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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 December 2024

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

Point of Order

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. Meghan Gallacher has a point of order.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance. Given the Scottish Government's shoddy behaviour last week on the winter fuel payment announcement, it should have learned a lesson. Therefore, I suspect that I was not the only MSP who was angered to read in the *Daily Record* that the Scottish Government is set to make an embarrassing U-turn on the cuts to affordable housing in the budget statement today.

The article was published at 4.30 this morning. It appears to me that the news was leaked to the media before MSPs had the opportunity to listen to and scrutinise the Scottish Government's proposals. The *Daily Record* must be the Scottish National Party's favourite choice of paper this season; I find it almost suspicious that both leaks have been handed to the same paper. The SNP Government should not be using the press to try to claw back any shred of credibility that it lost when it brutally cut the vital winter fuel payment fund. If it believes that that is clever politics, it is clearly mistaken. It is disrespectful to the Presiding Officer, backbench SNP MSPs and Opposition members in the Parliament.

It is becoming commonplace for the SNP to believe that it is above any convention and the processes of the Parliament. Will the Presiding Officer therefore seek to investigate the matter, to ascertain how the information managed to find its way into the mainstream press before the ministerial statement on the Scottish budget this afternoon? What will the repercussions for the disrespectful behaviour be? Should the statement be rewritten to reflect what we already know and what has been available in the public domain for nearly nine hours?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have not seen the statement and therefore cannot comment on what is and what is not in it, or on how that relates to what is in the press.

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

14:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We move to portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business. As members will appreciate, we are tight for time across a busy afternoon. Therefore, I appeal for succinct questions and responses. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Creative Scotland Review

1. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it expects its preparatory work to conclude and the review into Creative Scotland, which was announced in September 2024, to get under way. (S6O-04057)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I begin by extending my congratulations to the Scottish artist Jasleen Kaur for winning the Turner prize 2024. I note that she said that an inspiring school teacher and funding from the Scottish Government made it possible for her to train as an artist. I am sure that all members across the parties wish her well.

In answer to Tess White's question, I recognise that it is essential that the culture sector has an opportunity to engage in the work on Creative Scotland. I can confirm that the engagement will begin early next year with a short survey about the scope of the review. The Scottish Government aims to announce the independent chair of the Creative Scotland review shortly and will aim for them to publish their recommendations by summer 2025.

Tess White: Gender-critical author Jenny Lindsay wrote in her latest book, "Hounded", that

"in a democracy ... no person or group should be permitted to force their own subjective beliefs on those who take a contrary position".

Yet, that is precisely what Creative Scotland did when a member of staff tried to prevent Ms Lindsay's book from being stocked by bookshops because she was wrongly deemed to be transphobic. That was cultural authoritarianism at its worst.

The planned review into Creative Scotland is welcome, but can the cabinet secretary provide assurances that the process will look at the

importance of protecting free speech for authors and artists who seek support for their work from a public body?

Angus Robertson: I thank Tess White for her welcome of the review. I say to her, as I have said to other colleagues in previous portfolio question times, that I look forward to the independent chair of the Creative Scotland review being able to get on with the process independently. I am sure that, when we announce that person and they take up office, they will listen closely to what MSPs of all parties have said about issues that they consider that the review should look at. It is not for me to suggest what should be on and off the table for an independent chair of a review to take seriously. I am sure that Tess White will wish to raise that directly with the chair when their appointment is announced.

Creative Scotland Review

2. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how the planned review of Creative Scotland will improve compliance with fair work principles in the culture sector. (S6O-04058)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The review of Creative Scotland is a necessary part of a wider piece of work to maximise the impact of public funding. Our belief is that public sector funding should lever in wider societal benefits, such as the promotion of fair work, to support the development of a sustainable and successful wellbeing economy that is fair, green and growing over the long term.

The fair work task force is due to present its recommendations in June 2025. That will allow them to be considered during the review.

Patrick Harvie: The review and the trajectory towards £100 million of additional culture funding offer a huge opportunity to improve much about the culture sector. Instead of dragging the sector into Tory transphobic culture wars, it would be of far more practical benefit to address issues such as fair work in a sector in which casual labour and freelance work are pretty much endemic.

Will the cabinet secretary ensure that fair work principles are addressed specifically in the review's remit? Will he ensure that the unions that represent casual and freelance workers—creatives and those on the hospitality side of the culture sector—are represented as well?

Angus Robertson: As I am sure Patrick Harvie would expect, I meet the trade unions in the culture and arts sector regularly. I think that I am right in saying that I did so only last week. Fair work was at the top of the agenda of our conversations and, as I said to the unions, I say to

Mr Harvie that I expect the review to consider that and other issues. In the meantime, by working through the task force, the Scottish Government will continue to play its part in all deliverables that ensure that fair work is respected across the culture and arts sector.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I join the cabinet secretary in congratulating Jasleen Kaur on winning the Turner prize.

Analysis of Creative Scotland's published accounts from 2022-23 shows that the percentage of its budget that reached the pockets of front-line creatives in that year fell to 83 per cent, compared with 92 per cent in the two previous years. On achieving fair work, does the cabinet secretary agree that a greater proportion of Creative Scotland's budget should be used to put money in the pockets of front-line creatives? Will that be considered as part of the review, alongside Mr Harvie's sensible suggestions?

Angus Robertson: I give Neil Bibby the same assurance that I gave colleagues from other political parties in previous portfolio questions. The independent review of Creative Scotland will have to consider the wider arts and culture sector, not just that which is directly or indirectly funded by Creative Scotland. I am really keen for it to consider all the options that are relevant to people in the sector. That is why an invitation will be extended to the sector to raise issues, needs, interests, concerns and expectations. I expect members of all parties, and parties themselves, to be able to play an active role in that.

I give Neil Bibby a commitment that fair work is very high on my agenda. I believe that the review will be part of ensuring that we are able to deliver everything that we possibly can to ensure that people who work in the arts and culture sector are on a firm financial footing.

Employer National Insurance Contributions Increase (Impact on Culture Sector)

3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact it anticipates that the UK Government's decision to raise employer national insurance contributions will have on organisations in the culture sector that are in receipt of Scottish Government funding. (S6O-04059)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The increased costs to the sector introduced by the United Kingdom Labour Government could lead to a reduction in employment, wages or services. The Scottish Government is committed to investing at least £100 million more annually in culture and the arts by 2028-29. It is disappointing that the UK

Government has chosen to erode the benefits of that. We are clear that it should have asked the people with the broadest shoulders to contribute more, not tried to balance its budget on the back of cultural organisations, charities and the health service.

Clare Adamson: In recent years, the UK Government funding that has been available for the culture sector has decreased. Grant-in-aid funding for UK arts and cultural organisations fell by 18 per cent between 2010 and 2023. Thousands of charities and cultural organisations have warned that they will now have to absorb the costs of the changes. What impact will that have on the long-term sustainability of the culture sector in Scotland?

Angus Robertson: I recognise that the sector is hugely concerned about public funding for culture and about what the immediate and longer-term futures hold. It is not right that those organisations should be disadvantaged by the UK Government's policy change. There is significant uncertainty about whether the UK Government will adequately and properly cover the costs of the changes to national insurance contributions. That will be the subject of detailed discussions between the Scottish and UK Governments as we proceed with our budget steps.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, join the cabinet secretary in congratulating Jasleen Kaur on winning the Turner prize.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that the national insurance contribution changes will have a cumulative cost of £75 million to the third sector in Scotland. Given that charities and the third sector play such a critical role in promoting Scotland, what guarantees can the cabinet secretary give that those vital employers will not be subject to further in-year cuts by the Scottish Government?

Angus Robertson: We are talking about the UK Government's announcement on national insurance contributions, and Pam Gosal is absolutely right to highlight that the changes will have an impact on the third sector and on culture and the arts. Through our communications with the UK Government, we will do everything to stress that it is for it to ameliorate the problems. The Scottish Government's job is not to make good on bad decisions by the UK Government but to use our powers in devolved areas of responsibility to deliver certainty and growth. We will try to do that as much as we can, but, given how detrimental the UK Government's decision on national insurance contributions will be, we will have to persuade it to make good on its damaging decision.

Culture Sector (Funding)

4. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture secretary has had with the finance secretary regarding whether it will deliver its commitment to provide an additional £25 million to the culture sector in 2025-26. (S6O-04060)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I have had regular discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government regarding the aim of providing a further £25 million in the next financial year as part of the commitment to provide an additional £100 million per year by 2028-29. I look forward to setting out further details on culture funding for the next financial year in the coming days, after the Scottish Government budget has been published later this afternoon.

Mark Griffin: The culture sector has faced a double whammy of broken promises and underfunding. The situation has been compounded by local authority budget cuts that have stripped more than £163 million from culture and heritage budgets since 2011-12. Will the cabinet secretary commit not only to talking to the finance secretary about the promised £25 million but to securing a fair funding settlement for local government that will start to reverse the culture cuts that have hit our communities?

Angus Robertson: Mark Griffin has asked an important question just ahead of the budget, so he will have to be a bit patient. I note what he has said about local government finance and the Labour Party's hope that we will raise spending by £25 million, which was echoed by the Scottish Music Industry Association. Let us see what is in the budget later this afternoon, and I will be happy to have further conversations with Mark Griffin, if he wants.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Increased culture funding has the welcome potential to improve the arts sector in Scotland and allow it to flourish. What steps will the Scottish Government take, alongside any funding increase, to ensure that money is not wasted? What will the cabinet secretary do to ensure that projected funds from any uplift are an appropriate use of taxpayers' money?

Angus Robertson: I give Alexander Stewart the assurance that, particularly at this time of year, a lot of thought goes into ensuring that we maximise funding. As members would expect, as the culture secretary, I have impressed on colleagues why it is important to have the appropriate funding in place. Our conversations with funding bodies such as Creative Scotland and with the national performing companies, which I

met earlier today, revolve extensively around the best use of taxpayers' money to ensure that we support culture and the arts in the best way possible. If Alexander Stewart has any views in that regard, I urge him to feed them into the Creative Scotland review process, and I am sure that they will be taken very seriously.

Community Arts and Placemaking (Funding)

5. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recent reaffirmation of its commitment to increase culture funding by at least an additional £100 million a year by 2028-29, how much of this extra investment will be directed towards community arts and placemaking. (S6O-04061)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I would be in trouble if I was to preview what we are about to hear in the budget, so I will rest on the point that, once the Scottish Government budget has been published later this afternoon, I will set out further details on funding for specific areas of the culture sector, and I will be happy to share that with Ariane Burgess.

Ariane Burgess: Community arts organisations in my region, such as Findhorn Bay Arts, Dunoon POP Shop and An Lanntair, in Stornoway, play a key role in placemaking, but because of a lack of a clear route map for that kind of funding and the low levels of funding relative to other European nations, organisations around the country are worried about how secure the £100 million pledge is. They have set up the investing culture campaign—I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware of it—to highlight the value of the culture sector and raise their concerns. What route map does the Government have for funding community arts and placemaking?

Angus Robertson: I strongly urge Ariane Burgess to remain where she is and wait for the budget. I am sure that she will hear much more about the subject.

In passing, I put on the record my appreciation to Findhorn Bay Arts and many of the arts and cultural organisations that emanate from the Universal hall and Findhorn more generally. Speaking as a former member of Parliament for Moray, I know how talented the arts organisations that are based there are.

I am a big fan of community arts projects, but I would be in breach of protocol if I gave previews of what is in the budget. I encourage Ariane Burgess to remain in her seat to listen to the details later.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Labour has made a real-terms cut to the culture resource funding in England, with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport seeing

an average 2.5 per cent cut in day-to-day spending between 2023-24 and 2025-26. Given the concerns that have been raised by those in the culture sector, can the cabinet secretary outline how that contrasts with the approach that the Scottish Government is taking and the steps that it will continue to take to support community arts?

Angus Robertson: Gordon MacDonald is absolutely right to highlight the fact that the UK Labour Government is cutting revenue funding through the DCMS for the culture sector in England. It is worth noting that the Labour Government in Wales is also cutting culture funding, whereas spending in Scotland is up.

I assure Mr MacDonald that I am committed to supporting arts and culture in the community. I know at first hand how important that is. After the publication of the Scottish budget this afternoon, I will be happy to set out in more detail how we will continue to support community arts.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The MacMillan Skills Hub in Muirhouse, in north Edinburgh, will fully reopen in January. The project, which was completed with support from the Scottish Government and others, will include a 96-seat theatre, a social enterprise cafe, artist studios and a council library. It is a great example of local culture benefiting all. Can the cabinet secretary advise whether the Scottish Government would consider working with the Brunton Theatre Trust in a similar effort to replace the Brunton theatre in Musselburgh, which was recently forced to close?

Angus Robertson: I welcome Foysoyl Choudhury's question and the way in which he asked it. I have already given commitments to the constituency member who represents the theatre in Musselburgh.

I am delighted to hear about the progress that is being made in Muirhouse. If there is anything more that I can do to support either of those organisations and venues, I am open to doing so.

Library Services (Rural Areas)

6. Alex Rowley: To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what it can do to support access to library services in rural areas. (S6O-04062)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Public libraries are devolved to local authorities, which have a statutory duty to secure the provision of adequate library facilities in their area.

We encourage library usage through our support for the Scottish Library and Information Council. That support includes £450,000 for the

public library improvement fund, which supports creative, sustainable and innovative public library projects throughout Scotland and is on top of our general revenue funding to local authorities.

Alex Rowley: The cabinet secretary might be aware of the proposal to close a host of rural libraries across Perth and Kinross, which is a serious issue. The case for libraries is well known and well made, but libraries in Perth and Kinross are now run by an arm's-length external organisation. There is a complete democratic deficit there when communities are trying to campaign to save those libraries.

Is there not a need for clearer guidance to be given to local authorities on the provision of rural libraries? Is there not also a need for a review of the democratic deficit that has been created by, in effect, creating quangos to run those public services and, indeed, close them?

Angus Robertson: As I am sure that Alex Rowley knows, I am a big fan of libraries and a big supporter of library provision right across Scotland, whether in rural or urban settings.

The member raises an issue about democratic accountability and decisions that are made at local authority level. I am perfectly content to have a look at the question that he raises and I will endeavour to write back and reply to him. I will do anything that I can to support and encourage colleagues in local authorities to protect and support the provision of library services.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Members from across the chamber, including Mr Rowley just now, have raised concerns about the closure of libraries in Perth and Kinross, which is part of the region that Mr Rowley and I represent. The issue is not isolated to Perth and Kinross; it is happening right across the country, where councils are looking to close libraries due to cost pressures.

I welcome what the cabinet secretary said about the value of libraries. Is it not time for a proper national strategy to protect local libraries, given their importance to the community? Is it not time that the Scottish Government properly funded local councils to make sure that libraries can stay open?

Angus Robertson: First, on local government finance, I am sure that Mr Fraser will be listening closely to the budget statement later this afternoon.

I am open to all suggestions about ensuring that Scotland—a country of libraries—can maintain the level of service that the public support. I appreciate that there are cost pressures in local government and that there are challenges, particularly in rural areas. I have given Alex

Rowley an undertaking that I will look at the issue, and I will happily share my response to him with Murdo Fraser.

I understand that a review has been undertaken in Perth and Kinross. No doubt, Mr Fraser has made a submission to that—given how important the issue is, I am sure that he will have done so. If he forwards that submission to me so that I can understand better the challenges in Perth and Kinross, I will look closely at that.

Brand Scotland

7. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of brand Scotland. (S6O-04063)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Since brand Scotland was established by the Scottish Government in 2018, it has gone from strength to strength and has evolved into a multi-award-winning nation brand. The cross-organisational partnership continues to play an instrumental role in improving Scotland's positive reputation abroad by building and maintaining strong relationships with other nations and attracting people to Scotland to live, work, study and do business.

I extend my congratulations to the teams working across the brand Scotland partnership on winning five awards this year, the most recent of which was at the City Nation Place global awards 2024, in which the partnership achieved the best communication strategy award.

Annabelle Ewing: I have had a look at the brand Scotland website, which is an excellent tool. However, what plans does the Scottish Government have to ensure that more people, both at home and abroad, are aware of that comprehensive source of information about Scotland? How can local communities ensure that their events are referenced?

Angus Robertson: I commend Annabelle Ewing for her supplementary question, in which she raises the excellent opportunity that we all have to get behind the brand Scotland partnership. For members who are not aware, I point out that they can visit www.scotland.org and click on the link to the toolkit at the bottom of the landing page to access the amazing resources there to help promote things such as our economy, our tourism sector, our universities or the food and drink sector. All those organisations work in partnership as part of brand Scotland.

I hope and expect that colleagues from right across the chamber in all parties are using that resource to help promote Scotland at home and abroad. Of course, local communities are welcome

to use the branding tools for their event promotion to help to showcase the beauty of Scotland to those who come here to live, work, study, visit and do business.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 was not lodged. Therefore, that concludes portfolio questions on constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move straight on to portfolio questions on justice and home affairs. I make the same appeal as I made earlier: on a busy afternoon, I would appreciate succinct questions and responses. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Violence against Women and Girls

1. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of it being the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. (S6O-04065)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Violence against women and girls is abhorrent. If we want to have a society that is free from violence, abuse and misogyny, we must prioritise addressing the root cause of that violence—gender inequality.

Tackling gender-based violence is not a commitment for only 16 days; it is a commitment for 365 days. Working with a range of partners, we are implementing our ambitious and long-term equally safe strategy, which focuses on early intervention and prevention and is backed by the annual provision of £19 million through the delivering equally safe fund, which supports 119 projects involving more than 100 organisations.

David Torrance: Violence against women and girls is abhorrent, and front-line services provide much-needed support to victims and survivors. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that victims get all the support that they need?

Angela Constance: We are investing record levels of funding, including through the provision of significant levels of funding to front-line services, to support victims of violence, including through our delivering equally safe fund and the victim-centred approach fund.

Between October 2021 and March 2024, the delivering equally safe fund supported 67,004 adults, children and young people. The stories of the transformative impact on their lives

demonstrate the importance of that work. Between 2022 and 2025, our victim-centred approach fund is providing £48 million to 23 organisations, including £18.5 million for specialist advocacy support for survivors of gender-based violence.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The Scottish Government regularly highlights its excellent equally safe at school project, which was developed by Rape Crisis Scotland. That project is one of the key ways of tackling violence against women and girls at its root.

The Scottish Government reported that it expected that the equally safe at school project would have been running in around 48 per cent of secondary schools by 2020, but it seems from an answer to a parliamentary question that I recently submitted that, four years later, only 116 schools have registered with the project, which is less than one third of secondary schools. Will the cabinet secretary outline what action the Government will take to ensure that all secondary schools run the equally safe at school programme, or a similar programme, to tackle violence against women and girls at its root?

Angela Constance: Ms McNeill raises an important point about the efficacy of the equally safe at school programme. When I was the social justice secretary, I attended the launch of that programme in a Lanarkshire school. I know that progress has been made with its roll-out, but I will raise the matter with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, who has responsibility for that area.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The Scottish Government's stated position in the equally safe strategy is that prostitution is violence against women. In the absence of a Scottish Government plan to challenge demand, will the Scottish Government do the right thing by Scotland's women and girls and back my unbuyable bill?

Angela Constance: The member is quite correct: the commercial sexual exploitation of women is indeed a form of violence against women and girls. The Scottish Government has a programme of work, at the core of which is to challenge and deter demand for that form of violence.

I know that my colleague Ms Brown has met Ms Regan and will continue to do so. It is important that the issue is not considered in isolation and that we all get behind a collective endeavour.

Bella Centre and Liliac Centre

2. **Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of how successful the Bella centre in Dundee and

Lilias centre in Glasgow have been in acknowledging the experience of trauma and adversity and supporting successful transitions for women back into the community. (S6O-04066)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Community custody units represent a step change in the rehabilitation of women in custody. The units support women to develop key life skills and a greater degree of independence, giving them the best possible chance of a successful return to the community.

I welcome Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland's recent report on HMP YOI Stirling and the Lilias and Bella centres, which found them to be safe, stable and in keeping with the trauma-informed ethos that is set out in the national strategy for women in custody. The inspectorate commended the units for their "evident successful beginning" and hailed them as a

"significant milestone on the SPS's journey towards excellence".

Elena Whitham: The Bella and Lilias community custody units are world-leading facilities and are the only ones of their kind in the United Kingdom, and as such, they have rightly garnered national and international interest. I was hugely impressed when I visited them in my former ministerial role. I was so struck by the sense of calm and the psychologically informed design that they embodied. I said at the time that they felt more like a women's refuge than a custody setting. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the continued assessment and evaluation of those centres moving forward to ensure their success in delivering a safe, stable and trauma-informed service, especially to those women who have experienced severe and multiple disadvantages?

Angela Constance: I thank Ms Whitham for her continued interest. I, too, am proud of what has been achieved by the introduction of the community custody units. The approach is founded on the principle that all aspects of the care of women in custody should be designed for women and take account of their likely experience of trauma and adversities. The universities of Glasgow, Stirling and Cambridge have been commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the community custody units, and I very much look forward to considering their report in the spring.

Cashback for Communities

3. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much money recovered from the proceeds of crime has been committed to the cashback for communities programme since 2008. (S6O-04067)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Since 2008, cashback for communities has committed £130 million of money recovered through the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to support around 1.3 million young people across all 32 local authorities in Scotland. Cashback-funded partners provide a spectrum of interventions, including providing safe spaces, trusted adults and a range of positive diversionary and support activity to young people who may be at risk of entering the criminal justice system and communities that are impacted by crime.

The programme delivers national and local projects, with particular efforts made to work in the lowest 20 per cent of Scottish index of multiple deprivation areas to ensure equality of opportunities for our young people. That is reflected in the annual impact report, which will be published shortly.

Gordon MacDonald: Cashback for communities has invested £8.7 million into projects across Edinburgh since 2008, supporting 198,000 activities. SCOREScotland, which is a recipient of funding, delivers significant intervention work through its youth exchange project at Gate 55 in my constituency. Young people are driving change in their communities and influencing what happens through the cashback for communities programme. Will the minister advise how the effectiveness and impact of the programme funding will be evaluated?

Siobhian Brown: The member raises examples of great work that is happening in his constituency. I urge all MSPs to look at the cashback work that is going on in their constituencies and pay a visit.

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of transparency when it comes to evaluating the cashback for communities programme. The impact of the programme is evidenced in two ways. Each year, an impact report is published, which provides evidence of how cashback has positively impacted young people's lives and provides an opportunity for young people to make their voices heard.

In addition, an independent evaluation is commissioned to review the impact and value of each three-year phase of cashback for communities. We have appointed Bean Research to evaluate phase 6 of the programme. The evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the programme, with a particular emphasis on measuring and reporting social changes that the programme delivers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a supplementary question, as long as it is brief and the response is likewise.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The latest statistics reveal the scale of confiscation

orders that are imposed on criminals but not yet paid. Around a quarter of the fines that were issued in 2020-21 remain unpaid and behind schedule, amounting to almost £500,000, and the figures for 2022-23 are not much better.

In total, from the past five years, criminals who are subject to those orders are £1.7 million in arrears—that is money that could be benefiting communities and victims of crime. What is the Scottish Government doing to improve collection rates?

Siobhian Brown: As the member knows, up to £20 million has been committed to phase 6 of the programme, and the Scottish Government will always endeavour to do what we can to improve the collection of the proceeds of crime.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

4. **Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in advance of the winter months. (S6O-04068)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government supports the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to keep our communities safe, every day of the year, through its highly skilled crews, providing £393.3 million this year. The SFRS is ready to respond to the range of challenges over winter, including severe weather and flooding, and it works closely with our other responders through resilience partnerships. As a national organisation, it can direct resources where it needs them most. The SFRS will continue to issue public safety advice over the winter, with a particular focus on road and water safety in the event of severe weather. In parallel, the Scottish Government supports the service to undertake prevention activity through home fire safety visits to vulnerable people and winter safety campaigns.

Annie Wells: I thank the minister for that response. John McKenzie, Scottish secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, has recently warned that the service is in a deadly cycle of decline, with the number of engines being cut, and funding so bad that some stations do not even have running water. Can the minister reassure our brave firefighters that the Scottish National Party Government will not perpetuate that deadly cycle of decline?

Siobhian Brown: We continue our commitment to support the SFRS to deliver a high standard of services that are required to keep the whole of Scotland safe. As I said, in the 2024-25 budget there was £393.3 million, which is £79 million more than it was back in 2017-18. Decisions on how that budget is spent is a matter for the SFRS

board. We will continue to work closely with the SFRS to identify funding needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a supplementary from Beatrice Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Thank you Presiding Officer. I am sorry, but there is something wrong with the camera. I do not know what is wrong with it. I have a blank screen.

I should, before I ask my question, declare that I have a family member who is a volunteer with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

The regional secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, John McKenzie, said that he found Shetland's Bressay fire station to be

"the worst station I have seen in 20 years".

Work is urgently needed to bring stations up to an acceptable standard for our emergency services crews. In advance of the winter months, what will the Scottish Government do to ensure that the fire stations in Shetland will be supported and that the facilities receive urgent attention?

Siobhian Brown: The safety and welfare staff in the SFRS continue to invest in the repair and maintenance of its buildings so that it can deliver services to communities across Scotland. I know that the SFRS has a programme of fire station refurbishment, where dignified facilities for all firefighters, along with proper separation of areas to avoid contamination, are priorities. It is right and sensible for the SFRS to consider where its assets should be based to ensure that the right resources are in the right place to deal with the risks that our communities face. I am happy to write to Beatrice Wishart specifically about the Shetland case.

Legal Aid

5. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to recent reports that many towns in Scotland are so-called legal aid deserts. (S6O-04069)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The number of active legal aid solicitors has remained broadly similar in the years since 2020, and we are unaware of any accused being released as a result of being underrepresented. We acknowledge that people seeking help in relation to certain types of cases face challenges in some places. However, we cannot compel private solicitors to undertake work.

We recognise that reform is needed, and the Scottish Legal Aid Board is currently undertaking a comprehensive analysis to collect evidence of the degree of legal aid activity at geographical and subject matter level. I have written to the Law Society of Scotland and the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association, asking them to continue to work

productively to identify measures to improve and reform Scotland's legal aid system.

Carol Mochan: Over recent years, legal aid organisations have called for serious reform, citing a system that has been left in a state of neglect. Their calls have been frustrated by a Government that has failed to recognise the need for immediate action. In recognising the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, does the minister accept that a failure to deliver both short and longer-term reforms to the legal aid system poses significant risks to vulnerable groups in our society, particularly victims of domestic abuse?

Siobhian Brown: I acknowledge—I have been up front on the parliamentary timetable—that it is unlikely that primary legislation and legal aid reform will happen in this parliamentary term. However, I am committed to making legal aid reform within the next 18 months.

Legal aid needs to be better able to identify and anticipate the needs of service users to allocate resources where they are most needed and to ensure that it is accessible, consistent and transparent and has a clear focus on delivering policy objectives. That work is on-going and a paper on legal aid reform will be published imminently.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementary questions. I will get them both in if they and the responses are brief.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Significant changes were previously made in England and Wales which reduced both the scope and the resources for legal aid compared with those in Scotland. Has the minister considered replicating that or does the Scottish Government believe that free legal services should be available to those who are most in need?

Siobhian Brown: Unlike England and Wales, where there have been significant cuts to legal aid scope and funding, we have maintained the scope and resourcing of legal aid.

The expenditure for legal aid provides timescales. The expenditure in the financial year 2023-24 was £151 million. That is demand led, and it was £10 million higher than the allocated budget. It was a 12 per cent increase on 2022-23 and a 16 per cent increase from 2019-20.

We do not intend to replicate the changes of the United Kingdom Government with reduced legal aid, but we agree that an independent review of reform is needed.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): One of the drivers of legal aid deserts is the decreasing number of legal aid criminal defence solicitors. The legal aid trainee fund is due to end in March 2025 and the Government says that it is

evaluating the scheme. When will the Government conclude that evaluation, and when precisely can practices expect to know whether support from the fund will continue beyond March 2025?

Siobhian Brown: Regarding the numbers, some of the figures that have been in the local press do not take into account solicitors on joint duty plans. Additionally, they do not include publicly employed public defence solicitors.

The legal aid trainee fund is due to end in March 2025, and learning lessons from previous grant-funding projects such as that is extremely important. The outcome of the evaluation will help to shape and inform any decisions with regard to future traineeship. The fund will finish in March 2025, and then we will evaluate it.

Criminal Court Backlog

6. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is working to clear the criminal court backlog. (S6O-04070)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Significant progress has been made on reducing court backlogs. The number of scheduled trials has fallen by more than 20,000 since January 2022, which is a reduction of more than 48 per cent. That trend continues, and we remain committed to supporting justice partners to drive reform to ensure that our justice system works better for everyone.

Summary case management, which provides a new approach to summary criminal cases, and digital evidence sharing capability, which allows digital evidence to be shared at the earliest opportunity, are examples of reforms that aim to conclude cases more quickly and reduce the time for which victims, witnesses and the accused wait for trial.

Alexander Stewart: Recent analysis conducted by the Public and Commercial Services Union found that 75 per cent of Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service staff felt that their high workload was impinging on their effectiveness and the successful delivery of justice. The justice system is crumbling, and problems are widespread and systemic. What action will the cabinet secretary take to support our staff in the court system to ensure that the long-running backlog is cleared?

Angela Constance: I pay tribute to our hard-working courts and tribunals staff. It is accurate for me to point out to Alexander Stewart that, since 2021, this Government has invested £180 million in court recovery. It is true that our courts continue to be very busy. The level of business has changed and the new baseline will be to get the number of outstanding trials down to around 20,000.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As the chamber fills, I encourage members not to engage in private conversations while portfolio question time continues.

Law Enforcement Resources (Cities)

7. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with Police Scotland to increase law enforcement resources in Scotland's cities. (S6O-04071)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The budget statement, which we will hear shortly, will include details on how we will continue to support our hard-working police officers to keep Scotland's communities safe.

I remind Sue Webber that, in our 2024-25 budget, we provided record police funding of £1.55 billion. The chief constable confirmed that that would allow her to maintain officer numbers at around 16,500 to 16,600, with the figure of 16,600 officers being reached on 4 November.

However, it remains the case that the UK Government's austerity through the back door, via the increase in employer national insurance contributions, will cost our public services. The increase could add around £500 million to public sector costs.

Sue Webber: Edinburgh's population has grown over the past decade, along with complexities in policing the capital. However, that population growth has not been matched by a rise in divisional resources for Police Scotland, which has floated at around 1,100 officers in Edinburgh for most of this year. Maintaining numbers is not enough for the city.

I witnessed the pressures first hand when I went out with officers from Wester Hailes police station in south-west Edinburgh, and the strain became evident to all in the firework-related violence that we saw last month.

What action will the cabinet secretary take to ensure that Edinburgh has policing resources that are fit for a capital and match its growing population? *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for a little less background noise.

Angela Constance: The population continues to increase, not only in the city of Edinburgh but right across the Lothian region, including in my Almond Valley constituency. One of the benefits of having a national police resource is that resources can be deployed to where need is required.

In relation to the very important point that Sue Webber raised about bonfire night this year, during which one officer was injured, I note that someone

was charged for that and that it was an improvement on the 62 injuries to police officers last year. However, one injury is, of course, one too many.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As has been said, this year, we have experienced some very dangerous, harmful and disruptive antisocial behaviour in Edinburgh, undertaken in the main by a very small minority of young people. I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary would engage with Police Scotland partners and MSPs in 2025 to consider any further ways that we can address that together.

Angela Constance: Yes, of course. Although decisions on the deployment of resources are for the chief constable, as of 30 September, Edinburgh's E division had more than 1,100 officers deployed across the city, which is a small increase on the previous quarter.

The independent working group on antisocial behaviour will report to ministers, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Police Scotland by the end of 2024, ahead of publication. I look forward to reading and discussing its findings and recommendations, and I will keep Ben Macpherson informed.

Firework Control Zones (South Lanarkshire Council)

8. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with South Lanarkshire Council regarding potential firework control zones in the local authority area. (S6O-04072)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Act 2022 gave local authorities powers to designate firework control zones. It is for them to decide how they use those powers. This year, four zones were designated by the City of Edinburgh Council.

Statutory guidance is available to support local authorities, and the Scottish Government has made funding available for consulting on and implementing the zones. South Lanarkshire Council has not requested any of that funding or approached my officials about the possibility of doing so.

More broadly, I recognise the nature of problems that are caused by fireworks, and I have written to the United Kingdom Government to ask for a meeting to discuss what more can be done on fireworks regulation.

Clare Haughey: Glasgow City Council offers the option for community requests to be made online in relation to firework control zone consideration, yet South Lanarkshire Council has

no information about the process on its website. Groups in my Rutherglen constituency are interested in learning more about making a community request. Will the minister shed more light on the process and encourage local authorities to share information locally on how to make community requests?

Siobhian Brown: Firework control zone statutory guidance, which was jointly developed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, was issued in June 2023. It makes clear that local authorities should, where possible, establish a local process to give communities the ability to make the case for the designation of firework control zones through a community request.

The format and detail of the community request process will be determined by each local authority. I repeat the encouragement that I have given previously to all local authorities to establish published and accessible details about community request processes.

I hope that the information that I have provided is helpful for Clare Haughey's on-going engagement with South Lanarkshire Council in that regard.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): What discussions has the Scottish Government had with councils that implemented firework control zones in this first year? Will the minister undertake to provide a full report to this Parliament, which spent a great deal of time scrutinising the legislation, on the operation and effectiveness of control zones and the lessons that can be learned?

Siobhian Brown: I have had a briefing with Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service after bonfire night and the implementation of the firework control zones. I have not engaged with the City of Edinburgh Council yet, but I will do so. I am happy to report back to Katy Clark.

Budget 2025-26

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the Scottish budget 2025-26. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:51

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):

I am proud to present a budget that delivers on the priorities of the people of Scotland. Over recent years, our nation has faced an unprecedented range of challenges: Covid, inflation, austerity and Brexit. Today, we can show that we understand the pressures that people are facing. We can choose to come together to bring hope to people, to renew our public services and to deliver a wealth of new opportunities in our economy. This budget invests in public services, lifts children out of poverty, acts in the face of the climate emergency and supports jobs and economic growth. It is a budget that is filled with hope for Scotland's future.

The United Kingdom budget resulted in an increase in funding through the Barnett formula. That is welcome, but let us be clear: after inflation, it represents growth in resource spending—that is, day-to-day spending to pay for services—of only around 1 per cent, year on year. Substantial financial pressures therefore persist.

In the face of a Tory cost-of-living crisis, I am proud of the pay deals that give Scotland's nurses, teachers and public sector workers salaries higher than those in the rest of the UK, and I am proud of the increased social security spending that keeps people out of poverty.

In one way, the UK Government has added to the pressures that Scotland faces, with the increase in employer national insurance contributions. That hike will add well over £700 million to the cost of delivering public services. Despite that, the UK Government seems to be saying that it will reimburse less than half of that cost. It has accepted that it should pay, but it plans to short-change our public services by hundreds of millions of pounds. Even now, though, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has an opportunity to do the right thing. Services in Scotland should not have to suffer. The Chancellor of the Exchequer should pay the full price for her own decisions.

This Government has had to take difficult decisions to manage financial pressures. I set out in my statement in September that that included using some or all of the ScotWind revenues. No one wanted to do that. That money was meant to be used for long-term investment to help to

transform our economy. I was clear that I did not want us to use that cash to fund day-to-day spending, and we have not done so. Members will be pleased to hear that the ScotWind revenues have not been used up in this financial year. Instead, I am able to deploy more than £300 million of ScotWind revenues in 2025-26 for exactly the kind of long-term investment that they should be spent on. That £300 million will deliver substantial investment in jobs and in measures to meet the climate challenge. All of that is an investment in the long-term success of our nation.

Progress for Scotland—that is our promise. However, we can deliver progress for the people of Scotland only if there is a willingness to work together across this Parliament. More than 100 proposals have come from members across the chamber, and I thank Opposition members for their constructive engagement. Other proposals have emerged from the conversations that other ministers and I have had with people, businesses and organisations in communities the length and breadth of our land. We have listened, we have heard people, and we are acting. This is a budget for Scotland by Scotland, so I encourage all members to give it their support.

Eradicating child poverty is our top priority. Our action in the face of need includes policies such as the game-changing Scottish child payment and expanded funding for early learning and childcare. However, we want to go further. This budget will invest almost £800 million more in social security benefits in 2025-26, putting money directly into people's pockets and ensuring that benefits rise in line with inflation.

We also recognise that families having a warm, safe and affordable place to live is critical to tackling child poverty. Far too many families are still in temporary accommodation. Shirley-Anne Somerville has told me about the conversations that she has had with mums who feel the pain of bringing up their kids in inadequate accommodation. That is why we are ramping up action on housing by investing £768 million in affordable homes, which enables more than 8,000 new properties for social rent, mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership to be built or acquired this coming year and returns spending to a level higher than it was at two years ago.

Given the scale of the housing challenge, I will look at all the levers that are available to me to deliver, and I confirm today that we will work with City of Edinburgh Council to unlock more than 800 new net zero homes at its Granton development site.

Housing is, of course, just one strand of our work in tackling poverty. In education, we will provide £120 million to headteachers, to support initiatives that are designed to address the

poverty-related attainment gap. We will also work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to extend free school meals to primary 6 and 7 children from low-income families.

We are determined to go further still. I announce today that we will fund a new initiative that will deliver more breakfast clubs in primary schools across Scotland. They will be called “bright start breakfasts” and will make things a little easier for working mums and dads while also giving more of our kids a better start to their day.

We will help some of the most vulnerable people in our society with new funding of £4 million to tackle homelessness and for prevention pilots.

Following engagement with disabled people's organisations, we are delivering more than £2.5 million to support actions within the disability equality action plan.

All of those steps will help people, but I say to members that, if we want progress on housing, learning, free school meals and breakfast clubs, this Parliament has to vote for it.

We know how important public services are to quality of life and the success of our nation, and none more so than our health service. Therefore, my biggest financial commitment today is to our national health service. Today's budget provides a record £21 billion for health and social care, which is an increase of £2 billion for front-line NHS boards and is a record uplift. That money will make it easier for people to access general practitioner appointments, will improve accident and emergency services and will ensure that more Scots get the care that they need in good time. No public service is more important, and no budget has delivered a bigger vote of confidence in the NHS than this budget.

Neil Gray has spoken to me about the pressures across the health service. We know that many people's experience of the NHS is excellent but that others' experience falls short of what we expect. Therefore, today, I am investing almost £200 million in our plan to reduce waiting times and improve capacity, to reform the service and make it more efficient, and to remove blockages that keep some patients in hospital for far too long.

Because of today's record funding, our health service can reduce waiting times. By March 2026, no one will wait longer than 12 months for a new out-patient appointment, in-patient treatment or day-case treatment. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: The extra funding that we are providing will see more than 150,000 extra patients treated. Our record investment will also deliver additional support for GPs, targeted to

address known pressures in relation to waiting times and prevention. It means that we can deliver on our commitment to increase social care spending by 25 per cent over this parliamentary session—a full two years earlier than planned. We will expand the hospital at home service with more than 600 extra beds. We will deliver an extra 20,000 cataract and other optometry procedures in the community and more than 6,000 additional hip replacements or similar procedures each year. That record increase in spending will fund more dental training places, new specialist long Covid nurses in clinics and more community-based support for teenage mental health.

However, it is not just the day-to-day resource spending that will increase—we are also increasing health capital spending. I can announce to members today that this budget will fund the replacement of the eye pavilion in Edinburgh, the Belford hospital in Fort William and Monklands hospital in Airdrie. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, might I just stop you there? There should be no interventions or interruptions from members. We have a lot to get through this afternoon, and I am keen that we save time for members' questions.

Shona Robison: Every single project is a priority for the people of Scotland, and every project is something that members in the chamber have called for—delivered by this budget and by this Scottish National Party Government. However, I say again that, if members want investment in GPs, dentistry, long Covid nurses and young people's mental health, they must vote for it.

Many services, from schools to social care, are delivered in partnership with local government. Here, I will set out a second record funding settlement. In 2025-26, the Scottish Government will increase local authorities' funding by more than £1 billion. That will take their total funding to more than £15 billion, including £289 million to give real-terms protection to the general revenue grant, enabling councils to deliver the services that people rely on. It will also deliver the pay increases that have been agreed for our teachers, social care workers, refuse collectors and more. I remind members that pay increases will go ahead only if Parliament backs the budget. Although it will be for councils to make their own decisions, with record funding, there is no reason for big increases in council tax next year.

Scotland will thrive as a nation only if our youngest people are nurtured. I am therefore increasing spending on education and skills by 3 per cent above inflation, which is an uplift of £158 million. Our choices will see staff in early learning and childcare paid at least the real living wage from April. That will support the 1,140 hours of

early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. In a cost of living crisis, that funding frees parents to work and earn while giving kids the best start in life.

I have heard from Jenny Gilruth about the challenge that many children with additional support needs face in our schools. I will fund a £29 million ASN plan, which will deliver measures such as training, so that more of our teachers can become ASN teachers. More widely, the budget can maintain teacher numbers at 2023 levels and continue improvements in our school estate, with new projects from Shetland and Orkney to the Scottish Borders.

We will invest almost £4.2 billion across the justice system in 2025-26. That will maintain police numbers and continue policies that have seen levels of crime fall by 40 per cent since we came to office. From speaking to Angela Constance, I know that a particular area of concern to retailers is shoplifting. Once again, we have listened and we are acting by making an additional £3 million available to help to tackle retail crime. On prisons, we will fund replacements for HMP Inverness and HMP Barlinnie through the £355 million capital budget.

As I have set out, investment in public services is a priority, but reform goes hand in hand with that. I am therefore establishing a £30 million fund to invest to save. It will fund the costs of reform, drive out efficiencies, improve productivity and ensure longer-term sustainability.

I am also intent on putting pay on a sustainable footing. Our public sector pay policy, which has been published today, sets out a fair but flexible approach. It will deliver an above-inflation increase of 9 per cent over the next three years, and it will do so flexibly, with management and unions being free to agree how that increase will be structured. That will deliver progress on pay restoration and fairness to public servants and taxpayers alike.

Scotland's biggest contributions to tackling the global climate challenge are, of course, our vast renewable energy resources, our innovation and our expertise. Simply put, we can help the planet while creating new jobs and opportunities here at home—and I saw a great example at Logan Energy this morning.

We will create opportunities for businesses and jobs for communities by allocating £25 million to support the creation of new jobs in the green energy supply chain here in Scotland. To help people at home and work, £300 million will be invested in upgrading heating and insulation. That money serves two hugely important purposes: it helps us to reduce our carbon emissions while tackling fuel poverty. Lower emissions and lower

energy bills: that is an investment that is worth making.

Just as we are investing in tackling the climate crisis, we must also tackle the nature crisis. We will invest almost £90 million to protect, maintain and increase our woodlands and peatlands.

We will make it easier for people to walk, wheel or cycle, and we will invest in resilient and efficient bus services, with almost £190 million of funding. We will also expand our electric vehicle charging network.

I am happy to tell the Parliament today that we will not simply match the calls for £4.7 billion to be invested in tackling the climate and nature emergencies: rather, we will exceed that, with an investment totalling £4.9 billion.

Eradicating child poverty is this Government's most important priority. We will do that by growing the wealth of our nation and sharing that wealth more equally. A thriving economy is not an afterthought—it is an essential requirement. When I was discussing budget priorities with Kate Forbes, she told me about the discussions that she has had with investors and with employers, big and small. We have heard their ambition, and we share it. Today I am able to announce that we will invest £321 million in Scotland's enterprise agencies, thereby supporting emerging tech, including artificial intelligence and robotics, and programmes such as our ambitious Techscaler initiative.

We know that colleges, universities and the wider skills system make absolutely crucial contributions to economic growth, which is why, in this coming year, we will invest more than £2 billion in supporting them. We have listened to universities, and we are conscious that they must remain financially competitive with institutions in the rest of the UK. The Labour UK Government, rather shamefully, has increased student fees to pay for a 3.08 per cent increase in university funding in England. Here, we will not only keep tuition free, but will increase total investment in higher education by 3.5 per cent.

Critical to economic growth is capital spending and investment in infrastructure. I can tell the Parliament today that capital spend will total more than £7 billion pounds in this budget. A green reindustrialisation of Scotland is our ambition. After discussion with Gillian Martin, I can announce that we will use that capital funding to make a significant strategic decision to invest in this nation's green future. I can announce today that we will almost triple our investment in offshore wind, to £150 million next year. That money will help to leverage in private investment of £1.5 billion in the infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to growing the sector.

Capital funding of £150 million will accelerate our investment to support the offshore wind sector, which underlines our commitment to investing up to £500 million over five years.

Aberdeen is perfectly placed to become a global hub for green energy. To support that, we will establish a Scottish Government hub for offshore wind in the north-east to provide an additional route for industry to engage with our teams.

More broadly, we will provide £100 million for digital connectivity, thereby accelerating access to full fibre broadband. We will provide almost £1.1 billion to maintain and renew our rail infrastructure, and £237 million will be invested to maintain and improve our ports, and to deliver a more resilient and effective ferry fleet, new rail rolling stock, new ferries and the electrification of the East Kilbride rail line—all of which is investment to keep Scotland moving.

To ensure that our trunk road network is safe, resilient and efficient, we will invest £1 billion, including money to continue the dualling of the A9, which is a central priority for Fiona Hyslop and for all SNP members.

Our capital programme allows us to tackle another issue that has been raised with us. I know that many people want to see their local high streets thrive, so today I can announce that I will expand regeneration funding to £62 million to invest in towns and communities including Dundee, Arbroath, Possilpark, Pitton, Drumnadrochit and Stranraer town centre.

Our rural communities are also important, so more than £660 million will support the crucial contribution of Scotland's farmers, crofters and the wider rural economy. Mairi Gougeon has told me about the discussions that she has had with the farming community and its concerns about recent UK Government decisions. As has been asked for by farmers, we are returning in full the savings that were used in previous Scottish budgets through a new capital transformation scheme, with £20 million to be returned in 2025-26 and the remainder in 2026-27.

The budget also increases to £50.3 million the dedicated funding that is available to the four councils that operate their own ferry services. Alongside that is £20 million of capital funding for Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council. The one-off investment will enable them to sustain and improve interisland connections, whether that means flights, ferries or—I know that members for the northern isles will be pleased to hear this—tunnels between islands. It will be for those communities to decide.

The budget will support businesses and communities through the non-domestic rates system. We have listened to concerns from

business, particularly hospitality businesses, about significant financial pressures resulting from staff shortages, high energy prices and Labour's national insurance hike. I can confirm that we will help. The small business bonus scheme, which provides the most generous small business rates relief in the UK, will be protected. In addition, the budget will provide 40 per cent in non-domestic rates relief in 2025-26 for the 92 per cent of hospitality premises that are liable for the basic property rate, to be capped at £110,000 per business. On our islands, the relief will be 100 per cent.

Outside the hospitality sector, we will also help by freezing the basic property rate at 49.8p—which is the lowest such rate in the UK for the seventh year in a row. Thanks to the budget, more than 95 per cent of non-domestic properties will pay lower property tax than they would pay anywhere else in the UK, with more than 100,000 properties being taken out of rates payment altogether.

The latest Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts show that Scottish taxes will raise £24.6 billion in 2025-26, which is £777 million more than had been forecast in December 2023, which is due mainly to an increase in forecast income tax revenue. I am sure that members will be pleased to hear the good news that that increase is, in part, due to average earnings growing faster here than they are in the rest of the UK. *[Shona Robison has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

Overall, the tax decisions that we have taken have delivered £1.7 billion more in 2025-26 than if we had followed UK policies. I thank those with the broadest shoulders who are paying a little bit more, because they are enabling Scotland to spend more on the things that matter most—protecting and improving our NHS, growing the economy and lifting children out of poverty.

The new UK Government has increased employer national insurance contributions—a policy the impact of which the Office for Budget Responsibility has told this Parliament will fall mainly on employees' wages. It is estimated that that will take more than £2 billion out of the Scottish economy next year. In the light of that, I confirm that the Scottish Government will not introduce any new bands for, or increase the rates of, Scottish income tax for the remainder of this parliamentary session.

I will go further. Because Labour has hit the pay packets of working people in Scotland, I have decided to provide tax support for low-income and medium-income earners. Although the UK Government has frozen all income tax thresholds, the basic and intermediate rate thresholds in Scotland will increase this year by 3.5 per cent—in effect, twice the rate of inflation. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

Shona Robison: That means that more of people's money will be taxed at the starter and basic tax rates. It also means that the majority of taxpayers in Scotland will continue to pay less income tax than those in the rest of the UK. I commit to that remaining true until at least the end of this parliamentary session while, as in the rest of the UK, thresholds for higher, advanced and top rates will be maintained at their current levels.

Taking our tax and social security choices together, including the choice on pension-age winter fuel payments, 60 per cent of Scots will be better off because they live in Scotland. That is what delivering for the people of Scotland looks like.

Finally on tax, the additional dwelling supplement rate for next year will increase from 6 per cent to 8 per cent with effect from tomorrow, unless legal missives were signed on or before today. We will also match England by legislating to increase the standard rate of the Scottish landfill tax to £126.15 per tonne and the lower rate to £4.05 per tonne from 1 April 2025.

We have listened to people in communities across our land, and we have heard them and acted. We have heard, in particular, the concerns of the culture sector. It rightly flags the threat that the Tory cost of living crisis, inflation and Labour's national insurance hike pose to its future, but the SNP Government will help. Earlier this week, Labour called on me to deliver a £25 million increase in the culture budget and to exempt music venues from non-domestic rates. Yes—we will provide NDR support to music venues, but I will not increase the culture budget by £25 million. Instead, I will increase it by £34 million next year, which is another record increase. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

Shona Robison: We are committed to increasing arts and culture funding by £100 million. After only two years, we are halfway there. Next year, subject to the normal budget processes, I aim to deliver a further £20 million increase. Taken with this year's rise, that means that multiyear funding can be provided to cultural organisations across Scotland, which Angus Robertson has told me will be transformational for the sector. That includes our world-class Scottish festivals, whose budget we are doubling, and thousands of grass-roots artists, who will also benefit from that support.

I have one final announcement to make in this budget statement. Our first priority is tackling child poverty. The two-child cap is a pernicious part of the UK welfare system. Introduced by the Tories, it has caused misery for children and families in Scotland. Many people expected an incoming

Labour Government to abolish the cap. We have waited, but Labour has not delivered. The SNP Government will. Just as with pension-age winter heating payments, we will act. We will mitigate the two-child cap.

The detailed work of building the system to do that will start with this budget, but implementation requires the co-operation of the UK Government. It controls the Department for Work and Pensions, which means that it controls the data. We do not, but we have a year. We will work as hard as possible in 2025 so that we can start paying families as early as possible in 2026. That is more than reasonable, but members should be in no doubt that the cap will be scrapped.

My challenge to Labour is to work with us and to join us in ending the cap in Scotland by giving us the information that we need. However, either way, let me be crystal clear: this Government is ending the two-child cap and, in doing so, will lift more than 15,000 Scottish children out of poverty.

Let me summarise the measures that the SNP Government has set out today: record NHS investment, including money to reduce waiting lists and make it easier for people to see their GP; tax choices that put money in the pockets of low-income and middle-income earners and that help hard-pressed local pubs and restaurants; winter heating payments for older Scots; more affordable homes; investment in childcare and nursery education through more jobs and business growth; more breakfast clubs in our schools; £4.9 billion for positive climate action; a record increase in funding for local services; transformational increases in culture spending; and an end to the two-child cap, which will lift 15,000 children out of poverty. That is what the people of Scotland want and will vote for. The question is whether Opposition parties will, too.

This is a budget that delivers progress for Scotland. It is a budget that delivers hope for Scotland. I urge the Parliament to support it.

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

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Today's budget was a chance for the SNP to set a new direction on tax and spending. It was an opportunity for John Swinney to undo some of the damage that he has done to Scotland over the past 17 years. However, the budget is just more of the same—inputs, not outputs, and half-hearted attempts to fix the problems that the SNP has created.

The era of high tax and free spending is far from over. Once again, people in Scotland will pay more and get less. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: Thanks to the SNP, workers and businesses will pay more in tax, only for that money to be wasted by SNP ministers who let public services decline.

What a boast it was today to say that, under a new policy, people will have a 12-month wait for an in-patient or out-patient appointment in our NHS. That is a scandal, and John Swinney's fingerprints are all over it.

The SNP's economic mismanagement has held Scotland back. Is it not the reality that the only growth in the economy is in the size of the SNP Government and the scale of the black hole at the heart of its finances? The reality is that we are paying a heavy price for years of SNP waste on ferries, gender reforms, failed independence bids and a national care service that has already cost the nation £30 million.

The benefits bill, which will rise by a further £800 million, is out of control because the Government cannot get people back into work. NHS waiting lists are so long that sick people are staying sick. The budget confirms that the SNP has wrecked public services. John Swinney is out of ideas, and his Government is running out of time.

The NHS is on its knees and needs urgent reform, so we welcome today's budget increase for healthcare—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: —but our NHS needs more than money; it needs leadership and a serious plan from the Government. We have set out proposals to reduce bureaucracy so that more can be invested in accelerating treatment on the front line. Will the SNP make those necessary changes, or is its only solution more money, which has not reduced waiting lists one bit to date? Was the Auditor General for Scotland not right when he said that the Government has no vision for the NHS? The Government now has record levels of revenue and tax receipts, but it has no vision for Scotland, for our NHS or for economic growth. In fact, a £33 million cut to the enterprise budget was announced today.

I am pleased that, after years of failing to hand over rates relief to Scotland's struggling businesses, the SNP has in part met our demand for rates relief for hospitality, but why did it take so long? How many pubs and restaurants have gone to the wall in the interim? Why has retail been left out of the announcement? Hard-pressed householders will also face more pain in the form

of council tax rises, as the Government sweeps away the council tax cap to make up for the SNP's decade and more of underfunding councils.

Our income taxes are still the highest in the UK, so why has the Government not listened to those who warn that Scotland's high-tax regime and high tax rates are hitting growth? Rather than just tinkering with thresholds, why did the Government not take up the option of reversing its damaging tax increases? Why did the minister not come to the chamber and admit what everyone else in Scotland can see—that the SNP's experiment of hitting Scotland with higher taxes has failed monumentally?

Shona Robison: Let me welcome what I think is a welcome for the record investment in the NHS, although the issue is not just the investment but where the money is spent. As I said in my statement, reform, efficiency and productivity are at the heart of that investment, and I assure members that the Minister for Public Finance is driving that across the Government.

I will correct Craig Hoy on a number of points. More than half of Scottish taxpayers will pay less under the Government's proposals. He also talked about sustainability and the benefits bill being out of control. What is out of control is his leader's letter calling for £1 billion of tax cuts. Let us imagine the impact of that on fiscal sustainability—less money for investment in our public services, less money for the NHS, less money for local government and less money for other services.

When it comes to retail premises, I have set out an affordable proposition for hospitality businesses that will mean that about 11,000 hospitality businesses benefit. I say to Craig Hoy that going further would not be sustainable. His proposition would cost more than £350 million, and we would not get that money from the UK Government. We got only £145 million this year in consequentials, and there will be no consequentials next year, because the UK Government is moving to a different business tax rate system that cannot be replicated here. The Scottish Government is taking sensible, sustainable decisions on business rates, taxation and investment in public services.

As for council tax rises, we are making a record level of investment in local government. I am sure that local government will welcome that.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The budget benefits from an additional £5.2 billion from the UK Labour Government. In July, the people of Scotland turned the page so that Labour could end austerity and take the tough decisions to deliver urgently needed investment in our public services.

That means that today we have the opportunity to take a new direction in Scotland. It is not just a

question of how we spend £5 billion; it is a question of how we spend an unprecedented £60 billion budget. It is an opportunity to deal with the country's challenges and deliver better outcomes, rather than trumpeting a shopping list of inputs. If only the Scottish Government had the imagination to take that new direction.

Instead, in recent days, the SNP has invited us to stretch our imaginations, to suspend disbelief and to accept that this is John Swinney's first budget. The First Minister is supposedly now the fresh-faced ingénu of Scottish politics—a break from the past that he would like the country to forget. In reality, John Swinney has personally delivered 11 SNP budgets from that very spot, and for all that time they have hidden behind grievance and blaming a dreadful Tory Government.

However, today must finally be the day when the excuses end, because today's budget lands in the midst of a rapidly escalating crisis in our NHS, from Aberdeen to Glasgow and everywhere in between. The frost has barely bitten, but the predictable—indeed, predicted—crisis is unfolding. The Auditor General has set out in the starkest terms possible that that is a failure of this Government. He is repeating his warnings of 12 months ago with added feeling, and that feeling is that he is banging his head against a brick wall. It is abundantly clear that nothing of any effect has been done—no reform, no vision, no plan.

Scotland is going in the wrong direction under the SNP. One in six Scots is on an NHS waiting list. Schools are falling further behind. There is a national housing emergency. Growth is lagging behind that in the rest of the UK. Every Scottish institution is weaker.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is not enough just to try to correct the mistakes that were made last year by putting back the money that was slashed in the budget or in the cuts chaos of the now-annual SNP emergency budget in the middle of the year? Can she finally accept that her statement amounts to quite literally more of the same and is sending Scotland ever faster in the wrong direction?

Shona Robison: I must have missed the welcome for the record funding for the NHS, the record funding for local government and the funding for affordable housing. Michael Marra started by talking about the funding from the UK Government, and there is indeed an uplift in funding, which is very welcome, but it is theoretical unless that money gets to front-line services, and the only way in which it can get to front-line services is if members vote for the budget. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: There is huge interest in questions this afternoon. If I have to keep

interrupting so that we can hear one another, members will have to understand that there will be a consequence, in that we will be able to take fewer members.

Shona Robison: Michael Marra mentioned something about the frost biting. Let me say this to him: surely Labour is not going to vote against winter fuel payments for our pensioners for a third time in a row—surely not, because that really would lack a lot of credibility. Surely Labour is not going to vote against the measures that we are taking to mitigate the two-child cap. I hope that, among all the froth from Michael Marra, he and his colleagues will recognise that the budget puts money into front-line services, lifts kids out of poverty and gives our pensioners the winter fuel support that they need. I cannot imagine a scenario in which Scottish Labour will vote against that.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The £4.9 billion for climate and nature sounds positive and I will read with interest what it contains, but it cannot be padded out with greenwashing. I am glad to see free bus travel for asylum seekers and free ferry travel for young islanders. Both those commitments were secured by the Greens when we were in government but were cut by the SNP this year, so I am glad that those cuts have been undone. I am also glad that the Government has agreed to the Green proposal to increase tax on the purchase of second and holiday homes.

Despite the cabinet secretary's claims, the budget contains a huge cut to core council services such as schools and social care. It fails to expand free school meals to pupils in primary 6 and P7. It cuts the nature restoration fund and the cycling, walking and safe routes funding, and the efforts to make homes warmer and greener fall short by £250 million.

I will not dismiss the positive steps that have been taken, but does the Scottish Government accept that, if it wants Green support, significant further changes will be required? The budget will need to do much more for people and planet.

Shona Robison: I do not accept that. I ask Ross Greer to look carefully at the budget. For example, he should look at table 4.12, which sets out the local government settlement. Because the budget compares with the autumn budget revision position—which is something that the Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee wanted for the committee process—there needs to be a recognition of the in-year transfers that happen, particularly from health and education. All that is set out in table 4.12, which shows the £1 billion of extra investment in local government. I urge Ross Greer to look at that.

I welcome the welcome that Ross Greer has given to the very substantial investment of £4.9 billion in positive climate action. I am sure that Green colleagues will welcome that, and I am happy to continue to discuss with him and others the content of the budget.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): After 17 years, this country is badly off course and, if we are honest, we know that the only thing that will truly bring about the change that Scotland needs is a change of Government.

In the meantime, Liberal Democrats will work hard to unpick some of the damage that has been done. It is right that the Government has listened to us and included spending on social care, affordable homes, insulation, winter fuel payments for pensioners, additional support needs, ferries and tunnels, GPs, dentists, long Covid, mental health, Edinburgh's eye pavilion, the Belford hospital and business rate relief for hospitality. Liberal Democrats demanded spending for all those areas, and that is in the budget.

However, let me be clear: that does not guarantee our support. As with all budgets, the devil will be in the detail, and we will look closely at that.

In previous years, the SNP has done this dance many times. At the start of the process, it says that it has spent all the money, only to find huge amounts of cash down the back of the sofa as we move forward. Will the cabinet secretary dispense with that charade, be clear with Parliament now and tell us how much she has kept in reserve and what she is willing to do with it?

Shona Robison: First, I welcome Alex Cole-Hamilton's welcoming of some of the contents of the budget. I started the budget statement by talking about the engagement that we have had across the Parliament. I think that I have managed to speak to most of the issues that have been raised by members across the Parliament, perhaps with the exception of those raised by the Tories, who came to the process with a £1 billion list of tax cuts. Most other members and parties have taken a very constructive approach to the process. Given that we are a minority Government, that is how we need to proceed. I am keen to continue to have engagement across the Parliament.

With regard to Alex Cole-Hamilton's final comment about unallocated resources, the only unallocated resources will be in the ScotWind territory. However, we would not, I would have assumed, want to invest all the ScotWind money in one financial year. That funding can be invested over a number of financial years, and we are keen to talk to members about that.

Let us keep talking. At the end of the day, we need support across the Parliament, and I think that what I have put on the table today should garner that support.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for that statement and for the SNP Government's continued support of Scots.

A number of mitigations were already in place to alleviate Tory Westminster austerity, and, today, additional measures have been taken to alleviate UK Labour austerity. Personally, I am heartened to see the growth plans for housing, enterprise agencies, digital connectivity, artificial intelligence and robotics, skills, roads, the invest to save fund, capital spend, offshore wind and supply chain and, most of all, the protection of ScotWind funds.

Which areas does the cabinet secretary believe will add most to ensure that Scotland's economy prospers and make this Scottish budget a budget for growth?

Shona Robison: I think that there is a lot in this budget for growth. For a start, the investment in green energy is very important. The investment in our enterprise agencies is also important, as is the investment in our trade offices. When I visited an energy company this morning, I heard about Scottish Development International's support for that company. That support has been crucial in its securing investment into Scotland on a global stage. The Tories want to remove that spending from the budget. It is very strange for a party that is supposed to support economic growth to want to prevent one of our key agencies from doing the good work that it does with companies such as Logan Energy. That is inexplicable.

Michelle Thomson will be pleased to hear that the budget will also help to provide a positive future for Grangemouth, by providing £7.7 million to support work to secure a long-term and sustainable future for the industrial cluster. I am happy to keep engaging with her on that point.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In her statement, the cabinet secretary talked about the need for a thriving economy. That is very welcome, because Scotland's low growth, compared with that of the rest of the UK, has cost our economy £11 billion since 2011. However, the budget cuts spending on the enterprise portfolio by a further £33 million. Coming on top of last year's cuts, that delivers a cut over two years of £100 million, or 20 per cent, in the budget for the Deputy First Minister's portfolio. How will that help to grow the economy?

Shona Robison: As I said to another member in an earlier answer, Murdo Fraser should be cautious about the comparison with the ABR figures. He should look at where some of that

transfers. Areas have been transferred out of the Deputy First Minister's portfolio into other areas, and we have to be absolutely clear about that. I will write to Murdo Fraser with the detail of that and with detail of the investment in the Scottish National Investment Bank, which is a hugely important investment.

Murdo Fraser talked about figures relating to the Scottish economy. I laid out some of the tax revenue gain in my statement, which I think is very positive. Productivity has grown by a higher average rate than that of the UK. Gross domestic product per capita has been growing at a faster rate than that of the UK since 2007. A record number of foreign direct investment projects were secured in Scotland in 2023, maintaining Scotland's position as the top-performing area of the UK outside of London for the ninth year running. However, those projects have been put at risk by the Tory cuts to Scottish Development International. We also have net migration to Scotland across all tax bands. That says to me that the Scottish economy is resilient and doing well. We should get behind it and support our businesses.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It will come as welcome news to my constituents in Coatbridge and Chryston, as well as to people in Neil Gray's Airdrie and Shotts constituency, to hear that the increase in NHS capital funding will allow for the new Monklands hospital replacement project to go ahead. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with NHS Lanarkshire with regard to that announcement, and what are the Government's expectations on the progression of the project, which is urgent and very much needed for the people of Lanarkshire?

Shona Robison: NHS Lanarkshire will prepare the full business case for scrutiny by the Scottish Government's capital investment group. That is the normal process. Officials will liaise with the board regarding funding for that business case and design work. All that will now go forward at pace, and I know that the people of Lanarkshire will very much welcome the investment.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): At the start of the SNP Government, health spending per head of population was 17 per cent higher in Scotland than it was in England. Over the past 17 years, that difference has been eroded to less than 3 per cent. That tells you all that you need to know about the SNP's priorities. Less money was given to the NHS over the entire time that John Swinney was either the finance minister or the Deputy First Minister. The £2.5 billion for health from the Labour UK Government is welcome and transformational, but it needs to be accompanied by reform and political leadership. Does the

finance secretary understand why people do not trust the SNP to deliver reform, given that it has been in charge for 17 years and has completely failed NHS staff and patients?

Shona Robison: Of course, the £2.5 billion funding for the NHS only gets to the NHS if members vote for this budget. As for the £21 billion record funding, Jackie Baillie fails to mention that it includes social care funding, which is absolutely vital if we are to tackle delayed discharge and look at the system as a whole system, including both the NHS and social care. That is why we have put record investment into social care, including, of course, by ensuring that our social care workers get the pay that they deserve.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary advise how this SNP budget will provide increased support for local government and the delivery of vital public services under its responsibilities, including for my local authority, East Ayrshire Council?

Shona Robison: The local government settlement provides record funding of more than £15 billion, including £289 million of general revenue grant for local priorities. Individual local authority allocations will be provisionally published in the local government finance consultation circular on Thursday 12 December.

We will invest £3.3 million in the learning estate investment programme and the Scotland's schools for the future programme. In East Ayrshire, those programmes will support the Doon valley community campus, St Sophia's primary school, the Barony campus, Gargieston primary school, Hurlford primary school, Muirkirk primary school, Whatriggs primary school and the William McIlvanney campus.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecast told us that social security spending was predicted to increase from £6.283 billion in 2024-25 to £6.861 billion in 2025-26. That is an increase of £578 million, whereas the cabinet secretary is saying that the uplift will be £800 million. That is a huge difference, so where on earth is the money coming from to pay for that uplift?

Shona Robison: We see investment in social security as an investment in people and in tackling poverty. I know that Liz Smith and her Tory colleagues do not share that aspiration. In fact, they wanted to cut social security; that was set out by Russell Findlay in his letter. The real risk to fiscal sustainability is £1 billion of tax cuts that removes funding from health, local government, social security and all areas of public spending. That is not just wrong in terms of fiscal sustainability—it is not morally sustainable, either.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In a generally very positive and welcome statement, I am disappointed that, although the ferry service capital allocation rises by an impressive 50 per cent from £158.9 million to £237.1 million, there is no information as yet for my Ardrossan and Arran constituents who are awaiting the long-promised Ardrossan harbour redevelopment. That project is essential to both Arran's lifeline ferry service and the 165 Arran jobs that are directly reliant on the port. Is redevelopment at the forefront of Scottish Government plans? If so, when might we hear some good news as to progress?

Shona Robison: First, I recognise Kenny Gibson's tenacity on this matter. He has campaigned for it for a long time and I assure him that the Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to ensuring that the Arran ferry service is fit for the future, and to finding a solution at Ardrossan that can be delivered in a cost-effective way, reflecting the needs of all the partners involved. The Scottish ministers have been clear that it is vital that the business case to support the harbour upgrade is robust, to give greater certainty on the project costs and the financial packages that are required. We will look to provide updates when notable progress is made, and I will make sure that that is provided to Kenny Gibson in due course.

Daniel Johnson: Allocated skills funding is flat in this budget, at £202 million. Not only does that represent a real-terms cut of 2.4 per cent; it means that spending will be some £50 million or more less than is raised by levy payers in Scotland. When the Government has £5 billion more to spend, does that not undermine attempts to grow jobs and wages? Does it not further undermine employers by spending less on skills than they are being required to pay?

Shona Robison: First, I remind Daniel Johnson that I set out in my statement the increases around the colleges, universities and wider skills system. We will invest more than £2 billion in supporting them. The total investment in higher education will increase by 3.5 per cent. It is not an issue that I remember his colleagues raising at any of the meetings that we have had, but if he wants to follow it up post this budget statement—this is a draft budget that we have to continue to discuss with parties across the chamber—I am more than happy to do that.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As the local constituency MSP, I passionately believe in the significant potential for the development of Granton waterfront to help tackle Edinburgh's housing challenges, to transform the northern part of our capital city for the common good and to deliver economic growth,

new opportunities and multiple positive benefits for existing communities in the area and for our country more broadly. That is why I have worked constructively to highlight all of that to ministers.

I am therefore delighted and grateful that the finance secretary has committed to working with the City of Edinburgh Council to deliver 800 more affordable homes. Can she say more about the Scottish Government's commitment to the development of Granton waterfront as a strategic site and the positive impact that that will deliver for the people of northern Edinburgh and Scotland as a whole?

Shona Robison: Ben Macpherson is absolutely right. This is a big deal for Edinburgh. We will work with Edinburgh over the coming months and we hope to announce details on the deal to support this multiyear project early in the 2025-26 financial year.

I talked in my statement about unlocking 800 new net zero homes of mixed types and tenures; I also spoke about sustainable transport links and placemaking initiatives. This could be a game changer for Edinburgh. I am acutely aware of the housing need in Edinburgh and I think that this is part of the solution and will go a long way to helping with that.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests as an active farmer. Hundreds of farmers stood outside this building less than a week ago calling for fair funding. The SNP said that it would listen. The budget falls significantly short of what NFU Scotland saw as a baseline figure, and the £46 million that was snatched in previous budgets will not be given back in full. This is a budget that, fundamentally, seems to have left our farmers and fishermen abandoned. Is it not the truth that this budget fails to deliver the money that is needed not just for farmers but for the whole of rural Scotland?

Shona Robison: No, that is not true. Through the return of the funding, we will deliver a transformation fund for agriculture and food security. Many of those things are things that the farming community and its representatives have asked for. They wanted the money in capital, and they wanted it in a way that meant it could be spent. That money would be difficult to spend in one financial year, which is why it will be spent over two financial years. However, this is a guarantee to the farmers and to rural Scotland that every penny of that funding will be returned—but, of course, only if the budget passes. If Tim Eagle wants money to go to farmers and to rural Scotland, I suggest that he votes for the budget.

The Presiding Officer: Before I call Emma Roddick, I ask members to resist any temptation to

contribute when they have not been called to speak.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is very welcome that the Scottish Government is continuing to make substantial financial support available to tackle child poverty, including through the Scottish child payment, mitigating Labour's two-child cap and ramping up housing investment without additional funding from the UK Government to do so.

The recent autumn statement by the chancellor was a missed opportunity for Labour to follow our lead in tackling child poverty. Can Shona Robison provide further detail on how the budget helps to progress this Government's priority of ending child poverty?

Shona Robison: I can confirm that this budget is focused on eradicating child poverty, and that is this Government's top priority. That is why we are investing in a package of benefits and payments that is available only in Scotland, totalling £644 million in 2025-26—including the Scottish child payment, with 356,000 children now forecast to be eligible.

Further investment includes the expansion and testing of free breakfast clubs, free school meals provision for primary 6 and primary 7 children in receipt of the Scottish child payment, and continued support for the school clothing grant.

What I have announced today in terms of the progress on scrapping the two-child cap will lift 15,000 children out of poverty—some of the most vulnerable children in our communities. I am sure that that will be welcomed by many across Scotland.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): In real terms, the housing budget was £925 million in 2022-23. It went down to £790 million in 2023-24 and down to £610 million in 2024-25, but it is going up to £770 million for next year. That is like a dodgy black Friday deal in reverse, where retailers inflate their prices to give the impression of a good deal on the day. However, the cost of this is thousands more children in temporary accommodation.

The cabinet secretary previously said that housing was the number 1 priority for additional funding. How can the Government still claim that that is the case in the face of more than £150 million-worth of cuts to the housing budget from 2022-23?

Shona Robison: If Mark Griffin had listened to the housing organisations, he would know that they were asking for the restoration of that funding. That is what this budget delivers. It delivers the restoration of that funding—and, of course, that is in addition to the £80 million that

was already announced in relation to measures to tackle the very issue that Mark Griffin raised about temporary accommodation.

I agree that we need to drive down the number of families in temporary accommodation. This investment will help to do that. However, the investment will get to housing, and to the housing organisations, only if the budget passes, and therefore I hope that Mark Griffin will support it.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Monica Lennon described the two-child cap as the “wrong position”, Pam Duncan-Glancy said that it was “horrific” and Anas Sarwar called it “heinous”.

Does the cabinet secretary share my view that, given that the UK Government has refused to scrap that heinous policy, Labour MSPs must back this budget if they are to have any credibility on tackling child poverty at all, and to lift more than 15,000 kids out of poverty?

The Presiding Officer: I invite the cabinet secretary to respond on matters for which the Government is responsible.

Shona Robison: Kevin Stewart is absolutely right. Actions speak louder than words, and it will be about the actions of those on the Scottish Labour benches and whether they vote for this budget, which, among many other things, takes steps to scrap the two-child cap.

They can either get themselves into the same awkward position that they got themselves into on winter fuel payments, or they can do the right thing by supporting a budget that does the right thing by some of our most vulnerable families. The public will be watching.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): This SNP budget is a damp squib for the north-east. We still have no energy strategy and no just transition plan. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Lumsden.

Douglas Lumsden: The much-trumpeted £500 million just transition fund for the north-east and Moray sees its annual allocation at a paltry £15.9 million next year. It will take decades to stump up at this rate. Of course, that comes after the shameful abandonment last year of the £80 million carbon capture fund. Surprise, surprise—there is no sign of it again this year. Thousands of jobs across the north-east are being lost while this devolved Government defers, dithers and delays. When will the SNP Government deliver a just transition, or will it admit that that was another empty promise to the north-east of Scotland?

Shona Robison: I have never heard anybody so raging at £150 million investment in green energy for the north-east of Scotland. If that is

Douglas Lumsden on a good day, welcoming something, I would not like to see him on a bad day. It is money that will be welcomed by businesses across the north-east of Scotland. Do you know why Douglas Lumsden is so angry? He knows it, too.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I will start by sounding a cautious note of consensus with the Government. I believe that this budget is a step in the right direction. However, many Scottish households are under immense pressure, which is why, in my budget dealings, I sought to protect children and pensioners via winter fuel payments and extending free school meals. I welcome the progress that the Government has made on those two issues.

However, the Government promised in 2021 to provide free school meals for all primary school children, and this budget does not deliver on that commitment. Why not?

Shona Robison: First, I welcome Ash Regan’s welcome of the substantial contents of the budget in relation to winter fuel payments and the two-child cap. We have decisions to make about where we think the investment can make the biggest impact on eradicating child poverty. That is why the Government has concluded that the biggest impact is to lift 15,000 of our most vulnerable children out of poverty through the scrapping of the two-child cap.

Our programme of investment in free school meals will continue, targeting those children in primaries 6 and 7 who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment, and we will go further in the future, as resources are available. However, faced with a choice of what makes the biggest impact for the most vulnerable and poorest children in our society, eradicating the two-child cap wins every time, and that is what we will do.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I recently met Hospice UK, and it was sobering to hear that UK Labour’s national insurance increases will rob Scotland’s hospices of £2.5 million each and every year. Combined with challenges over core funding and matching NHS pay awards, an under-pressure sector needs support. How can today’s budget help Scotland’s hospices?

Shona Robison: I absolutely agree with Bob Doris about the importance of our hospice sector. We will provide £4 million for the hospice sector and, from 2025-26, will align the support that we provide for pay uplifts in the hospice sector to the outcomes of the NHS agenda for change negotiations. I know that that is a really important matter for our hospice sector. That will ensure that hospices get the additional funding that is needed to enable their healthcare staff to receive pay

increases that match those of NHS staff. I hope that Bob Doris and others will welcome that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The budget fails to deliver the change of direction that we need for our schools, colleges and universities. It continues on the Government's failed path, which has led to falling standards, overstretched staff and managed decline. In some cases, it is not even more of the same for the Government—it is less. How on earth will providing less than £1 million each to local authorities in relation to additional support needs and delivering cuts to colleges' and universities' budgets for student support possibly improve outcomes and spread opportunity for all of Scotland's children and young people?

Shona Robison: I say to Pam Duncan-Glancy that the situation is quite the opposite. There is more money in the budget for teachers, there is more money for additional support needs and there is more money—£1 billion more—for local government, which, at the end of the day, is the deliverer of education. We are providing the resources to local government so that it can get on and provide the standard of education that parents and children across the country expect.

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

I welcome the record-high NHS funding that the cabinet secretary announced today. We know that treatment close to home is preferred by many people and is preferable for many conditions. How will the budget enable more people to get the NHS care that they need in or close to their own home?

Shona Robison: Clare Haughey is absolutely right. More than £2.2 billion for primary care will help to deliver essential reform, improve capacity and patient access in local communities and reduce demand on acute services. The budget also supports primary care enhancements and the expansion of the hospital-at-home programme, which has been a huge success.

As I mentioned in my statement, the budget also includes nearly £200 million to reduce waiting times and to help to reduce delays in hospital discharge. It will help to support frailty units that are linked to every accident and emergency department and to support community re-enablement. As I said, it will expand the hospital at home programme to meet 20 per cent of Scotland's NHS bed base by December 2026.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Providing for the safety and security of the public is one of the most important duties of any Government. Although the manner in which money allocated is spent is an operational matter

for blue-light services, can the cabinet secretary provide more detail regarding the funding allocations for Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service?

Shona Robison: We will spend £1.62 billion on policing in 2025-26 and £412.2 million in support of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The money will support capacity, capability and front-line service delivery and will drive key areas of transformation, as outlined in Police Scotland's three-year business plan and estates master plan. That continued resource and capital investment will support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in its ambitious strategic service review programme to better align resources to current and future risks and to continue to keep our communities safe.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): We all read in the paper this morning about the Scottish Government's proposals for affordable housing. That was a key ask of stakeholders, but we cannot ignore the fact that cutting and then reinstating budgets creates instability in the market, as developers simply cannot trust whether that budget will still be in place next year.

We also have to acknowledge that cutting the budget last year caused a huge amount of damage and lost investment in our housing sector. If the cabinet secretary is serious about listening to housing stakeholders, what will she do to encourage developers and developments, and to deliver what developers are calling for, which is to scrap the disastrous rent proposals that will have devastating impacts on our housing sector? Is she confident that the Scottish Government will finally achieve its housing target of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032?

Shona Robison: I welcome Meghan Gallacher's welcome for the investment in affordable housing. It will help to lever in substantial additional resources, not least from the private sector and the funding that can be raised by registered social landlords, to make sure that that money goes as far as it can. The housing will be a mixture of new build, acquisitions and bringing empty homes back into use. We will also make sure that we target a lot of that investment at addressing the issues of temporary accommodation, which I mentioned in my reply to Mark Griffin.

The only other thing that I will say to Meghan Gallacher is that that investment would be put at serious risk if the contents of her leader's letter were enacted, because £1 billion of tax cuts would mean £1 billion less for investment in affordable housing, our NHS and local government. That cannot be reconciled with her party asking for more money for any aspect of public services in Scotland.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The cabinet secretary thanked high-income earners for making the fairer contribution that they do. I am sure that she also wants to thank the Greens for designing Scotland's more progressive tax system, which has raised that extra £1.7 billion a year. The Greens made the case for that while the SNP was still resisting it.

It was also the Greens who led the way on cheaper public transport, especially with the hugely successful bus pass for young people. Will the Scottish Government back our current call for a £2 fare cap for all bus passengers, to make public transport more affordable for everybody throughout the country?

Shona Robison: The £1.7 billion that has been raised through tax revenues is hugely welcome and a really important contribution to public services in Scotland. However, given the pressures on resources, we have asked taxpayers to go as far as we can in the current climate. Given that we have the resources available to us to make those substantial investments, the tax position that I set out in my statement is a balanced position, which recognises the needs of taxpayers and the needs of public services.

In response to Patrick Harvie's question about buses, we have made substantial investment in the bus network in this budget. We are delivering free bus travel for asylum seekers—one of the things that the Greens asked for—and a substantial investment in many areas of positive climate action, amounting to £4.9 billion.

We will continue to have dialogue, but I hope that Patrick Harvie will recognise that this budget is good for the climate with regard to the action that we need to take in Scotland. I hope that he and his colleagues will welcome that.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary mentioned in her statement, Labour issued a press release in which it demanded that the budget provide £25 million more in order for culture and music venues to get 40 per cent business rates relief. Now that the cabinet secretary has announced a game-changing increase of £34 million for culture and delivered 40 per cent relief to grass-roots music venues, does she agree that, if it tries to block that funding, the Labour Party will have some serious explaining to do to the artistic community in Paisley and throughout Scotland? Does she think that the Labour Party will want to follow the example of the UK Labour Government and cut culture funding?

Shona Robison: I agree with George Adam that Labour will have some explaining to do if it votes against the budget—for the whole variety of reasons that I have set out. It is curious that Labour has not quite got round to asking me about

culture funding. I am sure that, if time allows, somebody might ask me, or even welcome the investment in culture that this Government is making through the budget. I am sure that, if we wait long enough, we might just hear that.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Local Government funding is in dire straits. Local authorities have been warning for years that they are on the brink. In her statement, the cabinet secretary said that local government funding has increased, yet the figures show that the budget is nowhere near what local government needs. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Stewart.

Alexander Stewart: How on earth does the budget support local government and councils across Scotland to thrive and survive?

Shona Robison: Here is Russell Findlay's letter. Nowhere in the letter does he ask for more money for local government. He asks for £1 billion of tax cuts. That will mean less—

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, it is one thing to read a letter but another to use it as a prop.

Shona Robison: My apologies, Presiding Officer. In the letter, Russell Findlay asks for £1 billion of tax cuts. He does not ask for £1 billion of funding for local government. I have read it a number of times, but that is not there. It is a bit rich for Alexander Stewart to come here asking for money for local government when his leader is asking for less money for local government and for £1 billion of tax cuts. I think that you really need to get your story straight here.

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Scotland's teachers work incredibly hard, day in and day out, to ensure that our children receive the highest quality of education. How will the Scottish budget support local authorities, including South Lanarkshire Council, to maintain teacher numbers in our schools and to offer permanent contracts to the workforce?

Shona Robison: The budget will help local government to deliver on education. As I have mentioned, it provides more money for teachers and for additional support needs, and it continues the investment in the school estate.

On the investment in teachers, the latest figure that I saw for teacher pay showed that a newly qualified Scottish teacher at the start of their band would earn in the region of £6,132 more after tax than their equivalent south of the border would. That is a good investment in our teaching staff and in education.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The cabinet secretary said that she was restoring the affordable housing budget, but we are in a housing emergency. Does that not mean that we should be doing more than restoring? I see that we are spending £1.1 billion on trunk roads. Does she think that the balance between roads and housing is right?

Shona Robison: On the roads budget, it is important that we have a safe road network, and lot of that funding is essential spend on the maintenance of our road network. We have our commitment to the A9. We have set out the next stages of the A9 dualling project, and we will continue with that work.

On the affordable housing budget, I think that the level set is achievable and deliverable. It will help the sector to scale up in order to deliver on new builds, acquisitions and empty homes and to tackle temporary accommodation. It will enable us to do all of that.

We have spending reviews in the spring for resource and capital. I am keen to see a continuation of investment from the UK Government, particularly in the capital space, and I agree with John Mason in that regard. Once we see what that is, I am more than happy to have a discussion about multiyear funding, particularly in the affordable housing space.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the range of measures that have been outlined in the budget proposal. They will certainly increase economic growth and send the message that Scotland is very much open for business. How will the support and actions that are outlined in the cabinet secretary's budget support businesses in the Inverclyde community?

Shona Robison: The resources that will go to Inverclyde locally will be set out in the circular that I mentioned earlier. Without a doubt, the investment will help many businesses in the Inverclyde area, and I am sure that Stuart McMillan will welcome that. In fact, it will help businesses across the whole of Scotland. It is a significant investment that will reach all parts of Scotland.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The legal aid crisis seems to have been ignored in the budget, with a £14 million real-terms cut compared with 2023-24. What does that signal to those who need a legal aid lawyer in both civil and criminal cases? What allocation is there in the budget to address and sustain the legal aid system to attract new lawyers to the profession? I ask that question not simply in the interests of the legal profession but in that of the system that supports ordinary people who need good-quality representation in

their lives, whether it is for a civil or criminal matter.

Shona Robison: The budget maintains the substantial increases in legal aid fees over recent years to support the vital work of Scotland's legal professionals. The legal aid fund resource budget has been increased to £155 million, which is an increase of almost 10 per cent. The legal aid fund is demand led, and all eligible costs will be met in-year. I think that that might be where Pauline McNeill is looking. Let me assure her that it is a demand-led budget, and that all eligible costs will be met in-year. The legal aid administration budget has been increased to £22.5 million. That additional funding is to support increased operating costs and non-cash budget cover for an accrued pension liability. I hope that Pauline McNeill will welcome that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Staff in private and voluntary nurseries receive a far lower wage than equivalent workers in council nurseries, even though they do exactly the same job. I supported a former First Minister when he promised to close that funding gap. Why is that not in the budget?

Shona Robison: First, I recognise the issue. We have invested significantly in early learning and childcare, including for early learning staff. I understand the points that have been raised by those in the sector, and it is important that they are able to continue to recruit. I am more than happy to follow that up with Willie Rennie in the next stages of our budget discussions.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): North Ayrshire Council has had its budgets cut by £100 million since 2010, with disproportionate cuts to local government over the past 17 years. The council is now consulting on cuts to teacher numbers, on abolishing all school crossing patrollers, and on closing libraries and the Arran outdoor education centre. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the budget, which continues with increased ring fencing for councils, will still mean that more vital public services will be cut in the coming year, or can she give assurance that it is sufficient to address the immediate funding pressures and to start to undo the damage of the past 17 years?

Shona Robison: The budget provides £1 billion extra to local government, but only if it passes. Therefore, I welcome Katy Clark's support for that measure in the budget, and I am sure that she will vote for it.

On the ring-fenced funding, I think from recollection—I will correct this if it is not right—that there is an extra £500 million-plus that is being dering fenced in the local government settlement, which I am sure Katy Clark will welcome. The real-

terms increase in the general revenue grant, the removal of ring fencing and the council tax flexibility will all help with local government funding of local services, and I am sure that Katy Clark will welcome that.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I hope that the cabinet secretary will respond to my question in the spirit in which I ask it. Mental health waiting times, particularly for young people, are shockingly high in Scotland. As we all know, our drug and alcohol deaths are at record and alarming rates.

The devil is very much in the detail of budget announcements. I note that the alcohol policy and mental health service budget lines have attracted marginal increases next year, which I do not believe are proportionate to the urgency and scale of the problems that we face as a nation. Will the cabinet secretary give the chamber some confidence that those serious societal issues are front and centre of the Government's approach to the budget? Will she do what she can as she goes through the budget process to ensure that those in our society who need help are given it?

Shona Robison: I welcome Jamie Greene's constructive tone, and I am very happy to continue to discuss those matters with him. There have been increases to mental health spending. He will recognise that, although it has been a challenge, there has been substantial progress across the country in child and adolescent mental health services performance, which is to be welcomed. In my statement, I mentioned further support for teenagers on mental health support, which I hope he will welcome.

I absolutely recognise the importance of tackling the issues on alcohol and drugs. We are maintaining record levels of funding for drugs and alcohol, and there will be some funding transfers within the year for alcohol and drugs partnerships. I am very happy to continue to discuss those matters with Jamie Greene as we go forward.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Budgets should not just be about spending ever more, or indeed less, money; surely, they should be about achieving far greater value from every pound that is spent.

One in three of the acute beds in the Highlands are currently occupied by people who are at the end of their lives—I see the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care nodding. Highland Hospice reckons that 40 per cent of those people could, and should, be receiving palliative care by other means, normally at home, which is where most people wish to have it. Is the cabinet secretary, as I am, bothered, bemused and bewildered that NHS Highland is not collaborating far more effectively with bodies such as Highland

Hospice, which can provide and arrange palliative care in the community far quicker, far cheaper and far better?

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please answer in relation to the matters that were raised in your statement.

Shona Robison: First, I agree with Fergus Ewing that we need to get maximum value for every pound that is spent in our public services. I reassure the member that the Minister for Public Finance is on that 24/7, not just because he passionately believes in it but because it is the right thing to do on behalf of the Government.

The point about where people are cared for is critically important. In my statement, I mentioned the hospital at home service, which is important in supporting people at home to avoid hospital admissions. I also touched on the important role of the hospice movement, which we are investing in. I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has also asked for more collaboration and for that work to move forward at pace, which I am sure he will update the member on. On the point of principle, I totally agree with Fergus Ewing.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the Scottish budget. *[Interruption.]*

My apologies, Mr Mountain. I am getting ahead of myself. Edward Mountain has the final question.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. You have saved the best until last.

Just £6 million of the £30 million EV infrastructure fund, as announced in 2023, has been spent. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that £24 million will be allocated within the energy efficiency and decarbonisation line, or has it been cut like the mode shift revenue support scheme?

Shona Robison: I am glad that Edward Mountain got his question in, because it enables me to tell him that we have reached our targets on EV charging two years early. I am sure that he will welcome that progress and I thank him for the opportunity to put that on the record. I will continue ensuring that all the elements that are part of our tackling of the climate emergency receive the funding that they require and my statement included a substantial package of investment that will help on all those fronts.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the Scottish budget 2025-2026.

Point of Order

16:25

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance after Patrick Harvie MSP inappropriately suggested earlier today that I was dragging Scotland's culture sector into "Tory transphobic culture wars". His comments followed a question that I raised about Creative Scotland's support for free speech after a member of staff attempted to stop bookshops stocking the work of gender-critical author Jenny Lindsay.

I ask, under rule 7.3.1 of the Parliament's standing orders, whether describing gender-critical views as "transphobic" is in line with the courteous and respectful manner that is expected of members in this chamber. It was disrespectful to the women and girls watching proceedings today. Those comments were shameful.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The Deputy Presiding Officers and I will always protect members' rights to scrutinise and debate and to challenge each other robustly. Challenges to opinions and policy positions are perfectly in order. However, we will not accept members being personally insulting or disrespectful towards one another.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Further to that point of order, I seek reassurance and clarification that challenging transphobia and transphobic views in this chamber is not regarded as a personal insult to anyone.

The Presiding Officer: I have ruled on the matter already and ask members always to ensure that they treat one another with courtesy and respect in this Parliament.

Business Motion

16:27

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-15710, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 10 December 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: 2025 National Improvement Framework and Long-term Strategy for Scottish Education

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Judicial Factors (Scotland) Bill

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Pathways to Global Human Rights: Towards a Stronger Human Rights Culture in Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 11 December 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 December 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:

	Net Zero and Energy, and Transport
<i>followed by</i>	Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Debate: Remote and Rural Healthcare Inquiry
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
Tuesday 17 December 2024	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Wednesday 18 December 2024	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Education (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Financial Resolution: Education (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 19 December 2024	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
12.45 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
1.10 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 9 December 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-15711, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask Jamie Hepburn to move the motion on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2024 Amendment Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

16:28

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The Conservatives will support the motion lodged by Jamie Hepburn, but we do so with some reluctance. I will explain why.

Although we are not opposing this particular set of budget revisions, we have significant concerns about the practices at play here. There are questions to be asked about Government transparency and about whether the Parliament has been able properly to scrutinise the final details of major in-year budget changes. The Scottish Fiscal Commission, Audit Scotland and independent analysts all agree that greater transparency is needed regarding the Scottish Government's budget revisions, because significant proportions of the original Scottish budget are being transferred in-year between portfolios.

I understand that some in-year revisions were required because of United Kingdom events such as the general election and the timing of the budget. However, the Scottish Government itself also made many changes, and those shifts, mostly from the health and education budgets, are now being propped up by a quick-fix funding boost at the heart of the Government's finances.

That practice is problematic for two key reasons. It does not allow for sufficient and accurate parliamentary scrutiny of Government spending and it means that this Government appears to be flying by the seat of its pants in funding our public services. Relying on massive in-year transfers means that the figures presented to Parliament in each year's budget could be construed as being a façade because they do not represent the actual plans, policies and spending intentions of the principal portfolios.

That can mislead the Parliament and the public about the scale and focus of the Government's plans and priorities. For example, a portfolio such as health and social care can be promoted as having received a big funding uplift while the

Government has every intention of re-routing the funding elsewhere.

In summary, we will support the SSI, but questions remain about transparency, scrutiny and the sustainability of the process by which funding is delivered. We have to question whether it is acceptable to move around such significant proportions of public money using only the vehicle of a statutory instrument. We need such questions to be discussed in a wider debate in the Parliament, and I encourage the Government to engage with that process.

16:30

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about the SSI. The Budget (Scotland) Act 2024 Amendment Regulations 2024—which are also known as the autumn budget revision—have already been subject to consideration and scrutiny by the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which took evidence on the SSI in November and approved it to go before the Parliament.

The autumn budget revision provides the first opportunity to formally amend the 2024-25 Scottish budget, and it allocates almost £1.1 billion of additional funds to support our public services. The changes include providing £1,058 million to health to support services and to fund pay rises and changes to employers' pension contributions, £155 million to local government and £35 million to fund police and fire service pensions. It also sets out savings, as announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government in the Parliament in September, that impact underlying budgets. That was required to fund priority areas such as health and to support pay rises in order to avoid strike action.

The autumn budget revision is part of routine parliamentary business and proposes amendments to better align the Government's budget with planned spending profiles. Budget revisions require to be in place to ensure that spending can be taken forward against the full allocated budget. It is not that the additional funding that has been received during the financial year thus far—most significantly as part of the UK main estimates—cannot be taken forward without breaching statutory spending limits.

I and colleagues across the chamber are a bit surprised by Craig Hoy's approach and his rather fruitless attempt to make a political point about the process. In relation to transparency, the Government has provided everything that the Finance and Public Administration Committee asked for. As Craig Hoy well knows, the budget document that the finance secretary has just

talked about includes extensive tables and back-up information to provide transparency. If he is struggling to understand that, we would be very happy to come back to the FPAC to go through it with him one more time.

As is normal practice, I urge the Parliament to support the SSI in order to ensure that the funding that has been received to date is able to be spent on our vital public services.

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

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-15712, on approval of an SSI. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Disability Assistance (Scottish Adult Disability Living Allowance) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

16:33

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-15711, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2024 Amendment Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-15712, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of an SSI, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Disability Assistance (Scottish Adult Disability Living Allowance) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Scots Language (Open University Support)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-15571, in the name of Emma Harper, on Open University support for the Scots language. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that the Open University (OU) in Scotland, in conjunction with Education Scotland, has produced the first of its kind professional learning course for teachers on the Scots language; welcomes the partnership working between both organisations; understands that over 200 teachers have signed up to the course since January 2024 using Scottish Government-funded places; further understands that the course creates a Scotland-wide community of practice where teachers realise the transformative role of embedding Scots language and culture in the classroom; recognises what it sees as the educational, as well as equality, diversity and inclusion, benefits of embedding Scots in the classroom; believes that, with teachers participating from across 12 different secondary subject areas and all primary curricular areas, this demonstrates the strong interdisciplinary potential of teaching Scots; wishes all of the participants every success with their studies; applauds the OU's first research study into the needs and experiences of adult learners of the language, often New Scots, and notes its work in developing Scots and Gaelic language community education for refugees and migrants in the South Scotland region and across the country, as well as the OU's pioneering collaboration with NHS Education Scotland aimed at embedding the Scots language in health and social care to enhance staff and service users' experiences.

The member has provided the following translation in Scots:

Thit the Pairlament recognises thit the Open University (OU) in Scotland in conjunction wi Education Scotland ir produced the first o its kind professional lairmin coorse fir teachers on the Scots Leid; welcomes the pairtnership wirkin atween baith organisations; unnerstauns thit fae January 2024 owre twa hunner teachers hiv signed up tae the coorse, utilisin Scottish Government funded places; further unnerstauns thit the coorse creates a Scotland-wide community o practice whaur teachers realise the transformative role o embeddin Scots language an culture in the cless; further recognises the educational as weel as equality, diversity an inclusion benefits o embeddin Scots leid in the cless; believes thit wi teachers participatin across twal different secondary subject areas an aw primary curricular areas it shaas the strang interdisciplinary potential o teachin Scots an wishes aw participants ivry success wi thir studies; maiowre, applauds the OU's first iver research study intae needs an experiences o adult lairners o Scots – aften New Scots; thir wark developin Scots an Gaelic leids language community education fir refugees an migrants, as weel as the OU's pioneerin collaboration wi NHS Education Scotland aimed at embeddin the Scots leid in health an social care tae enhance staff an service users' experiences.

16:35

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Presiding Officer, loons, quines, bairns and weans, muckle, dreich, drookit, foostie and clartie—these are unique Scots words. Scots is one of the three indigenous languages of Scotland, and I wanted to speak today to again highlight my mither tongue. I thank colleagues across the chamber for supporting the motion, which has allowed the debate to proceed the day. There are monie Scots speakers in this place. Thanks also go to Dr Sylvia Warnecke for providing the briefings ahead of the debate. I welcome Sylvia and her PhD student Linda Bruce to the gallery this evenin. I hope that they made it in time, because they might have expected the debate wis gonnae stert at 5 pm.

Scots is spoken throughout Scotland—fae Shetland tae Stranraer, in the lowlands, in our cities, in our northern isles and, of course, in the north-east, where monie folk ca their Scots variant Doric, or the Doric. In the 2022 census, 1.5 million people in Scotland reported that they can speak Scots and almost 2.5 million reported that they can speak, read, write or understand Scots. That is an increase from 2011, when 1.9 million people reported that they had some skills in Scots.

Scots is spoken on a continuum, which means that some people use more and some people use less. Some people use the occasional word or expression such as “wee”, “peedie”, “scunnert” or “sair fecht”. Some folk, such as ma faither, speak in rich, broad Scots, replete wi its ain unique pronouns, prepositions, grammar and word order. We even hear mair and mair Scots on BBC Radio Scotland. Last year, Jackie Dunbar and I met BBC Scotland’s programme leadership, and—

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: Of course I will.

Jackie Dunbar: I will probably spik in the Doric. I thank Emma Harper for takkin the intervention. She has gone on about Scots contributors makkin a difference. Does she agree that Oor Vyce is also makkin a huge difference in gettin oor Scottish language oot there?

Emma Harper: I thank Jackie Dunbar for that intervention. I was about tae come tae Oor Vyce. I know that Jackie Dunbar attended the event last Friday at the Scottish Poetry Library. Phil Reid and the team are doing a great job in promotin Scots wi the Oor Vyce organisation.

When Jackie Dunbar and I met BBC Scotland recently, we asked the leadership whether they would—or could—encourage the presenters tae yaise mair Scots. It is guid tae hear Michelle McManus and Len Pennie in the afternoons, and

folk will ken Tam Cowan and Stuart Cosgrove fae their show “Off the Ball”. I thank them for enrichin us wi their fitba banter. It helps the listeners tae hear their native language normalised, which reduces discrimination and stigma. That is important.

Following the stage 1 debate on the Scottish Languages Bill, columns were scribed fae the press defending Scots, including by Paul Kavanagh, also known as the Wee Ginger Dug, and our very own member of the Scottish Parliament Dr Alasdair Allan.

There are now so many speakers, srievers, singers and supporters of Scots. Billy Kay, the author and broadcaster, presentit a Scots time for reflection in Parliament in April 2022, and Matthew Fitt, James Robertson and Steve Byrne are also massive contributors. The Scots Language Centre’s Michael Dempster and Laura Green are the secretariat for the cross-pairty group on the Scots leid, of which I am co-convener wi Jackie Dunbar. I thank all the Scots speakers for the work that they do.

Dr Sylvia Warnecke is senior lecturer in languages at the Open University, and she leads the Scots teacher professional learning programme, which was created in conjunction with Education Scotland. Dr Warnecke has undertaken extensive research and teaching in supporting minority and marginalised groups with their linguistic needs, including Scots and deaf communities. She does pioneering work using languages, including Scots, to support the wellbeing of people in care homes, and she upskills overseas social care staff in intercultural literacies and Scotland’s indigenous languages.

To date, the Scots teacher professional learning programme has had 152 fully funded places, which are funded by the Scottish Government, with a further 66 places for 2024-25. The schools in Dumfries and Galloway that are participating in that are Castle Douglas and Kirkcudbright primary schools, St Joseph’s college and the high school in Dumfries, and Douglas Ewart high school in Newton Stewart. The course supports teachers to include and embed Scots language and culture in their classrooms. It creates a Scotland-wide community of practice where teachers realise the transformative role of embedding Scots language and culture in the classroom. I ask the Government to continue to place high importance on continuing to fund the course to ensure continued success.

I will touch on the current research that is being conducted by PhD student Linda Bruce at the OU. Members had the opportunity to meet Linda when I held a Scots language drop-in a couple of weeks ago, and she is undertaking the first-ever study of new speakers of Scots. Her study explores the

backgrounds, motivations, needs and experiences of adult learners of the Scots language. Those are new Scots—refugees and migrants—who are seeking to participate fully in Scottish society. The OU is also developing work on Scots and Gaelic community education for refugees and migrants. There is so much work going on.

Additionally, the OU's pioneering collaboration with NHS Education for Scotland is aimed at embedding the Scots language in health and social care to enhance the experience of staff and service users. I heard directly from author and singer Susi Briggs how, when she provided music matters sessions in care homes, she witnessed increased cognitive function and better cognitive reaction when conversing or singing with older persons with dementia in their native tongue, whether that was English or Scots.

It is clear that the OU is critical in shining a light on Scots, and I thank Sylvia Warnecke and everyone involved. Feedback from one teacher who participated in the professional learning programme stated:

"I realise now—not teaching Scots in Scottish classrooms is doing a disservice to the linguistic landscape of Scotland and its people".

There is lots more that I could say. I am lookin furrin tae the Scottish Languages Bill progressin, and I cannae wait tae hear colleagues' contributions. I hope that together, in the chamber, we can mark the importance of the Scots leid and that the Parliament will pass a strong Scottish Languages Bill to strengthen Scots across the country.

16:42

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank Emma Harper for securing the debate and for her passion in campaigning on the Scots language—it is good to see someone in Parliament taking that forward.

Yesterday, for the first time, a Gaelic poet was appointed as Scotland's makar. It was interesting to see his interview last night on the BBC and other channels, in which he said that he writes in Gaelic and in English and sometimes in Scots. He said:

"We are a multi-lingual nation so it's important to find ways to speak to each other."

Listening to his interview last night reminded me of the time when I first became acutely aware of our cultural tapestry of languages, which was when I left the village of Bankfoot or Auchtergaven in Perthshire to go to the granite city to attend Robert Gordon University.

My first memory is of arriving in the Woolmanhill student flats, where I met my flatmates, who had all headed south from the Broch to study. When I

walked into the student accommodation, the first thing that they said to me was, "Fit like, loon? Far are you fae?" I had no idea what they were asking me at first, but we soon developed great friendships, and I loved learning the Doric at university. My flatmates spoke in the Doric, but only out of university. In university, they very much put on their Queen's English—it would be King's English now. I often thought that they lost part of their culture and identity in doing that.

I will briefly touch on one really important point in the motion, which is about Scots language in health and social care settings. When we were first elected to Parliament, Emma Harper and I were members of the Health and Sport Committee. Because we need to value it, I championed the work that is done in our NHS to ensure that people—especially people with dementia, whom Emma Harper mentioned—can be communicated with. We know that health literacy and the patient experience are important. Older people who live in care homes or who visit GPs often complain that they do not know what they are being told. We need to take that into account, and our health services need to look to do that.

Emma Harper: To pick up on what Miles Briggs said about the NHS, NHS Dumfries and Galloway has introduced a Scots course for the Ugandan nurses so that they can look after patients better. Does he welcome that?

Miles Briggs: I think that that is a great step forward. Last new year, I visited a family friend in a care home in Aberdeen. Lots of international people were working in that care home—that is the nature of care homes—and I think that such work was being done up there, too.

That is an issue that we need to think about. Obviously, it is not the first priority for the NHS, but such work on communication can make a huge difference.

The Scottish Languages Bill gives us an opportunity to take forward that work to make sure that people across Scotland have the confidence to speak in their native tongue and that we are able to preserve and celebrate Scots, which, in this Parliament, is something that we do only on the opening of the Parliament. We do not do it as much as we should.

I welcome the partnership working between the Open University and Education Scotland to produce the first professional learning course for teachers on the Scots language, and I look forward to many amendments being made to the Scottish Languages Bill to ensure not only that we preserve the language but that it is taken up by everyone in Scotland.

16:46

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Emma Harper for securing the debate, and I share her commendation of the Open University for its groundbreaking programme, under the leadership of Sylvia Warnecke, which has been simply transformational.

I was able to attend the event that Emma Harper hosted in the Parliament the other week and to meet the young people from Broughton high school and their teacher, Nicola Daniel. The talks that they gave that evening were utterly inspiring. How very different their experience of schooling is from mine, when Burns was rolled out every January. I am a Burns Federation winner for reciting “The Sair Finger”. On the day when I did that, my friend Joe Cassidy beautifully sang “My Heart’s in the Highlands”. Sadly, Joe passed earlier this year, but we were still reminiscing about that experience 50 years on.

I am so pleased that the Open University is reaching out to train teachers in speakin and singin the Scots leid. When I visited a primary 7 class at Cleland primary in my constituency, I met Miss Molloy and saw the incomparable Matthew Fitt deliver a Scots language lesson. Every day is a school day, Presiding Officer. I know that you will find this hard to believe, but I have occasionally been called a besom. What I learned that day was that a besom is a broom. Matthew played a Scots quiz game of quidditch in the classroom with a broom. There were balls and snitches flying everywhere—it was like Hogwarts meets the Broons. A rammy ensued as they all gied it laldie. I will never forget the bairns’ enthusiasm for the Scots they kent, not just from Matthew’s teaching but from the wealth of words from their homes—in other words, their mither tongue.

That brings me to Billy Kay, who has already been mentioned. His book “Scots: The Mither Tongue” changed my perspective of our leid and gave me permission to embrace and enjoy the Scots leid. It led to me enjoying Gibbon’s “Sunset Song” and my favourite, Robert McLellan’s Linmill tales from the Clyde valley, where I grew up, which is published by Canongate Books. I wish that I had known those books when I was younger.

I am glad that youngsters today have the opportunity to read Itchy Coe publications and Matthew Fitt’s translations of children’s classics, which include “The Eejits”, “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stane” and “The Laddie, the Mowdie, the Tod and the Cuddie”. I also commend the “Eejit Street” magazine characters that were so loved by the weans at Cleland primary and the Scots Hoose work that has been done in Scottish

education with support from the Scottish Government.

As Emma Harper mentioned, Matthew Fitt is one of many Scots language writers, such as Susi Briggs, who writes for Curly Tale Books.

There are all kinds of new and exciting applications for the resurgence of Scots. The cross-party group on the Scottish games ecosystem, which I convene, heard about Aonar, an immersive cinematic virtual reality storytelling experience that is based on Scottish folklore, which is available on Steam. It has been translated into both Scots and Gaelic with support from the Scottish Government.

Billy Kay says in “Scots: The Mither Tongue”:

“In Scotland, for long the site of a linguistic battle based on myths, class bias and crackpot theories, children find it difficult to be fully themselves when the language of their home environment is criticised and devalued by a system that is supposed to be educating them to be at one with that environment. That in itself is bad enough but when much of the speech that is criticised is not ‘bad English’ but ‘good Scots’—the historic national tongue of the children and the language in which much of their great literature is written—the situation surely becomes untenable.”

I agree with him whole-heartedly. He also quotes Hugh MacDiarmid:

“To be yersel’s—and to mak’ that worth bein’,
Nae harder job to mortals has been gi’en.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I certainly caution against anybody referring to you as a besom in the chamber. I call Foysol Choudhury, who is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:51

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I join members in congratulating Emma Harper, who is a great champion of the Scots language, on securing this members’ business debate, and in welcoming the continued work of the Open University and Education Scotland in teaching the Scots language.

For too long, children were shamed for speaking Scots. A 1946 report on primary education said that it was

“not the language of ‘educated’ people”.

We must recognise how much things have changed for the better in recent years. The Open University programme, which helps to embed Scots in schools, demonstrates that. For pupils, the effects of having their teachers communicate on their level can only be positive.

I also welcome the work of the Open University in developing Scots education for refugees and migrants. The “New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy” notes how difficult it can be for people to integrate without language skills, but Scots is not

included in traditional English lessons, despite its being used in daily life.

I look forward to seeing the Open University's research, and to seeing how we can support learning for new Scots. I also note the Open University's previous success in Scots education. Its first course in Scots language and culture opened in 2019, and it has since taught 15,000 students. It is also important to note that the course is attended by more people from outside Scotland than from inside Scotland. That is a great demonstration of the value of the Scots language and of how it enables learning between cultures and attracts interest outwith Scotland.

I am pleased that Scots remains a living language and am pleased by its revival in recent years. I see that revival in my position as the shadow culture spokesperson for Labour.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Foysoil Choudhury touches on something that is important to my heart. As a young Scot over in Canada, I was able to partake in a college course called Scots in 1991, well before there was any such education here. That little migrant child was able to support students over there and to translate Scots text for them. There is a huge thing about the diaspora across the world, but we need to focus on what happens here in Scotland to make sure that our own people and the people who come here to live have those tools.

Foysoil Choudhury: I thank Elena Whitham very much for the intervention. I totally agree with her.

Creative Scotland has a Scots policy that commits it to funding and to advocating for the language. Just a few weeks ago, it opened its fund for Scots artists. The newest Scots makar says that he wants to build bridges between the Scottish languages, and the previous Scots makar wrote many poems in Scots. We must note that culture plays a vital role in keeping the language alive.

The Scottish Languages Bill is now working its way through Parliament. It calls for promotion of Scots in our schools. Although there is still much to be done on the bill, courses such as the one from the Open University and Education Scotland are a positive step in promoting use of Scots in professional settings. I again join members in welcoming that partnership, and I hope to see more and more teachers signing up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Graeme Dey to respond to the debate.

16:55

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I very much welcome the opportunity both to conclude the debate and to recognise the commendable work of the Open University and Education Scotland in creating the Scots professional learning programme for teachers.

There should be no question that Scots is central to our heritage and our identity. It is part of who we are. I say that as an Aiberdeen loon who is married tae a quine fae the Broch. From our songs, poetry, plays and literature, it is clear that Scots is a key component of our cultural life, but more than that, Scots is alive and well as part of family and community life. I was very much struck by the powerful point that Emma Harper made about dementia.

We have strong foundations to build on, and we should also be able to find encouragement in recent activity. There are public bodies and funded Scots groups that are active in the use and promotion of Scots. We also have good evidence on Scots from the census, and over recent years we have seen more Scots being used in schools, supported by small groups and by individuals, with encouragement from Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

However, Miles Briggs made a very good point about the lack of use of Scots in this Parliament. That is something that we, collectively, should reflect on.

The Scots learning programme is clearly another important step forward, and it builds on the foundations that I noted a moment ago. The course was launched by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in February this year and has proved to be attractive, popular and successful. Some 206 teachers have already signed up for the course, including teachers of English, history, music, drama and modern studies, and we now have interest from the college sector, too.

The programme is inclusive. It celebrates linguistic diversity, emphasises our cultural heritage and has a focus on local community identity. It also includes reference to people, groups and initiatives that will be recognised as being active in the Scots language community. The learning programme is wide. It demonstrates where Scots can be used in history, geography, creative writing, the arts and more. Anecdotally, we are hearing already how the course is helping with attainment and the building of confidence.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government has been able to support the course with funding. In doing that, we are able to support the teachers who have signed up for the programme of

learning. Without doubt, that is an important step forward.

Let me impart some good news to the chamber. Yesterday, the General Teaching Council for Scotland awarded GTCS professional recognition of the course, making it the first Scots language course to receive such status. [*Applause.*]

I also want to give credit where it is due and recognise the role of the Open University, under the leadership of Susan Stewart. I take this opportunity to wish Susan the very best for the future, following her decision to step down from her role in early April 2025. Susan has made a huge contribution to higher education provision in Scotland and I hope that members in the chamber will join me in acknowledging that. [*Applause.*]

I also take this opportunity to correct an omission in my opening remarks and to thank Emma Harper for bringing the debate to the chamber. I apologise for not doing so earlier.

Another important step forward is the inclusion of Scots in the Scottish Languages Bill, as we heard earlier. We know that there is good evidence of support for Scots and of progress being made. That has been further strengthened by the bill, which has passed stage 1 and has attracted more than 75 stage 2 amendments to date. I hope that that is a sign of constructive intent to ensure that the bill realises its full potential.

The bill makes a statement about the status of Scots and Gaelic. Our aim is that the bill will clarify the duties on public authorities and make good progress with education support for Scots and Gaelic. For Scots, the ambition is to build on the structures that are in place with a more effective system to clarify the status of Scots, and to see a Government strategy for Scots being prepared and published. Our expectation is that the bill will prove to be an important piece of legislation that will strengthen and bring improvements to the status, profile and use of our language.

In concluding, I return to the course. I have absolutely no doubt that it will add to the quality of learning and attainment in our schools, as is evidenced by the GTCS's professional recognition and its being recognised in the 2024 Scots language awards.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, minister. I echo your comments about Susan Stewart.

That concludes the debate. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow members on the front benches to change places.

Powering Futures

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14602, in the name of Michael Matheson, on Powering Futures—putting young people at the heart of the energy transition. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the important work of Powering Futures, which, it understands, has put young people at the heart of the energy transition, giving them the knowledge, skills and experience of real-life scenarios so that they are equipped to respond to the energy transition; notes that Powering Futures connects business and education to empower young people across Scotland, including in the Falkirk West constituency, to respond to the challenges of an energy transition; understands that, since Powering Futures launched in 2020, it has engaged with over 3,000 young people across Scotland and 150 businesses; notes that 45 schools across Scotland are currently participating in Powering Future's education programme, with a further 100 schools registered to participate in 2024, and believes that Powering Futures is doing important work to connect different sectors with schools and young people through the SCQF Level 6 accredited programme, which results in young people gaining a SCQF Level 6 qualification.

17:01

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I thank members from across the chamber for their support for the motion that has enabled this evening's debate to take place.

I take this opportunity to welcome Jennifer Tempamy and Anna Bell from Powering Futures, along with students and teachers from St Kentigern's academy in Blackburn, Craigroyston high school in Edinburgh and Dollar academy, all of whom have been part of the Powering Futures challenge programme, which I will discuss throughout my speech.

Along with the rest of the world, Scotland is at a crucial time in our history as we face the twin challenges of the climate crisis and the devastation that we now face with greater nature loss. Every sector in our economy is, rightly, under intense scrutiny to act on the role that it can play in helping to address sustainability and those twin crises. As we progress our transition to becoming a net zero nation, we will need to innovate and collaborate to deliver the change that will be necessary across every aspect of our society, so that we can do so in a way that delivers a just and fair transition for everyone. The future is very much in our hands, and it is in the interests of our future generations that we exhaust all avenues in our ambition to achieve sustainability for everyone.

To deliver a just and fair transition, we will need to empower our future workforce and enable people to have the skill sets that are needed to meet the challenge. Key to that is supporting young people to develop their skills and confidence in preparation for the world of work, while encouraging them to question and challenge businesses and industries to be prepared as best they can be for a carbon-neutral economy.

That is core to the role and purpose of Powering Futures, which is based in Falkirk, in my constituency. Founded in 2020 by David Reid and Jennifer Tempany as Fuel Change, it initially received some Government support to help the programme to develop. It focuses on helping Scotland to achieve our climate ambitions by engaging our young people and employers in the debate and by encouraging the skills that are needed to meet the climate change challenge that we face.

From the outset, the ambition of the programme was to reach every business and school across Scotland. Powering Futures was set up as a social enterprise to give our 16 to 24-year-olds a meaningful voice in tackling the climate crisis. Over the past four years, it has gone from strength to strength, calling on world leaders to motivate millions of young people to make a real difference on climate change and working with more than 3,000 young people from more than 100 schools across Scotland at the same time as engaging with 150 businesses and volunteers, who are now partnered with schools and engaging with them regularly in delivering the Powering Futures programme.

Part of the unique nature of the programme is that there are huge educational benefits to the work that Powering Futures carries out. The Powering Futures challenge programme enables learners to develop the critical meta skills that employers are looking for in their future workforce, ensuring that learners will be able to enter, excel in and support their business, so that they have a positive impact on it by helping it to adapt to the opportunities that moving to a net zero society will bring.

On the programme, learners receive a Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 6 qualification, which is equivalent to a higher, with teams of four to six young people taking on real-life sustainability challenges that are set by the sponsoring businesses. Teams work through the challenge to develop a solution before presenting it to a panel of industry judges, so that they can provide feedback. As I have seen at first hand, the programme is delivered enthusiastically by classroom teachers from a variety of subject-area backgrounds, who are fully supported by the Powering Futures team in Falkirk, by the wider

community and through practical, continued and lifelong professional learning sessions. The programme also provides teachers with access to high-quality learning resources to help them to continue to support their students.

At the end of it all, those who have taken part receive an SCQF level 6 qualification. Undoubtedly, they benefit from their exposure to future industries, potential employers and the challenges that they face. Fundamentally, they leave the course having enhanced their skills and abilities, enabling them to access the future world of work with those opportunities.

I certainly encourage colleagues across the chamber to get in touch with the Powering Futures team so that they can see its work at first hand in their respective areas. I know that some members across the chamber have already done so. I can say with certainty that the work that Powering Futures is doing is putting the voice of our young people at the very heart of our energy transition in helping to clear the path to a better and more sustainable future for us all. I am sure that colleagues across the chamber will want to wish the young people who are taking part in the programme well as we continue on our journey to becoming a net zero nation.

17:08

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): First, I congratulate Michael Matheson on securing this members' business debate on putting young people at the heart of the energy transition. As the former Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, and now as the deputy convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, Michael Matheson has a wealth of knowledge and understanding of our energy sector and of what is needed for a just transition.

The motion is clear, as are Michael Matheson and so many other folk I have spoken with, that young people absolutely need to be at the heart of the transition. That is the generation that we need to get this right for. If we act too slowly on an energy transition, we will do irreparable damage to our climate, and they will have to live with it. If we move too quickly and scale down our current energy industries without investing in new industries, we will fail that generation by failing to provide them with the job opportunities to make their own way in life.

Investment in new industries is needed not only in bricks and mortar and in technologies and machines, but in people. To borrow a phrase from Jimmy Reid,

"The untapped resources of the North Sea are as nothing compared to the untapped resources of our people."

That is why it is such a pleasure that this debate gives us a chance to talk about fantastic initiatives such as Powering Futures that are investing in young people and giving them the skills that they need for Scotland's energy transition.

It is particularly pleasing for me that two schools in Aberdeen are Powering Futures schools. As members will know—not least because I keep saying it—Aberdeen is the future net zero capital of the world. It might come as no surprise to members, therefore, to learn that the north-east has a similar scheme of its own, the girls in energy scheme, which complements the Powering Futures scheme exceptionally well.

The girls in energy scheme is a year-long engineering course for 14 to 17-year-old secondary school students, sponsored by Shell and delivered in partnership with North East Scotland College and Fife College, to encourage young women to engage in science, technology, engineering and mathematics and to consider a career in the global energy sector.

Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting the girls in energy conference at the P&J Live, in my Aberdeen Donside constituency, where I got to meet the five members of team phoenix—Elizabeth Ogunleye from St Machar academy, Kacey Smith from Mintlaw academy, Isla Walker from Ellon academy, Tilly Drunsfield from Peterhead academy and Sophie Charleston from Banff academy—who thoroughly impressed me with their elevator pitch.

Team phoenix recognised that carbon emissions from air travel need to come down in our journey to net zero, but they also recognised the importance of aviation in connecting us to others, so they set out their ideas to make flying more environmentally friendly. I think that they were going with the line, "You can't change the world if you can't connect to it".

Although I did not get a chance to meet any of the other teams, I was still quite certain that team phoenix's pitch would be the winning one, and I was almost proven right. When I spoke to Audrey Nicoll later—she was one of the dragons for the day—she told me that team phoenix had made the top 5 and that they had a very impressive pitch. She said that it was very close and that it was a difficult decision to pick the overall winners.

I offer my congratulations again to Michael Matheson on securing the debate, and I am pleased to hear of the many ways in which young people are being put at the heart of the energy transition. With the likes of Elizabeth, Kacey, Isla, Tilly and Sophie at that heart, the energy industry has a bright future ahead of it.

17:12

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):

I thank Michael Matheson for securing the debate. I begin my comments with Powering Futures. The motion speaks about the programme's role in bridging the crucial gap between education and business, and about its work in equipping young people with the skills, experience and confidence that they need in their future careers. It is an inspired approach that takes real-world sustainability issues that businesses are grappling with and gives young people the opportunity to come up with solutions. In doing so, they gain direct experience of how industry works and of the sorts of challenges that must be overcome to secure the net zero transition.

The success of that transition depends heavily on having a workforce with the right skill set to make it happen. We have already seen what happens when that is not the case; the Scottish Government has admitted to me that peatland restoration efforts are being hampered because of a skills shortage. It is encouraging, therefore, to hear that the Powering Futures programme is helping to train a generation in the skills and approaches that are needed to build a circular economy, with its programme now registered in more than 100 secondary schools across Scotland.

It is also great to see Powering Futures working with Tayside businesses through the Tayside circular economy challenge. Powering Futures has also partnered with Zero Waste Scotland to deliver training to young people, allowing them to deliver sustainable solutions for their employers that both advance net zero and secure better results for the economy and for the company.

The issues on which Powering Futures is focusing in Tayside involve exactly the sort of work that I have been urging the Scottish Government to take more seriously—for example, on supply chains, procurement and end-of-life product management. Those issues are obviously relevant to the energy transition. One such example is oil and gas infrastructure, where better reuse and higher-value recycling could boost the asset value of steel, valves and tanks by as much as 25 per cent, and where repurposed pipeline can be worth five times as much in construction.

However, giving our young people the right skills is only half the battle—we need to ensure that there are jobs for them in Scotland; otherwise there will be somewhere else, out there in the global jobs market, that will benefit from their talent. My concern is that not enough is being done to ensure that that happens. Back in 2010, the "Scottish Offshore Wind: Creating an Industry" report from Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Renewables estimated that there could be 28,000

offshore wind jobs by 2020. However, the Fraser of Allander Institute has pointed out that there were just over 15,000 jobs by 2021, which represents a sizeable shortfall.

Yes, there has been progress—the Fraser of Allander Institute also points out that, in 2021, the renewables sector as a whole employed people in almost 43,000 full-time equivalent jobs and had an economic output in excess of £10 billion. However, there are real challenges. Green job creation is not as high as it could be and there are still net zero skills shortages, and the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024 did not do much, if anything, to meet either of those challenges. Praising the efforts of others is not enough. Young people need the Government to step up its action to make sure that they benefit from the net zero transition.

17:17

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Michael Matheson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I am delighted to take part in the debate to recognise the work of Powering Futures in ensuring that young people are at the heart of the energy transition in Scotland. As we have heard, Powering Futures was set up in 2020 to do what we know so many young people need and want from education in Scotland: develop and empower the young and future workforce with the skills, knowledge and ability to help Scotland to transition to net zero.

By bringing together the employers of today and the workforce of tomorrow to work towards the shared goals of prosperity and stability, Powering Futures creates the circumstances whereby young people can see a pathway to opportunity and employers can spot and support the talent that they need. The organisation's main aim is equipping 1 million young people with the skills and behaviours that they need to thrive in the workplace by 2030. I believe that that aim could change lives, and it is an ambition of the scale that is required in order to meet the challenges of today and build the country that we need for tomorrow.

In supporting young people to take on real-life business and sustainability challenges that are faced by industries and develop solutions to them, the Powering Futures challenge programme sets up the next generation to face real-life issues and become work ready. Participants who complete the programme, whether in school or through retraining,

“receive an accredited qualification and are empowered to become sustainability-enabled problem solvers with the skills to generate implementable solutions.”

In delivering training and retraining to schools and businesses, the programme recognises that

we need both young people with new skills and talent and experienced staff to reskill to help our economy to thrive.

As Michael Matheson's motion sets out, Powering Futures has, since its inception in 2020, “engaged with over 3,000 young people across Scotland and 150 businesses”.

More than 100 Scottish secondary schools have registered to start the education challenge programme in the academic year 2024-25. Given the skills gaps that, as we have heard, already exist in this industry in particular, that is the sort of scale on which we need to operate in order to meet that challenge.

The programme is a fantastic example of interpersonal learning, which was advocated by Professor Louise Hayward through the independent review of qualifications and assessment. It gives young people the opportunity to learn and showcase skills that will be useful to meet the real-life challenges that they will face when they leave school. Although I know that the Government is hesitant on aspects of that review, I hope that it will see that examples such as Powering Futures show that such learning is already happening and that it will consider taking the steps that Professor Hayward has suggested to recognise that.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting a school in the Glasgow region that runs a similar interdisciplinary programme. There, I heard first hand the positive feedback from pupils who spoke extremely highly of the opportunity to opt for a module, as they described it, that was perceived to offer something different from traditional learning methods. Powering Futures is an example of that. I note that the Scottish Government is funding a programme at Dollar academy, and I suggest to the minister that he note the success of the Powering Futures challenge programme, which currently does not receive Government funding and is being undertaken in almost a third of secondary schools in Scotland, and that he consider supporting that, too.

The rate of uptake in the Powering Futures challenge programme demonstrates the value of that kind of provision. Professor Ken Muir, author of the “Putting Learners at the Centre” report, which was commissioned by the Scottish Government, has been involved in assessing students' presentations as part of the challenge programme. He has had the chance to speak to students and teachers who are involved and reports that staff have universally praised the quality of the programme, particularly the excellent resources, videos and support that is available. He also noted that there has been positive feedback

from students, with one comment in particular sticking in his mind. A student said:

“This is a different kind of learning, and I really, really enjoyed it.”

I also understand that the Powering Futures team has recently been to Dublin and has plans to pilot its challenge programme elsewhere, which confirms the value that others see in the programme.

Young people must have the opportunities to flourish and succeed. Powering Futures can help them to do that. As many young people as possible should be able to benefit from learning of that kind, and I hope that the debate offers food for thought for the Government and that it might, as a result, give more consideration to opportunities for shared provision and more flexible timetabling in schools, so that more young people can access that learning and spread the opportunity that it brings.

17:21

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): As others have done, I extend my thanks to Michael Matheson for securing the motion for debate in the chamber and to members for their contributions. In passing, I note that it is good it is to see Mercedes Villalba back in the chamber.

As we have heard, Powering Futures is playing an increasingly important role in connecting schools and businesses to prepare young people for sustainable careers. Its schools challenge programme supports young people to develop crucial skills for the workplace as well as further develop their knowledge of the sustainability sector. I understand from Education Scotland that more than 100 secondary schools across the country either are now participating in or have signed up to the Powering Futures schools challenge programme. The growth of the programme in schools since 2020 is certainly to be welcomed, as is the presence in the gallery of a number of the participants. Indeed, I note that, in my constituency of Angus South, Carnoustie high school is taking part in the programme and Monifieth high school is preparing to join the programme in the next academic year.

One of the strengths of the programme is the sustainability challenge that young people are presented with. Real-world problems are brought forward by business partners. Young people are tasked with developing solutions and presenting their findings, which gives them real insight into green jobs. To realise our climate change ambitions, we need to ensure that our young people have the knowledge and skills to access the increasing number of green jobs. New

research, which was published just last week by PwC, indicated that Scotland is poised to reap the rewards of leading the just transition to net zero. It is vital that our young people are furnished with the knowledge and understanding that is required to seize the opportunities that that presents.

Our children and young people recognise the importance of climate and social justice for their future lives and work in the 21st century. Pupils want those themes to be a real and meaningful part of their learning experiences. That is why I am proud that Scotland was one of the first nations to embed learning for sustainability as an entitlement in the curriculum for all learners. Through the curriculum improvement cycle, which is currently under way, there is an opportunity to ensure that learning for sustainability is properly embedded across an updated, forward-looking curriculum. The Scottish Government is also working closely with a wide range of partners to implement the learning for sustainability action plan, which includes the target 2030 ambition for every three-to-18 education setting to become a sustainable learning setting by 2030.

The chamber will also be aware that our national strategy for economic transformation sets out our aim to establish Scotland as one of the best countries to start and grow a business. Today's young people are our entrepreneurs of the future. That includes working with partners to nurture and develop entrepreneurial mindsets in education and beyond. I am confident that Powering Futures will have a key role to play in that work and will help to develop the meta skills of its participants that Michael Matheson highlighted.

In the current financial year, the Scottish Government is providing £0.25 million of funding to Powering Futures through the entrepreneurial education pathways fund. The funding will enable Powering Futures to further develop and enhance the programme and qualification on offer by being more explicit about entrepreneurial understanding and attributes.

Interdisciplinary learning programmes such as the Powering Futures schools challenge offer young people the opportunity to apply disciplinary knowledge and develop key skills in relation to complex, real-world challenges that are very much relevant to future employment opportunities. I recognise the desire, including from young people themselves and from employers, for more IDL opportunities to be consistently available in secondary schools, with the skills and the benefits that that form of learning can bring.

In response to the independent review of qualifications and assessment, the Government is committed to undertaking more work to support a high-quality and more equitable IDL offer in secondary schools. Powering Futures is

specifically mentioned in that response as an example of effective practice. In order to achieve that, a refreshed national IDL working group, chaired by a senior secondary school teacher, will bring together all the key voices who are already working in the space. The Government, in partnership with Education Scotland, colleagues in the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and other delivery partners, looks forward to working with organisations such as Powering Futures in taking that important work forward.

The debate has shone a light on the huge opportunities for our young people to be at the heart of our energy transition. As we have heard today, programmes such as Powering Futures and the girls in energy scheme are inspiring the next generation to do just that, while transforming how business engages with the next generation of talent.

It is inspiring to see the programme continue to evolve and grow since its inception in 2020. I very much look forward to even more schools and businesses, including in my constituency, becoming part of the programme in the future, because the benefits for the young people who are involved, for business and for the country's transition to net zero are evident.

Meeting closed at 17:26.

Correction

Shona Robison has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):

At column 29, line 3—

Original text—

The latest Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts show that Scottish taxes will raise £24.6 billion in 2025-26, which is £777 million more than had been forecast in December 2023, which is due mainly to an increase in forecast income tax revenue. I am sure that members will be pleased to hear the good news that that increase is, in part, due to average earnings growing faster here than they are in the rest of the UK.

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