have a large effect and a devastating impact on Scotland's rural sector. On top of that, rural businesses will be shouldering the burden of the increases to capital gains tax and employer national insurance rises.

I will comment on what Richard Leonard said, because it was totally unfair of him to conflate wealth with exploitation. The two things do not go hand in hand. A very small percentage of people might be creating the working conditions that Richard Leonard talked about, but that is not the general picture of farmers and crofters across Scotland, who are doing their best to put food on our plates. They are working 24 hours, seven days a week, and they are earning very little to do that.

Richard Leonard: I am not for a minute suggesting that all farmers are involved in the level of exploitation that is, as I described, facing migrant workers. By the same token, however, would Rachael Hamilton accept that some farmers are excessively exploiting migrant workers who are on seasonal migrant worker visas?

Rachael Hamilton: We need to see the evidence for that. That subject was raised in the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, on which I used to sit. I would be absolutely 100 per cent behind tackling exploitation of any workers, but we are not talking about an agricultural sector or a land-working sector—we are talking about all sectors across Scotland. It does not happen only in agriculture; it is just that I have experience, from being on the committee, of hearing about possible concerns in that sector.

I have put out a Borders business survey this week—yesterday, in fact—and I have had a lot of replies to it so far. The majority of people indicate that the recent UK Labour Government budget is going to have a negative impact on their business, as we have discussed in the chamber.

The Scottish Government must focus on Scotland's future. With the powers that it has, it should focus on following through on the promises to rural Scotland that it has so far broken. It is rich in SNP members to make some of the arguments that they have made today, when it is clear that the SNP is creating deep uncertainty for farmers with the deferral of money that was ring fenced for agriculture. They must recognise that at the heart of rural economies are real people, farmers and land managers—real communities—and we must support them.

16:24

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As the MSP for Banffshire and Buchan Coast, the impact that Brexit has had on my rural constituency is clear to me.

I want to be clear that my speech has been crafted with the words and experiences of people in my constituency who have felt the effect on the ground in the here and now. That may be because of decisions that have been made in the past, but that is how time works. The impact is hurting people now, and it is right and proper that we discuss and talk about it—so that we know not only who we can trust, but what we can do about it, going forward.

For my constituents, the outcome of Brexit feels more painful and personal because Brexit was touted as the answer to all the fishing sector's challenges. It is now more than eight years since our fishers were promised "a sea of opportunity". They were assured that we would take back control of UK waters, enjoy increased quotas, see an economic revival in our coastal communities, benefit from reduced bureaucracy and gain enhanced export opportunities with global market access. It has been eight years, and there have been countless promises, yet Brexit has delivered none of them. If anything, our fishing industry continues to catch and process our food and sustain coastal communities despite Brexit, not because of it. It is the hard-working people in the industry who have kept things going and delivered results by themselves.

Tim Eagle: I am surprised by what you have said. Will the member not accept that the fishing community, particularly in the north-east where her constituency is, is largely pro-Brexit, and that many still believe that massive opportunities will come to them by taking back control of our waters? I am pretty sure that your communities still think that there is value in Brexit, whereas you are suggesting that they would want to go back into Europe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members of the need to speak through the chair at all times.

Karen Adam: I have spoken to my constituents and to the fishing industry. Their words are in my speech and members will hear what they have to say. Brexit has absolutely been an unmitigated disaster when it comes to the promises that your party served them and the subsequent outcomes.

It was vote leave architect Michael Gove—was it not?—who said:

"The day after we leave, we will be able to decide who can access our waters .. We can rebuild our fishing communities and take back control of this important natural resource."

His double-act partner, Boris Johnson, proudly declaimed that

"We will restore Britain's fish, and our fishermen will see an economic boom like they have not seen in decades."

I remember the vote leave leaflets proudly exclaiming that Brexit would cut EU red tape and simplify regulations for our fishers, thereby allowing them to operate with more freedom and fewer burdensome restrictions.

However, when we strip back the bravado, what is the reality? "Take back control", they said. Well—the trade and co-operation agreement allows EU vessels to retain significant access to UK waters under a phased arrangement. The transitional period, which will last until at least 2026, limits the UK's control, as EU fleets continue to fish in British waters under negotiated quotas. The promise of exclusive control has not been realised in the way that fishers anticipated.

Increased quotas were promised, but many fishers feel that the adjustments have been marginal and do not compensate for the additional costs and challenges that they face due to Brexit-related trade barriers. Some industry representatives have criticised the minor quota gains as symbolic, rather than transformative.

They promised more jobs in our coastal communities, yet those communities, especially in north-east Scotland, have experienced economic challenges instead of a revival. Brexit-induced trade barriers have led to reduced profitability, especially for fish exporters, who now face increased costs and delays in getting to EU markets. Many small-scale fishing businesses are struggling to stay afloat due to rising export costs, and some communities report that there are fewer job opportunities.

"No more red tape", they said. Instead, Brexit has introduced new administrative requirements, especially for those who export to the EU. Fishers must now complete extensive paperwork, including export health certificates, customs declarations and additional checks that delay shipments. For perishable seafood products such as shellfish, those delays have a direct impact on product quality and market competitiveness. Many fishers and processors report that regulatory burdens have increased rather than decreased, which is contrary to the promises of the Brexit campaign.

"Brexit is increasingly looking like a betrayal of the UK fishing industry".

Those are not my words, but the words of the president of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, Elspeth Macdonald.

Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster for Scotland's rural economy, and especially for our

fisheries. Where Scottish fishers once dominated EU markets, our fishers now find themselves at a competitive disadvantage, compared with EU-based competitors.

Many seafood businesses in Scotland have reported a decline in export volumes since Brexit. UK fish, crustacean and mollusc exports to the EU declined by nearly 45 per cent in net mass from December 2020 to early 2023.

One of the pressing challenges that are facing the processing sector today is the severe labour shortage, which has—as we have heard from my colleagues—been worsened by limited access to EU nationals who would traditionally fill those roles. Many businesses in my constituency rely heavily on migrant workers—some up to almost 80 per cent, I have been told—and they are gravely concerned about their ability to stay operational. The proposed pay thresholds for visas are quite simply unrealistic for many of those roles. Since Brexit, the absence of EU workers has made it difficult for processing plants to run at full capacity, which is cutting productivity and driving up operating costs.

Fisherman James Stephen, who is based in Peterhead, has been at sea for 40 years. Earlier this year, he said:

“We’re such a small part of GDP, but yet we were one of the major arguments in the Brexit story. But when it all came to fruition, it was just a pack of lies we were told. We were led up the garden path.

We’ve ended up with the crumbs for extra quota, which has been one of the major things. Even the on-shore industry really gets hit by the paperwork. Now we have to export the fish to Europe. So I think for all concerned, to me, it has been a total shambles.”

Those are not my words; they are his.

I have little more to add, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to bring your remarks to a close, please.

Karen Adam: I have little more to add. Our fishers have been betrayed by a Conservative Government that promised them a sea of opportunity but delivered to them a sea of troubles. It is time for Scotland to escape this Brexit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adam, you need to close.

Karen Adam: It is time for independence. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take this opportunity again, just while it occurs to me, to say that any references to “you” that are made by members are actually references to me. I am sure that that is not what members are intending when they make their contributions.

With that, I move to closing speeches and call Ariane Burgess to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens. We have no more time in hand. You have up to six minutes.

16:31

Ariane Burgess: Thank you, Presiding Officer, for that clarity about references to “you”.

In my opening remarks, I spoke at length about the day-to-day issues that the rural farming community faces as a result of Brexit, but the community also faces long-term concerns as a result of the UK leaving the EU. One of the most difficult is that Brexit has made it harder for our small farmers and growers to get hold of climate-resilient varieties of vegetables. Complex paperwork, seed spot-testing at ports and a lack of domestic suppliers have meant that EU exporters simply do not want to attempt to trade with the UK.

Even getting hold of existing seed varieties has become more difficult in the light of Brexit. My constituent Jo Hunt, who, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, has been forced to cease organic food production, told me that red tape and a surge in organic growing in the EU have seen EU seed suppliers prioritise their customers on the continent over organic farmers and growers in the UK. That means that the range of seeds that are available to our growers has shrunk and availability is patchy. At a time when we have committed to increasing our organic production as part of our response to our biodiversity and climate crises, that is severely concerning.

Fully state-funded seed research and development was ended by Thatcher’s Government in the 1980s, and I am told that the only company currently operating in the UK that focuses on developing varieties that can cope with our increasingly unpredictable growing climate is doing all its research in the Netherlands. That is untenable, given the sheer pace of change in our climate and the need to ensure that communities have access to locally produced food. I urge the Scottish Government to look at using its new powers over agricultural funding to resurrect that vital work and encourage a thriving Scottish seed sector.

As we have heard today, the ill effects of Brexit labour shortages extend beyond agriculture. The rural hospitality sector is struggling to sustain itself, with many businesses having to cut back or close down because of staff shortages and barriers to trade, including some that have been in families for generations.

Rural health and social care systems are on their knees because of the lack of workers. One example of the challenges facing the latter sector can be seen in the mental health care system. We

are all well aware of the mental health challenges that affect our foresters, fishers and farmers, which often tragically result in suicide.

There could be a different outcome if those people had access to local mental health support. However, there is such a chronic shortage of workers in the mental health care system that the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland says that the retirement of a single consultant can mean the end of an area's entire service. The organisation also says that, in some health boards, more than half the psychiatry positions are vacant or held by a locum. If we were still in the EU, we could have a wealth of workers taking up those positions.

It is also becoming apparent that Brexit has hit living standards. As we heard from Emma Harper, research in 2023 by the London School of Economics and Political Science found that Brexit has accounted for about a third of the increase in food bills for households since 2019, which is equivalent to £250. That extra cost is likely to have been most keenly felt in Scotland's rural areas, which have already been hit especially hard by soaring energy bills. A 2021 report by the Scottish Government estimated that the minimum cost of living in remote rural Scotland was between 15 and 30 per cent higher than that in urban parts of the UK.

On Monday, the Prime Minister said that the UK Government would not devolve immigration powers to Scotland. However, given the severe negative impacts that Brexit is having on our rural and island communities, it is time for the Labour Government to finally devolve immigration and visa powers. The people of Scotland did not vote for breakfast—*[Laughter.]* The people of Scotland did not for Brexit and they do not support it. We did not vote for breakfast either.

Just as our citizens are now unable to freely work in Europe, Europeans also suffer, with limitations placed on how they can live, work and study in our country. Scotland should have the right to make its own decisions on immigration and to reach out to the world around us. The Scotland that I want to see us build is one where we can welcome people into our country, support their right to work and allow our rural businesses and communities to thrive and prosper. As such, I hope that our Parliament will come together to back the sentiment of the amendment that I proposed for the debate and call on Westminster to undo the awful damage that has been done by Brexit.

16:37

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): We have had an interesting debate. Other than

perhaps from Tory members, there has been broad agreement that Brexit has not been good for Scotland. It has not been good for rural Scotland—indeed, for all of Scotland—and it has not been good for the UK.

As Colin Smyth said, Labour is committed to resetting the relationship with the EU, and the question is about how we do that. Some people say that we should be back in Europe tomorrow, and I think to myself, "If only it was that simple." I have no doubt that even the people who voted for Brexit, many of whom were completely conned by the Tories, would have a different point of view today. However, I do not think that the issue is as straightforward as simply clicking our fingers, getting in a room and saying that we want to be back in.

Karen Adam quoted the fisherman from Peterhead who said that they had been led up the garden path. I think that most fishermen feel like that—that they were lied to and cheated. That is how many people who supported Brexit now see things.

Christine Grahame: I challenge the member for suggesting that it would be very difficult for Scotland to re-enter the EU. Most of our legislation and policies remain EU compliant. They are now being dismembered, but they are there, so it would be much easier for us than for somebody who was coming in for the first time.

Alex Rowley: What I said is that it is not as straightforward as some people suggest.

Keir Starmer has been very clear that a priority of the UK Government is to foster a closer relationship with the European Union. That is a welcome move away from the Tory position of seeing the EU as the enemy of the UK, in its petty culture war that is designed only to cling on to power for those who cannot see the benefit of good international relations with our neighbours in the EU.

In recent months, Keir Starmer has begun talks on a new co-operation agreement between the UK and Germany, with the aim of boosting trade, creating jobs and delivering economic growth in both countries. That is certainly a shift away from the position of the previous Tory Government. He has also made it clear that he is seeking a closer relationship with the EU on a number of fronts, including the economy, defence and exchanges. That is all positive and moving in the right direction.

In her speech, the cabinet secretary was fairly positive about where we should be working together and how we could be working together. That second key change is important. We now have a UK Government that wants to work with the Scottish Government. If we are to overcome

some of the challenges that there are, we absolutely need to work together.

I have always said that we should be able to look at things such as the skilled workers visa. We should be looking at the evidence and asking whether there is a problem with people not wanting to come to Scotland. I think that Emma Roddick said that people want to come here, but the evidence does not suggest that. Is there a specific problem? If we build relationships between the two Governments, it should not be beyond us to get round the table and start to look at solutions. I have always said that we should explore an approach. If one approach is a specific visa or immigration passport for Scotland, we need to look at that—it is not beyond us.

Quite a number of speakers have raised issues that cannot simply be blamed on Brexit. We have to have an honest discussion. The skills challenges in rural Scotland are, in some ways, similar to the skills challenges across Scotland. We cannot look at those challenges without looking at what we have been doing with our colleges over the past number of years.

Rachael Hamilton: I am listening carefully to what Mr Rowley is saying. Is it Sir Keir Starmer's policy to have a separate immigration policy for Scotland?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I ask Mr Rowley to close.

Alex Rowley: It is not, and that is not what I said. I said that I hope that we now have two Governments that will work much more closely together and put the people of Scotland first, instead of the ideological nightmare that we had from the previous, failed Tory Government. It should therefore not be beyond us to present evidence and a case and to come together to work on it. Unfortunately, the Tories have consistently looked to create division to drive their agenda. I hope that those days are over and that we have two Governments coming together.

To go back to the point that I was making, the SNP Government has to take some responsibility for the skills gaps. As Richard Leonard said, no proper skills and industrial strategy is in place. On housing, which is one of the major issues for rural Scotland that is causing rural depopulation, the Scottish Government has to be honest and accept its failures. I close on that.

16:43

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In case those who are in the chamber now were not here when I intervened earlier, I remind members that I am a partner in a small family farm in Moray—a small family farm meaning one that is

less than 500 acres and that is going to get hammered by the tax brought in by Labour.

On 23 June 2016—unless I got that wrong—Brexit was voted on and it was decided to go. That was eight years ago. I cannot remember how many debates in this chamber I have had on Brexit, but they seem to all be on a Thursday afternoon when we could be more reasonably talking about interesting things such as the A9 and why transport policies in the central belt and in southern Scotland were prioritised over rural areas in the north of Scotland. We could be talking about hospitals and the lack of them, or dentists and the lack of those, or the impossibility of finding any.

We seem to be stuck eight years ago, without having moved on. Although I do not deny that there have been some challenges, industry as a whole has tried to move on, as it fully understands that one cannot just sit there and say, "I'm going to cry over spilt milk for ever in the hope that the cornflakes won't get soggy." The cornflakes are soggy and we need to move on—that is what industry is doing.

What annoys me when we talk about Brexit is that the Government and other members from across the chamber ignore all the other things that have been going on around the world. We have had Covid and the invasion of Ukraine, which have made a huge difference to rural Scotland—I am sure that the minister and the cabinet secretary will know that when Ukraine was invaded, fertiliser went up from a mere £230 a tonne to more than £1,000 a tonne, which affected every farm in Scotland. We have seen oil prices go up.

On the side, we have seen the SNP dipping into ring-fenced rural funds—that should have been going to the rural economy—to use them for other things. That is to say nothing of the various other things that have gone on, such as cuts to rural housing and tree planting targets, and a delay to the agricultural support scheme—I say to the cabinet secretary that I will be interested to see and fully understand what the new scheme involves, because, as a farmer with a lot of capital invested in that industry, I am still not sure that I do.

I would like to know when the cuts to transport and health will be stopped. All those things are crushing the rural economy and causing huge problems. Of the 200 Caithness mums who gave birth in 2022, only eight gave birth in Caithness; the rest of them were moved down to Inverness, because there were no facilities for them in the rural areas. Take my word for it that, when people look to move to and to stay in rural areas such as Caithness, that situation puts them off.

I want to talk about labour—first, about the Labour Party whose members are sitting opposite

me, and then about labour. The Labour Party has made a huge mistake. I know that Mr Leonard, who is sitting at the back, laughs about the wanton attack on small family farms. It is all very well for Mr Leonard to laugh about it, but my small family farm employs three people and we have two families living in the countryside—be under no illusion that we will be affected by that taxation. I doubt whether I will be able to hand my small farm over to my son, and that gives me a worry. The tax gives every farmer in Scotland a worry, and I am not surprised about that. The Barnettisation of farm payments is a disgrace and will affect the rural economy. Everyone in the chamber has spoken against it—the Conservatives have always done so.

On labour as a whole, I tried to make the point with an earlier intervention that finding labour to work in rural areas, especially on farms, is extremely difficult. I know from personal experience that young people do not want to work on farms, which require an extraordinary amount of commitment. Farm work can see young people being asked to come out of their beds at 2 o'clock in the morning to calve a belligerent cow that will probably kick them in the process—they do not want to do that. They certainly do not want to be working hard at all times of night. A lot of young people nowadays expect to be able to work for four days a week in an office and take a day off. That has an effect on all the countryside. If people do not believe that, they only have to look round Edinburgh to see whether restaurants are open for more than four days a week—they are not, because they cannot find the people who are prepared to work five or six days a week.

Working on a farm is hard work. I understand Ariane Burgess's point about finding people to pick fruit. Having done it, and having got dirt under my fingernails doing it, I can tell you that it is an extremely difficult task, which not everyone wants to do. In fact, I will be honest—it was such hard, back-breaking work, I never want to do it again. Finding people to do it in this day and age is really difficult. That is not a fact of Brexit—that is a fact of where we are.

To pick up on a couple of points that some of my colleagues made, Mr Eagle was right to say that slow payments to farmers actually put farmers off. Although I know that the cabinet secretary got a lot of the payments out early, we must remember that harvest came that much later in the year, so farmers will get paid much later in the year.

Some of the farmers have not received their harvest payments yet and are desperately relying on the single farm payment to ensure that they can invest in crops for next year. They want to be

able to plan in the long term, which, as Mr Eagle suggested, is not unreasonable.

Mr Carson talked about rural homes, and I absolutely agree with what he said. Rachael Hamilton talked about the lack of housing, which is a key point for people in the rural economy, and also about the issue with the Barnettisation of farm grants.

We did not quite hear what Christine Grahame's problems were, although she alluded to them. I think that the issue might have been to do with her speech notes or something else, but we will never know.

There are going to be problems if this Government wants to continue pushing the Brexit theme and not move forward. Let me be clear: even if the Government gets its way, which I do not think that it will, and Scotland rejoins the EU, doing so will be extremely expensive. It will cause incredible trade barriers with the other parts of the United Kingdom that do not; we will be forced to have the euro; and, be under no illusions, if the USA is going to employ trade barriers, the EU will be affected just as much as any other country.

16:51

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I offer my thanks to members across the chamber for their speeches this afternoon. It is clear from the range of most of the contributions that the level of challenge that Brexit has presented across the rural economy and beyond is understood and taken seriously.

There are many issues that need to be taken into account when we consider how we address those challenges, and I will share my initial reflections on today's debate.

As we have heard today, the food and drink sector has been beset by a range of challenges in recent years. We know that there are increasing risks to Scotland's food security, including from climate change and events such as the conflict in Ukraine. A strong political relationship with one of the world's biggest agrifood exporters and our closest geographical neighbours does not just support our agrifood businesses, but strengthens our overall food security in terms of our trading relationships and critical supply chains. The European Union shares our values and our goals, and having friends that do so is critically important in the current geopolitical situation.

Speeches in today's debate have laid bare the impact that the loss of freedom of movement has had and continues to have on Scotland's rural and island communities. We are clear that Scotland has distinct demographic challenges and that, in

response to that, we need a tailored migration route for Scotland that will support our public services, our economy, our communities and, in particular, those rural and island communities that have their own distinct challenges resulting from Brexit.

This Parliament has previously supported broad calls for a tailored approach to migration that supports Scotland's economies, communities and public services. Right now, there is a significant opportunity for the new UK Government to work with the Scottish Government to deliver on our shared priorities.

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: I will make a bit of progress, and then I will happily give way to Mr Carson.

We are committed to working together with the UK Government to explore opportunities for progress, including our proposals for a Scottish visa and a rural visa pilot. Those proposals are strongly supported by key stakeholders across Scotland, and their delivery is vital to supporting the sustainability of Scotland's rural and island communities and economies, which have faced such harm since the ending of freedom of movement.

I turn to individual members' contributions. First, I congratulate Tim Eagle on his new role and responsibilities. As I used to represent him as his local member of Parliament, he knows that I share his interest in the issues that he spoke of, which I know are very close to his heart. However, what we heard from him today was Brexit denialism. We did not get a straight answer in response to a straightforward question about a veterinary agreement—an agreement on agriculture, food and drink. I encourage Mr Eagle and his colleagues to make efforts in the coming weeks and months to understand the importance of the issue—which concerns a Labour Party manifesto commitment—as it becomes more of a realistic prospect.

To Colin Smyth I say that I was grateful to hear that clarification about the Labour Government's manifesto commitment, and I am delighted that Labour is following the lead of the SNP in committing support to the veterinary agreement. I will be happy to work with him and his colleagues to make sure that that is delivered.

Ariane Burgess was absolutely right to highlight the damage of Brexit, its scale and the scale of the damage still to come. We are well warned about wishing it away as if it were not going to have an enduring and negative impact. I commend the point that she made about differentiated immigration systems, which, as I pointed out in an intervention, are perfectly possible in both

Australia and Canada. There is absolutely no reason why such a system could not happen here, which is the reason why we on the SNP benches will support the Green Party amendment.

Beatrice Wishart was absolutely right to raise the issue of seed potatoes and of food rotting in the fields. Those are Brexit impacts; they are ongoing, current and avoidable.

Christine Grahame's contribution was, frankly, a master-class in inviting Brexit denialists in the chamber to give a single Brexit benefit. Not a single one was heard—not one.

I turn to Finlay Carson, to whom I give notice that I am about to give way to him. In his speech on Brexit impacts, he managed to totally ignore the facts and the issues around the damage of Brexit. Perhaps, when I give way to him, he will update us on any advantages that Brexit has delivered so far.

Finlay Carson: Much of the debate has focused on immigration, but we have also touched on rural depopulation. Will the cabinet secretary tell us why we see accelerated depopulation in rural areas when it is the SNP Government that has control of nearly all the levers that are responsible for that depopulation and that potentially hold the solutions to reversing it?

Angus Robertson: I declare an interest, having chaired the Scottish Government's population task force. I am sure that Finlay Carson would agree that Scotland is a country that has endured both emigration and immigration. Population change in Scotland has been a constant. Our challenge is that we do not have all the tools in the toolbox to deal with issues of population change in our immigration system. That is why I encourage him to have an open mind. Conservative Governments in Canada and Australia have been able to see the advantages of differentiated migration systems, and I encourage the Scottish Conservative Party to have an open mind about that.

Emma Roddick talked about the necessity of honesty on Brexit. We cannot just wish or brush it away as if it has not had a negative impact. She powerfully added her voice to the case for a Scottish visa and highlighted the disappointment—expressed on one front page recently—that the Labour Party marched us all up the hill believing that it is in favour of a Scottish visa, only to have us march down the next day, saying that it is not.

Richard Leonard was correct to point out that the United States is the biggest single overseas market. He is absolutely right. However, when counted together, the markets of the countries of the European Union account for significantly more than the United States market. We should not avoid that as a fact; it really matters.

Emma Harper, who is a strong voice for the south of Scotland, pointed out the impact of labour shortages in her part of the country and in the rest of it, which underlines why we should have the appropriate tools in the toolbox to deal with migration.

Rachael Hamilton said that it is important to have an understanding of rural areas, and I agree with her. That is why I am proud that the Scottish National Party represents most rural constituencies across the length and breadth of Scotland. It is members on the SNP benches who take Brexit and its seriousness as a major priority, when her party does not. She had difficulty saying the word “cumulative”. I say to her that that is perhaps understandable when we understand the cumulative impact that Brexit has had on rural Scotland, which has not been good.

Karen Adam brought up the litany of false Brexit promises to fishing communities about the labour market and the export market, and she is absolutely right. Another future is possible.

Alex Rowley was absolutely right to talk about the advantages of a reset in relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments. I agree with him that we should do everything that we can to work out where there are things that we can reach agreement on. We also agree on the advantages of a veterinary agreement—an agriculture, food and drink agreement. I welcome the fact that Alex Rowley is open-minded to a Scottish visa system, and I encourage him to impress on Anas Sarwar and his colleagues on the Labour front bench that they should remain open to that as well. It would be hugely welcome if the Labour Party were to support the position of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Government on that issue.

Alex Rowley was right when he said that we cannot simply click our fingers and rejoin the European Union, but that is not a reason for us not to try. Surely we must end the self-harm in all of this.

Finally, I turn to Edward Mountain’s speech, in which, perhaps unsurprisingly, he joined his colleagues in minimising the impact of Brexit. He described it as being like soggy cornflakes and said that we should not cry over it. I do not think that he was trying to make a joke about the issue in the sense of suggesting that it should not be taken seriously, but Brexit is a serious matter, and he should know that it impacts on the communities of Speyside as someone who lives in the middle of it.

I reiterate that, as the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands so clearly put it, the time for action is now. The United Kingdom Government has a number of choices before it. It needs to work with us to ensure that

the choices that it makes will not negatively or disproportionately impact on the people and businesses of Scotland. The consequences of the hard Brexit that was pursued by the previous UK Government are plain to see. It is far less obvious how the current UK Government intends to mitigate or reverse the harmful impacts that we have discussed today, which is why SNP members, and the majority of members in this Parliament, believe that the best future for the economy and for Scotland is for it to be an independent member state of the European Union.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is decision time. There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-15253.2, in the name of Tim Eagle, which seeks to amend motion S6M-15253, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on Brexit impacts on Scotland's rural economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-15253.2, in the name of Tim Eagle.

For

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (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)

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (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-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (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)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-15253.2, in the name of Tim Eagle, is: For 26, Against 85, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-15253.1, in the name of Colin Smyth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-15253, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on Brexit impacts on Scotland's rural economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 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-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)

Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (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)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-15253.1, in the name of Colin Smyth, is: For 85, Against 26, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-15253, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on Brexit impacts on Scotland's rural economy, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 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-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
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 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)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
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 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 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)

Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Meeting closed at 17:10.

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-15253, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on Brexit impacts on Scotland's rural economy, as amended, is: For 85, Against 25, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the ongoing harm caused by Brexit to Scotland's rural economy, such as barriers to trade, loss of EU funding and post-Brexit labour shortages; acknowledges that these barriers have severely impacted Scotland's world-class food and drink sector, which is of particular importance to Scotland's rural and island communities; calls on the UK Government to consider changes to the current Brexit arrangements that would address these barriers and impacts, including through the pursuit of a comprehensive veterinary agreement with the EU; welcomes the UK Government's commitment to reset the UK's relationship with the EU, and calls on the Scottish Government to prioritise the use of all the levers already at its disposal to improve the economy of Scotland's rural areas, through supporting jobs, providing housing, progressing infrastructure and improving transport links.

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here:
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Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

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Telephone: 0131 348 5447

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