



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 7 September 2017

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 7 September 2017

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

General Question Time

Online Connectivity (Town and City Centres)

1. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is giving to improve online connectivity in town and city centres. (S5O-01215)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity (Fergus Ewing): The Government is committed to driving technological and digital innovation to transform our economy. To do so, we need the right digital and connectivity infrastructure in place. In the coming year, we will seek to make Scotland the most attractive place in the United Kingdom to invest in telecommunications, which will include delivering free wi-fi throughout major town and city centres, building on the £1 million that we have already invested to provide wi-fi in public buildings around Scotland.

Bruce Crawford: I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to delivering free wi-fi throughout city centres, particularly as not everyone currently benefits from that in Stirling city centre, which is in my constituency. How will the Government help businesses such as those in Stirling to make more use of the digital infrastructure? I note that the UK's largest tech incubator company, CodeBase, has established itself in Stirling, which is an exciting development for a fabulous city.

Fergus Ewing: Mr Crawford makes the good point that good connectivity has led to inward business investment in Stirling. It is relevant to point out that, in Stirling, thanks to the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme, the percentage of business premises and households that are able to access digital superfast broadband speeds of, or in excess of, 24 megabits per second has risen from 59 per cent to 90 per cent. In other words, one third more people and businesses in Stirling have access to superfast broadband as a direct result of the Scottish Government investment and programme. That is solid progress on which we seek to build.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the Government's promise to deliver free wi-fi throughout major town and city centres. Will the cabinet secretary provide some clarity on how that

will be delivered, and on what constitutes a major town? For instance, will towns such as Dumfries and Stranraer in my constituency meet the criteria?

Fergus Ewing: In due course, we will bring forward details of our commitment to deliver free wi-fi to major towns and cities in Scotland, which was set out in the programme for government.

It is important to point out that, as a direct result of Scottish Government investment, we have already provided wi-fi access to a large number of libraries, community halls and sports centres, and to facilities for the most vulnerable in society, such as in homeless hostels and residential care homes. As a direct result of our investment, 99 per cent of Scotland's libraries now offer free public wi-fi, which is an excellent facility that I am grateful for the chance to publicise.

If Mr Carson wants to write to me, I am happy to carefully consider his representations regarding any specific towns in his constituency.

Disability Assessments (Private Contractors)

2. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to put specific provisions in the Social Security (Scotland) Bill to rule out private contractors conducting disability assessments. (S5O-01216)

The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman): We have made a clear commitment to this Parliament and to the people of Scotland that private contractors will not be used to conduct disability assessments. I will deliver that commitment. I want the member to know that I have looked at the issue in detail and my view is that a legislative ban is the wrong way to address the matter, because it brings with it significant potential for other difficulties and unintended consequences to occur. I have offered the member some examples of that, but I do not want to take up too much time now.

Like Pauline McNeill, I believe that the policy of not using private sector contractors is the right one to take for Scotland. I want to make sure that a legislative ban does not inadvertently deflect from or compromise the delivery. As the member knows, my door is always open and I am happy to discuss the issue further with her and talk through the basis of my decision.

Pauline McNeill: I welcome the statements that Jeane Freeman has consistently made on the important question of who should be allowed to carry out assessments in the social security system. I am sure that she will agree that there is very strong feeling among claimants who have had traumatic experiences dealing with private contractors. I fully appreciate that she has given the matter full consideration. However, if it is not in

the bill, how can we ensure that future Governments will respect the implementation of a public system, rather than a private one?

Jeane Freeman: I thank Ms McNeill for her support and for her additional question, which raises the issue of future proofing what we are doing for social security, which has emerged over the summer and has been raised by many key stakeholders. There is a limit to what we can do. Through the legislation that will be debated in the Parliament in due course—the bill is currently in committee—we are setting out a robust framework for a rights-based social security system, founded on the principles of dignity, fairness and respect. We can set in statute some key elements. However, we cannot preclude future democratic decisions by people in Scotland on who they elect to the Scottish Parliament and who becomes the Government. There are limitations to future proofing.

As I have said, I am happy to talk further to the member and others about the issue and about our bill.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): This morning at the Social Security Committee, we met and heard evidence from claimants—I hate to use the word “users”—who were adamant that they did not want private contractors to deliver social security, particularly the assessments. However, they welcomed the guidance in the bill and were very supportive of that flexibility, just in case—as the minister has said—there is a future Government that does not look on social security as favourably as the current Government does, which is with dignity and respect.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I am not sure that there was a question there, so a very brief response, please, minister.

Jeane Freeman: Perhaps I could use the opportunity to say a wee bit about the work that we have begun on assessments.

The Presiding Officer: We have another question, so perhaps you could respond to that.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): The minister almost stole my thunder. If we are going to move in this direction, will the people who carry out the assessments be employed full time by the Scottish Government? If that is the case, where will we find physios, nurses and occupational therapists to fill those roles? What cost has the Government put on employing those people?

Jeane Freeman: That is an excellent question for which I thank Mr Balfour. Private companies, with a necessary and understandable profit motive, are incompatible with a rights-based social security system. [*Applause.*] I fully appreciate that Mr Balfour is not as old as I am.

We are now working with experienced colleagues across the health and social care sector and with experts led by the chair of the British Medical Association general practitioners committee, who is a member of the expert advisory group that provides advice to me on carers and disability benefits, to devise a system of assessments that will be evidence based, fair and most certainly fewer in number because we will get our decisions right first time. They are working that through for me because the best people to solve such issues are the people who know about it.

We will use qualified, experienced professionals across healthcare sectors and social care to provide assessments when they need to be undertaken, ensuring—unlike the current system—that the individuals who carry out an assessment are experienced and professionally qualified in the condition that the person presenting has. In other words, we will make sure that our system can deal with fluctuating conditions, neurological conditions and mental health and will treat people with dignity, fairness and respect. I am comfortable about explaining in further detail at a future meeting of the Social Security Committee—I believe that I will be there in November—how those individuals who will not be employed full time by us will bring that professional expertise from their daily healthcare and social care practice to benefit our rights-based social security system.

General Practitioner Services (Lothian)

3. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to expand general practitioner services in Lothian. (S5O-01217)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is aware of the pressures facing general practice and is fully committed to supporting a model of sustainable general practice.

I met Lothian GPs last November to discuss how our significant national investment of £71.6 million for this year can directly support general practices in Lothian. The investment this year will improve GP recruitment and retention and expand the multidisciplinary primary care team, as part of a commitment to see an additional £250 million being invested annually in direct support of general practice by the end of this session of Parliament, which is part of a wider £500 million investment in primary care.

Since the meeting in November, health and social care partnerships across Lothian are supporting practices to use their receptionists to signpost patients who do not need to see their GP to the right person, which is helping to take the

strain off GPs. Through cluster working, GPs are able to identify areas for improvement and to test solutions such as enhancing their multidisciplinary teams.

Miles Briggs: Is the cabinet secretary aware that over 40 per cent of GP practices within NHS Lothian are full, not accepting new patients or restricting registrations? Does she agree that that is an indication of the crisis that is affecting GP services as they struggle to cope with demand?

With the Royal College of General Practitioners now predicting a shortfall of 828 GPs across Scotland by 2021, does the cabinet secretary really believe that the Scottish Government is doing enough to ensure that areas such as Lothian, which has one of Scotland's fastest-growing populations, will have adequate numbers of GPs to cover the increase in the number of patients?

Shona Robison: Of course I am aware of the challenges in Lothian. As Miles Briggs will know, that is why I met Lothian GPs to discuss more closely some of their particular issues. He will be aware, as I laid out in my initial answer, of the investment that we are making in primary care, and in general practice specifically. There is a lot happening within the expansion of the primary care workforce. Of course, we are increasing not just the number of GPs but the number of other multidisciplinary team members. We have increased the recruitment and retention fund and we have specific initiatives including the GP development fellowship, which Lothian has taken advantage of.

I can tell Miles Briggs that in GP specialty training and recruitment more than 90 per cent of the 1,082 Scottish GP training places are filled. Some progress is being made, but I accept that there is more to be done, which is why we are working very hard with the British Medical Association to deliver a new general medical services contract that I think will help to transform primary care.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I wish the cabinet secretary would stop talking in euphemisms. We do not have "challenges"—we have a crisis in general practice. Over the summer I held a drop-in session for GPs in West Lothian and they told me of a staffing crisis, of the complete reliance on extremely scarce and expensive locum cover, and of practices that are but a resignation or a sickness absence from collapse. All practices in Midlothian have closed lists: what a damning indictment that is of the Government's failure to plan for general practice. Will the cabinet secretary apologise to GPs and their patients for this crisis and tell us what is happening to resolve it now, and not some time in the future?

Shona Robison: I say to Neil Findlay that what is happening now is a £71.6 million investment this year that is directly supporting general practice not just in Lothian, but elsewhere across the country. What is happening now is the negotiation of a brand new GMS contract that will transform primary care. That is important because we need to make general practice more attractive as a career, and the new contract will help to do that. What is happening now is that 90 per cent of GP specialty training places are being filled because of the efforts that are being made to promote general practice. So, a lot of action is being taken in the here and now to support general practice that will make a real difference in the here and now in Neil Findlay's area and elsewhere in Scotland.

Local Festivals

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it gives to local festivals. (S5O-01218)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Scotland's local festivals are, in the main, supported by their local authorities. The Scottish Government provides support through the national funding bodies Creative Scotland and EventScotland. Creative Scotland supports festivals that apply directly to it for funding, and EventScotland supports a portfolio of events through its national, international and signature programmes, which are designed to assist event organisers to grow their audiences. Support is also available through themed-year funding, which in 2017 links inspirational events with the year of history, heritage and archaeology.

Stuart McMillan: The year 2019 will mark the bicentenary of the death of the great enlightenment inventor, James Watt. I propose that a week-long James Watt festival should take place in Inverclyde, which is the place of James Watt's birth, to celebrate the legacy of that great inventor. Does the cabinet secretary agree that such a festival could play an important role in re-establishing Scots' place internationally as innovators, thinkers and cultural leaders, and that it would also have a positive impact on Inverclyde, on the teaching of science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, and on wider society, the economy and culture?

Fiona Hyslop: Indeed. Events being planned to celebrate the life and achievements of James Watt would be warmly welcomed across Scotland, for the reasons that Stuart McMillan outlined, and by the community in Inverclyde. We are happy to consider approaches to Creative Scotland—in particular, to its open fund. Of course, on 23 August the Scottish Government announced

£250,000 for annual science festivals because the inspiration that young people can find in the STEM subjects can be told through those festivals. Celebrating the great James Watt is one way of enhancing that programme in 2019.

Gypsy Travellers (Parking Sites)

5. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what information it has regarding the provision by local authorities of parking sites that are suitable for Gypsy Travellers. (S5O-01219)

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): The provision of Gypsy Traveller sites is a matter for the relevant local authority. The Scottish Government does not routinely collect information concerning sites in Scotland. All Scottish local authorities must, by law, produce local housing strategies that set out their priorities and plans for delivering housing and related services. Those strategies should include plans for meeting any Gypsy Traveller housing needs, including addressing any requirement for provision of suitable sites.

Stewart Stevenson: While noting the particular difficulties in Moray, where Tory part-time MP Douglas Ross was recently a member of the council administration that has failed to provide any such parking sites, does the minister believe that rather than vilifying Travellers—who make a valuable contribution to society—as a “top priority” problem, as he described it, Mr Ross and others in his party should work to address that deficiency?

Kevin Stewart: Yes, I agree with Mr Stevenson. As I set out in my first answer, the provision of suitable Gypsy Traveller sites in Moray is a matter for Moray Council, based on its local housing strategy. Councillors should look at the needs that are highlighted in their local housing strategy and address the issue accordingly. Gypsy Traveller communities are among those that are most disenfranchised and discriminated against in Scotland. The Scottish Government values the Gypsy Traveller community, the contribution that it makes and the important role that it plays in enriching Scotland socially, culturally and economically. We are committed to tackling all forms of discrimination and to promoting a multicultural society that is based on mutual trust, respect and understanding.

Integrated Health and Social Care (Voluntary Sector)

6. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making to ensure that voluntary sector groups are treated as equal partners in the development of integrated health and social care. (S5O-01220)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government promotes and values the contribution that the voluntary sector and other third sector organisations make to the integration of health and social care. Integration authorities must involve the third sector in the strategic commissioning and locality planning process, and a third sector representative is required to be a member of the integration joint board. IJBs also have the flexibility to include nominations of people including representatives from the voluntary sector. However, that will vary due to local circumstances.

Claudia Beamish: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but it does not address some of the needs and concerns of the voluntary sector that I represent in South Scotland. Before I became an MSP, I was involved in the third sector on a voluntary basis, and I know about its fragility and the challenges that it faces. Healthy Valleys in Lanark and Borders Voluntary Care Voice in Galashiels have expressed concerns to me about funding security and continuity, training opportunities and—most important of all—status recognition. What can the cabinet secretary do to reassure those groups and groups across South Scotland and more widely?

Shona Robison: If Claudia Beamish wants to write to me about the specific concerns that those local organisations have, I would be happy to look into them in more detail. The Scottish Government has established and supported a network of third sector interfaces to support and fund third sector organisations at local level. More than £12 million of funding was provided to the 32 third sector interfaces that cover each local authority area in Scotland, and I would have thought that organisations in Claudia Beamish’s area would have benefited from that. However, if she wants to write to me, I will be happy to look into the matter in more detail.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): As members and others might be aware, this will be our first First Minister's question time without open or diary questions. Leaders will begin by asking their substantive questions.

Income Tax

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): The First Minister said on Tuesday that she wanted to open a discussion on tax, so let us begin right now. I am opposed to all current basic rate taxpayers paying more in income tax. Can the First Minister confirm that she is, too?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Usually when opening a debate and committing to listening to what others have to say, it makes sense to carry on and do that before ruling things out in advance.

Let me be quite clear about the principles that will guide this Government. First, we will always—as we always have done—set tax rates responsibly and with the interests of households, businesses, wider society and the economy firmly at heart. We will not simply transfer the burden of austerity on to the shoulders of those who can least afford it.

As we look forward over the next few years, we owe ourselves a genuine debate about what kind of society and economy we want to be. We know that we face further Westminster austerity imposed by Ruth Davidson's party. We know that we face the implications of Brexit, from which Ruth Davidson thinks that the country might never recover, and a range of other pressures, such as demographic pressures. If we want—as I certainly do—this country to continue to have the highest-quality public services, well-paid public servants, the support and the infrastructure that our businesses need to thrive, and effective policies to tackle poverty, we need to have an honest and mature debate about how best to deliver those things, and that is the debate that this Government will lead.

If the Tories want to sit on the sidelines of that debate, calling day in and day out, as they do, for extra spending on a range of different things while also calling for tax cuts for the richest in our society, they will continue to have not a shred of credibility. Ruth Davidson keeps telling us that she wants to be taken seriously. Now we will all get an opportunity to see whether or not she is up to it.

Ruth Davidson: I think that anyone in Scotland who earns less than £43,000 a year just heard the

First Minister's message loud and clear—she is coming for their paycheck.

In her general election manifesto, which was published just 100 days ago, the First Minister said:

“there is a risk that an increase in the Additional Rate of income tax in Scotland alone would lead to a loss of revenue.”

Does she believe that that risk has somehow disappeared in the past 100 days?

The First Minister: It is exactly the risks as well as the benefits of different tax policies that we have said that we will set out openly and honestly. We want to allow the Parliament and the wider public to have a mature debate about that. It is because of concerns that I had about raising the additional rate in Scotland alone that we did not do it last year. Instead, I asked the Council of Economic Advisers to give us advice on that.

Of course, we have consistently taken a very responsible approach to taxation. That is right and proper for any Government. However, we also have a responsibility to everybody in our country to make sure that, as we go into the next decade and beyond, we not only protect the public services that all of us depend on but ensure that our nurses, doctors, police officers and firefighters are well rewarded. That is why I have said that we are going to lift the 1 per cent public sector pay cap. It is also vital that we ensure that the support that our businesses need is there, whether that is the additional investment in research and development that I have announced in the past few days or the transport and digital infrastructure that our businesses need to thrive.

As a Parliament and as a country, let us have that mature and honest debate. I know that my party will take part in it with an open mind. Given their positions on taxation, I hope and believe that Labour, the Greens and the Liberals will take part in that debate with an open mind. However, based on what we have heard and are hearing today from Ruth Davidson, I suspect that what we will continue to get from the Tories is daily demands for extra spending. In the past week alone, the demand has been for funding for Frank's law, which I am delighted that we will go ahead with, and for extra spending on more housing. I think that I just heard one Tory member call for extra spending on the national health service. The Tories want extra spending, but they also want tax cuts for the richest, which is not a credible position. That should hardly be surprising, as the Tories are increasingly not a credible party.

Ruth Davidson: In her answer, the First Minister spoke twice about supporting what Scotland's businesses need, so let us listen to Scotland's business community, shall we? Today,

David Lonsdale of the Scottish Retail Consortium said:

“Any notions about increasing income tax rates ... should be firmly knocked on the head as it could cast a pall over consumer spending—a mainstay of Scotland’s economy.”

Liz Cameron, the chief executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce, said:

“Growing the Scottish economy, not squeezing the last drops out of existing businesses and workers, will generate more tax revenues.”

Increasing tax rates beyond those of our neighbours could well deliver the opposite result. Scotland’s businesses are telling the First Minister what they want and need, but she is not listening.

We have been here before, and the question is the same. If raising taxes in Scotland damages the Scottish economy and leads to the loss of revenue that the Scottish National Party’s own manifesto talked about, which is the money that we need to spend on our national health service and schools, why would any responsible Government do it?

The First Minister: Let me cover a few of those points. First, let us look at Scotland’s economy, which faces challenges. In the most recent statistics, we have seen Scotland’s economy growing four times as fast as the economy elsewhere in the UK. Unemployment in Scotland today is close to its lowest level on record, with employment at a record high and the rate of youth unemployment half what it was 10 years ago. We are seeing progress in Scotland’s economy that we must continue to protect—I am absolutely clear about that.

The second point that is worth making is one that, day and daily, everybody across the country is becoming ever clearer about. One of the reasons why we are having these debates now is the damage that Tory austerity is doing and the damage that the reckless Tory Brexit is threatening to do to our economy. Frankly, it is beyond belief that Ruth Davidson can say, as she did yesterday, that she thinks that Brexit might do damage to this country that it will never recover from and yet expect us to carry on with Brexit regardless. Frankly, Ruth Davidson should hang her head in shame.

My next point is about consumer spending. It is because I want to see consumer spending protected, as well as out of a sense of fairness for our public sector workers, that I think that it is time to give them a pay rise. We will continue to make such decisions responsibly and with the interests of the country as a whole at heart. Our businesses need investment as well. They need investment in health, education, skills and infrastructure, and all of that has to be paid for. We all—at least, those of us on this side of the chamber—want high-quality public services.

We will lead an open, honest, mature debate about how we, as a country, best provide the services and business support that we need. I do not know whether the Tories will want to be part of that debate or whether they will simply call for more spending and tax cuts for the richest. Nevertheless, I am determined to lead a debate that is right for the overall interests of this country of which I am proud to be the First Minister.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister opened by talking about how the last quarter figures showed Scotland growing faster than the rest of the United Kingdom. She is absolutely right about that, and I welcome it. However, that does not erase the fact that for the past 10 years we have been growing slower. We are talking about how we keep growing faster, and having punitive tax rates is not the way to do that.

As I said on Tuesday in response to the First Minister’s statement, there is room for consensus in this Parliament. Indeed, I welcome some of the ideas that the First Minister has put forward on the economy, such as cutting air passenger duty in order to stimulate economic growth. However, we have to get the balance right, and jacking up taxes on working families and businesses in Scotland will damage the Government’s stated objective of getting the economy growing faster and bringing in more revenue.

Liz Cameron, as the voice of Scottish business, added today that the biggest concern here is over the message that tax rises will send out about Scotland’s reputation as a place that values ambition, welcomes business and wants to grow. In the spirit of a mature debate, does the First Minister not accept that by going down this route, she risks damaging that reputation, as Liz Cameron says, and stifling the ambitions that all Scots should share?

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: What is damaging the reputation of this country right now is the isolationist, inward-looking Brexit approach of the Tories and things such as the leaked Home Office proposals showing how the Tories want to punish people who come from other countries and to introduce measures that would be devastating for our economy.

As for the tax issue, we will have that debate and involve everybody, including business. Its views are hugely important, as are the views of those who work in our public services and the public at large. However, the message that I want to send about Scotland—and I want to send it to people here at home, elsewhere in the UK and internationally—is that it is the best place in the world to grow up and be educated in; it is the best place in the world to be cared for if someone is

sick, vulnerable or in need; it is the best place in the world to grow old in; and because of our investment in infrastructure, in digital and in business support, it is the best place in the world to invest and do business in. That is the message that I want to send the world about Scotland, and we all need to make sure that we do what is necessary to deliver that kind of world-class nation.

National Health Service

2. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Labour has been calling for and will very much welcome a debate on how we invest in Scotland's future, because we cannot continue with failed Tory austerity.

On Tuesday, before the programme for government was announced, a set of statistics detailing the performance of our national health service was published. Our hospitals do not have enough doctors, nurses and midwives; hundreds of operations are being cancelled because hospitals cannot cope; and two years on from the health secretary's promise to abolish delayed discharges, more than 1,000 patients have been stuck in hospital when they were fit to go home. Those figures are surely dreadful but, perhaps most damning of all, one in five young people needing treatment for mental health had to wait longer than the agreed waiting time. What does the First Minister propose to do about this?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I take this opportunity to welcome Alex Rowley to his albeit temporary place. I am sure that we will enjoy our exchanges over the next few weeks.

Alex Rowley raises a number of extremely important and serious issues. Before I say what we are doing about them, I want to address a number of points that he alluded to. First, on the number of people working in our national health service, there are almost 12,000 more in it today than was the case when this Government took office. On delayed discharge, the bed days lost to it are reducing, and we are determined to reduce them even further. Finally, on the rate of cancellation of hospital operations, although a small number of hospital operations will always be cancelled for a number of reasons, the rate has remained steady over the years and has not increased significantly.

That is some of the context. As for what we are doing, I and other members have spoken about this many times. We have a health service that, although not facing unique challenges, faces rising demand, partly from an ageing population and partly as a result of some of the issues around mental health that Alex Rowley raised and reducing the stigma related to mental health. In common with many other countries, we now have

the challenge of investing in and reforming our health service so that it can meet those challenges for the future.

In terms of investment, the health budget today is around £3 billion higher than it was when the Government took office. We have committed to a further £2 billion increase over this session of Parliament. That is why, in the programme for government, I committed to at least a real-terms increase in the resource budget next year. I say again, as I said many times to Kezia Dugdale, that that is a higher commitment to NHS investment than Labour made in its manifesto for the Scottish Parliament elections.

Secondly, we are committed to a programme of reform in our national health service. That means transferring more of the health budget into community and primary care in mental health services.

Investment and reform are the challenges that we are taking forward. Some of the issues are difficult and will involve taking difficult decisions in the chamber, but I ask all members to get involved in the discussions so that we collectively take the decisions now that will equip our health service for the future.

Alex Rowley: As the First Minister would expect, I dispute the figures for who committed to what but the issue is more important than that. Too many children in Scotland are being let down. That is the key serious issue.

My approach has always been that, on the big issues, we should try to work together with the Government to find a solution. A year ago this week, Labour published a proposal that would end the scandal of poor support for child mental health. We put those proposals directly to the First Minister and we called for three things: we called for a review of why so many children were being rejected from treatment; we asked for guaranteed access for every secondary school to a qualified and experienced school counsellor; and we asked the Government to finally use the Scottish Parliament's tax powers to stop the cuts to local public services and invest where investment was needed.

It is clear that nothing needs more investment than mental health services, particularly children's mental health services. The First Minister said that she would look at the plan closely. Did she do that? Did she take on board any of the proposals and, if so, will she give us an update on what progress is being made?

The First Minister: I recall the First Minister's questions at which those plans were raised. I gave a commitment then to consider them as part of our finalisation of the mental health strategy and, yes, we have taken forward many of the proposals that

Alex Rowley talks about. One in particular I am surprised he does not know about, because I think that I announced it in the chamber at FMQs: we committed to a review of child and adolescent mental health service rejected referrals. We are beginning that review. That was the first of the issues to which Alex Rowley referred.

On school provision, we also committed in our mental health strategy to a review of personal and social education in schools to ensure that the vital link between education and health services is recognised and strengthened.

We have had many debates on tax over the past couple of years. In last year's budget, we took a decision on the threshold for the higher rate tax, which was opposed by the Conservatives; Labour encouraged us to go further. As I just debated with Ruth Davidson, the time is now right to consider how we fund our public services in the longer term. I hope and expect that Labour will take part in that debate constructively.

As I have said before, we see rising demand for mental health services. That puts an onus on the Government to ensure that the services are there. We are committed to the work to ensure that that is the case. We see improvement in waiting times, for example, and a significant increase in the mental health workforce to support those expanded services. We will continue to take the action and invest the resources that bring about those improvements.

Alex Rowley: I am aware that this week's programme for government has clear commitments to look at the matter. That is welcome and Labour will work with the Government on it, but we need action—action speaks louder than words.

I do not know whether the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister have ever been in schools and talked to teachers about the importance of having counselling services. I have, and I know that schools value those services and want to see them.

The Government has a target, but that target has never been met. More than 9,000 young people have waited too long for treatment. That cannot be allowed to continue, and the First Minister's Government needs to do something about it, not next year but starting now.

Action speaks louder than words. How many times must children's mental health services be raised in the Parliament before the First Minister and her Government do something about the issue?

The Presiding Officer: Again, I ask people to be succinct.

The First Minister: Alex Rowley is—and I mean this genuinely—a very considered and fair politician, and I often appreciate the constructive way in which he raises issues. I include today in that. However, I think that Alex Rowley is being a tad unfair in his characterisation of the Government's approach.

Let us take just some of the issues that he has raised. I referred to the review of rejected referrals; Labour called for a review and a review is happening. On additional resources in schools, the pupil equity funding that we put in place last year is already supporting headteachers and teachers in schools to invest in measures, where they think that that is appropriate to help them to close the attainment gap. That is concrete action, which is under way right now, as we speak. The mental health strategy, which is finalised and is being implemented, backed by new resources, is helping us to continue the progress that we have made on increasing the workforce in CAMHS and reducing the time that young people wait.

These are hugely important issues. I am not standing here saying that there is not more work for us to do—of course there is. I expect and welcome that those who care about these issues press us to go further and faster. That is absolutely legitimate. What I do not accept is Alex Rowley's characterisation of the Government as doing and having done nothing, because that is manifestly not the case.

I encourage Alex Rowley—and I will certainly play my part in this—to let us come together where we can to make sure that we take the right decisions to ensure that young people get access to the mental health services that they deserve and need.

The Presiding Officer: We have a couple of constituency questions.

Motorcycle Offences (North Edinburgh)

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I remind members that I am a parliamentary liaison officer to the First Minister.

On 10 August, one of my constituents, a 10-year-old boy, was callously run over by a recklessly driven, stolen motorcycle, in north Edinburgh, on Ferry Road, which borders my constituency and that of Alex Cole-Hamilton. The young victim of this shocking hit and run was left fighting for his life, with severe injuries. He was discharged from hospital only yesterday. I am sure that the Parliament will join me in wishing him well and a full recovery.

That terrible incident is one of the most serious in a series of dangerous and antisocial motorbike offences in north Edinburgh over a number of years, which have been perpetrated by a small

group of offenders. Other local politicians and I have been working collaboratively with Police Scotland, City of Edinburgh Council, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, local youth work groups and other partners to tackle that criminality, which no community should have to endure. What action is the Scottish Government taking to tackle the dangerous joyriding of motorcycles in north Edinburgh? Can more be done to address this serious issue?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am grateful to Ben Macpherson for raising an extremely serious issue. First and foremost, of course, the case to which he referred was a terrible tragedy, and I take this opportunity to offer my sincere condolences to the young boy's family and friends and indeed to the whole community in north Edinburgh. [*The First Minister has corrected this contribution. See end of report.*]

As that tragedy and Ben Macpherson's comments illustrate, there is a real and significant risk of serious harm from the theft and illegal use of motorbikes—harm to residents and to the young people who engage in that illegal behaviour. The behaviour has to be stopped, and agencies are working with local members of the Scottish Parliament and, importantly, the community in north Edinburgh, to find solutions. [*The First Minister has corrected this contribution. See end of report.*]

Local partnership is key to confronting the behaviour and dealing with underlying issues. I know that the stronger north group has played an important role in that regard. A series of initiatives are being put in place by the police, the council and community groups to divert young people from crime.

Scottish Government officials from the safer communities and youth justice units are engaging with the police, local agencies and third sector partners, including the Robertson Trust, to see what more can be done. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice wrote to Ben Macpherson last month to set out a range of initiatives and resources that are working in the area, and I give Ben Macpherson a commitment that we will continue to engage constructively to ensure that Government is playing our part in finding the solutions to this very serious issue.

Children's Remains (Unlawful Retention)

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of reports about a constituent I have been assisting in Edinburgh, Lydia Reid, who recently discovered that her son's coffin was buried in 1975 with no body in it. That revelation comes after 42 years of her seeking to discover what happened to the remains of her child and leading the campaign that exposed how

hospitals had unlawfully kept deceased children's body parts for research purposes. Will the First Minister commit to finding the answers to what happened in Lydia Reid's case, and can she confirm that everything will be done to discover whether the same thing has happened to other families?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Obviously, I am aware of the case and I take this opportunity to give my sympathies to Lydia Reid and her family. It is very difficult for any of us who have not gone through such experiences to fully appreciate and understand the stress that Lydia Reid and others in similar situations have experienced. I can only imagine what that must be.

Clearly, some work has been done on issues of this nature in the past, but I give an assurance today that the relevant minister will be happy to meet Lydia Reid to see what the Scottish Government or our agencies could do to try to ensure that she gets the answers that she certainly deserves and will personally feel that she needs to allow her to move on from this revelation. I give that assurance to the member and will take steps to ensure that that meeting happens as soon as possible.

Benefit Cap (Mitigation)

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** One issue that the Greens were pleased to see in this week's programme for government was a commitment to roll out family financial health checks. My colleague Alison Johnstone has been campaigning persistently for such measures to maximise the incomes of some of the most vulnerable families in our society. The Government has committed to implementing that by spring next year, and we look forward to working with the Government to ensure that the measure is fully funded and helps the maximum possible number of people in Scotland.

However, there is much more that we need to do to reduce poverty in Scotland, especially in light of the impact of the United Kingdom Government's extended and even more harmful benefit cap. Research that we have conducted shows that it has hit 3,700 more households and 11,000 children in Scotland, with well over a 400 per cent increase in Glasgow alone. Of the households affected, 64 per cent are single parents, the vast majority of whom are of course women. On average, the affected households are receiving £57 a week less than they are assessed as needing. In short, the cap targets families with children who are already poor and makes them even poorer.

The Scottish Government has allocated some funds to mitigate that, but is the First Minister

aware of the evidence that has been presented by the Child Poverty Action Group that the discretionary housing payments that are intended to achieve that are falling well short of what is required? Indeed, some councils have indicated that they cannot do it at all, with one saying:

“we are not in a position to award discretionary housing payments for cases affected by the benefit cap.”

Is the First Minister aware of that shortfall? What will be done to make it up?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am happy to look at the issue in more detail. We have used discretionary housing payments, which are administered by local authorities, to try to mitigate a number of the welfare changes that the UK Government has made. Those include the ones that Patrick Harvie has talked about, but we have, for example, also used the payments to make sure that nobody in Scotland has to pay the bedroom tax until such time as we can legally abolish it. Inevitably, therefore, discretionary housing payments come under pressure. As part of my previous ministerial responsibilities, I had oversight of the issue, so I know that we have ongoing discussions with local authorities about discretionary housing payments and their sufficiency. We will continue to have those discussions and we will try to ensure that discretionary housing payments operate in a way that allows us to mitigate the impact of the welfare changes as much as possible.

We are almost at the end of a week in which the United Nations has described the UK Government’s approach to disabled people as a “human catastrophe”. I know that that is not the particular issue that Patrick Harvie raises, but that comment shines a light on the inhumanity of the welfare policies of the Conservative Government at Westminster, and members of that Government should hang their heads in shame day in and day out because of the misery that they are inflicting on vulnerable people the length and breadth of this country. We will do whatever we can to mitigate that, and I am happy to give an undertaking to Patrick Harvie that I will talk to Jeane Freeman, look at the evidence that he is talking about and have a discussion with local authorities about whether we need to take further action.

Patrick Harvie: The First Minister is of course right to challenge the decisions of the UK Government, but in the face of the crisis that those decisions have created, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament have a responsibility to act. There are councils down south, such as Croydon, that are taking a much more proactive approach, ensuring that they give advice to all families to maximise their incomes where possible.

The approach that we have suggested to maximise households’ incomes through the family financial health check could be taken at council level as well, to ensure that all families are able to access the discretionary housing payments if they need them.

Does the First Minister agree that there is a need for consistency across councils and that national guidance to achieve that would be one step towards achieving that comprehensive approach? The Scottish Government’s own figures show something in the region of a £2 million reduction in payments nationally through the initial cap and another reduction of £9 million or so on top of that from the extended cap. The Scottish Government’s allocation is only in the order of £8 million, so the shortfall will inevitably lead to more debt arrears, more evictions, more hunger and more hardship.

Does the First Minister acknowledge the urgency of closing that gap and ensuring that councils not only take a comprehensive approach to the advice that they are giving but have the resources available to make the payments that are so urgently needed by many families in Scotland?

The First Minister: First, I would be happy to look at evidence or experiences from anywhere else across the UK that might inform our approach, so I am certainly happy to look at the Croydon example that Patrick Harvie mentions.

Having said that, I doubt very much whether any part of the UK is doing more to mitigate Tory welfare cuts than the Scottish Government is doing right now. We are spending hundreds of millions of pounds over the life of our Parliament doing just that—money, frankly, that I would far rather be investing in our national health service, in our education system, or in almost anything other than in mitigating the cruel policies of a Tory Government.

On Patrick Harvie’s point about consistency, I agree—that is one of the reasons why the programme for government referred to the roll-out of family financial health checks. I believe that such things are often best delivered locally, but within a framework of national guidance—we will give more detail on that shortly.

The final point is on the quantum of the resources that we can make available. We will continue to do everything that we possibly can to mitigate these cuts, but when we are mitigating something as opposed to removing it at source, there will always be constraints and limitations on what we can do.

When the Tories make these heartless cuts—I wish they would not, but when they do—they do not hand to the Scottish Government our share of the savings that they make to allow us to decide

what we do with them. Every pound of mitigation that we allocate is a pound that we are having to take from other parts of the Scottish budget.

We will do everything that we can, but let us be in no doubt that the real solution here is not mitigation; the real long-term solution is to get these powers out of the hands of Tories at Westminster and into the hands of this Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I am conscious that it has taken 33 minutes to get through the party leaders' questions, with only two constituency supplementaries. It is welcome that some of the questions and some of the answers have been succinct, but I encourage all the party leaders and the First Minister please to keep the questions and the answers brief and to the point. This is not a conversation; it is a question-and-answer session. [*Applause.*] I have a number of members to get through. [*Interruption.*] Can we make progress? Mark Ruskell has the final constituency supplementary.

Park of Keir Development

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Last week, the First Minister's Government approved mansions, a hotel, a golf course and a tennis centre on the protected Park of Keir near Dunblane. The decision overruled the local development plan; it overruled Stirling Council; and it even overruled the Government's own planning reporter. Did the First Minister's Government not learn anything from the disastrous decision to approve Trump's golf resort?

Celebrities should not rule the planning system and, despite the celebrity spin, the real national tennis centre is only 2 miles up the road, at the University of Stirling. Will the First Minister guarantee that there will be no public funding to bail out the Park of Keir project if it fails and that public funds will be used only to support genuine community tennis facilities?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am not sure whether the member was trying to put Judy Murray into the same category as Donald Trump—I certainly hope not.

Planning decisions are taken in line with planning rules, and no other considerations are taken into account. The planning minister carefully considered all aspects of the reporter's report and concluded that the development is of regional and national significance for sport. Ministers are therefore minded to grant planning permission in principle, subject to conditions that have been set out, which include the requirement for residential developments not to be occupied until the tennis and golf centre is built and open for use. Ministers have also specified that, before consent can be

granted, a legal agreement between the council and the developer must be concluded that commits the developer to contributing to affordable housing and education provision in the area.

The next step in the process is for the council and the developer to discharge a legal agreement. At that point, it will be up to ministers to determine whether planning permission is formally granted. Because of all that, this is still a live planning matter, so I will say no more than that.

I absolutely understand the disappointment of those who oppose a planning application that is then granted. However, I underline the point that such decisions are taken in line with due process. That is the way that it should be and that is the way that it always will be.

Brexit (Transfer of Powers)

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assurances the Scottish Government has received regarding the transfer of powers to Scotland following Brexit. (S5F-01492)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): In its white paper on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the United Kingdom Government stated that it expected

"a significant increase in the decision-making power of each devolved administration",

but I have to say that, as things stand, the opposite is the case. The bill centralises to Westminster powers on all matters that are currently subject to European Union legislation, including those in devolved areas—in other words, powers that should properly be exercised in this Parliament. The bill also imposes new and, I think, unworkable restrictions on the Scottish Parliament's powers in those areas. For those reasons, I and, indeed, the First Minister of Wales have made it clear that we will not recommend consent to the bill unless appropriate amendments are made to deal with those concerns.

Stuart McMillan: Will the First Minister confirm that there have been no joint ministerial committee meetings since February, that there has been a lack of constructive activity from the UK Government in relation to Scotland and Wales and that the Brexit discussions that are being led by David Davis show a complete lack of vision on the UK Government's part? Does she agree that the UK Government's shambolic approach thus far is just a naked power grab?

The First Minister: On the question of the power grab, when I gave my previous answer, I spoke about the replacement of EU law in devolved areas with unilateral Westminster decision making, and I heard someone from the

Tory benches—I do not know who—shout from a sedentary position, “Rubbish.” Last Friday, the House of Commons issued a briefing paper on the Brexit bill. It says:

“the Bill effectively re-reserves to the UK Parliament these areas of competence, within competences which have otherwise been devolved.”

I suppose that “re-reserves” is polite language for a naked power grab. That is why, in all conscience, I will not recommend to this Parliament that we approve the bill.

We continue to discuss with the UK Government sensible amendments, and we hope that we will achieve them. As I said the other day, if that does not prove possible, we are also considering the possibility of continuity legislation in this Parliament.

All those discussions would be helped if we had a UK Government that was willing to enter into them in any meaningful way. There has not been a joint ministerial committee meeting since February this year. The papers that the UK Government has been publishing—many of them concern devolved areas—have been published without any consultation with any of the devolved Administrations whatsoever. Not only is the UK Government treating devolved Administrations with contempt, but it is, as we have all seen in the past weeks, leading the UK blindly off a cliff edge. This is a UK Government that has lost its way, has lost the plot and has no idea whatsoever what it is doing.

National 4 Qualification

5. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the concerns that have been expressed regarding the efficacy of the national 4 qualification. (S5F-01480)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The national 4 is a significant achievement for many pupils. It represents the right level of qualification to reflect their attainment, while offering a route for pupils to go on to obtain national 5s and even highers. Concerns have been expressed, however, about aspects of the qualification, not least that it does not include an external exam, and that is why there is currently an expert review.

Attempts by some to use those concerns to denigrate the academic achievements of the tens of thousands of young people who have been awarded the qualification are disgraceful. That is unwarranted and it does a deep disservice to our young people, who work hard to achieve the qualification.

Liz Smith: In February 2014, the education committee of this Parliament heard concerns from

teacher representatives that national 4 was not highly valued as a qualification because of the absence of such an exam. That concern was repeated at the Education and Culture Committee in November 2016, when teachers made it clear that they felt that, as a result of that absence, too many pupils were being pushed into taking national 5 exams when that was not in their best educational interest. Today, the results of the Scottish Qualifications Authority survey are telling us exactly the same thing.

When the issue is so important to youngsters, why has it taken two and half years to start addressing the problem?

The First Minister: The decision not to have an exam at national 4 was made following discussions at the qualifications governing group, which is a body that includes teachers. The group was aiming to ensure that more time is spent on learning than assessment.

Concerns have now been raised, which is why a review has been established and is being undertaken by the assessment and national qualifications group, which is made up of the SQA, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland and other stakeholders. It is chaired by the Deputy First Minister. If changes are to be made, it is important that they are properly thought through and that the views of a range of education bodies are taken account of. Some of the changes that have been made to national 5 and highers must also be recognised. These are decisions that we will take forward with proper consideration and process.

I say again: although it is right that concerns are recognised and changes are made if there is a consensus around those changes, let us make sure that we do not undermine the achievement of young people who work hard for these qualifications—I am not saying that Liz Smith has done that, but some have. As the EIS general secretary Larry Flanagan said this week,

“For many pupils gaining a National 4 award is a significant step and we are clear that this achievement should be celebrated”.

I agree with that whole-heartedly.

Drug and Alcohol Misuse (Fatalities)

6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the reported significant increase in the number of deaths related to drug and alcohol misuse in the last year. (S5F-01478)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I would like to put on record my deepest sympathy to any family who has lost a loved one through drug use.

We recognise that behind the numbers there are individual tragedies, and loss of life, which is devastating.

The rise that we have seen is the result of the growing older of many long-term drug users, who go on to experience a range of chronic conditions as they get older. We know from the recent report from NHS Health Scotland that there is an established link between the rise in drug deaths now and previous austerity policies of the 1980s, which should tell us something about not repeating those mistakes for the future.

Of course, the Scottish Government has a responsibility to act, and we are determined to do that. The programme for government sets out an additional £20 million investment for alcohol and drugs services, and our new drugs strategy will be based on the principle of seek, keep and treat, to recognise that problems of substance misuse must be addressed from a public health perspective.

Monica Lennon: I have deep concerns about the funding and adequacy of recovery services, but I want to focus on a different barrier to recovery, which is the stigma around addiction. Living with addiction is not easy to speak about, but that has to change, because recovery and support services cannot help people if they feel too ashamed to access them. Too often, families only break their silence about drug and alcohol harm after they have buried their loved ones. I know that because, two years ago, my dad died as a result of alcohol harm.

In 2016, Scotland reached an unacceptable 10-year peak, with 2,132 people dying as a result of alcohol and drugs misuse. We have a long way to go. I ask the First Minister to join me in sending a message to everyone in Scotland affected by drug and alcohol harm that they matter, that they are not to blame, and that they are deserving of support. [*Applause.*]

The First Minister: I thank Monica Lennon for raising that issue. I also pay tribute to her courage, given her personal experience, in standing up in the chamber today and raising issues that are often deeply personal to people but hugely important to our society as a whole.

Monica Lennon is absolutely right. First and foremost, we must see those who suffer from addiction as human beings. I ended my first answer by saying that we must treat such issues from a public health perspective first and foremost, and that is what our renewed strategy will seek to do.

We must ensure—this is why we have set out plans for additional funding—that when people find the courage to come forward and to seek help,

that help is there for them from the services that Monica Lennon has spoken about.

When people find themselves with addiction and dealing with drug or alcohol problems, it is often because of other factors in their lives. It is those underlying factors, as well as their needs as human beings, that must be uppermost in our minds. I would be happy to talk to Monica Lennon at greater length about the issues based on the experiences that she has shared with us today. I think that all of us across the chamber will agree that that sentiment must be the driving force behind the changes that we are seeking to make.

The Presiding Officer: We will squeeze in question 7 from Liam McArthur.

Police Scotland and Scottish Police Authority (Management)

7. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Thank you very much indeed, Presiding Officer.

To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will provide an update on the management of Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority. (S5F-01497)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Significant work is under way across Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority to give effect to policing 2026, which is a long-term transformational strategy published by the service in June this year. The process of appointing an SPA chair is on-going and work to identify an interim chief officer for the authority began this week. Steps are also being taken to strengthen Police Scotland's executive team through the appointment of a new deputy chief constable, with that process due to be completed in the coming weeks.

Liam McArthur: Reports today suggest that the independent inspectorate will be scathing about what it calls this Government's politically motivated dismantling of the British Transport Police in Scotland. That follows a summer that has seen the chief constable under investigation and the SPA chief executive, like the chair, heading out the door. Will the First Minister agree to the call by the justice spokespeople of all four Opposition parties, myself included, for change, and for the next chair of the SPA to be appointed by this Parliament, not solely by ministers, recognising our collective interest in seeing the mess that has been created sorted out?

The First Minister: As it happens, I am not entirely unsympathetic to the case made by Liam McArthur. I simply point out—I am sure that members will understand why—that the appointment process is laid down in legislation. It is a requirement of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 that Scottish ministers appoint

the chair of the SPA. Where the Parliament has a role in appointments, for example, the information commissioner and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, that is generally set out in relevant legislation. That is not the case for the SPA, but ministers will carefully consider the case put forward and whether there is a role that Parliament could play within the framework set by the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. I know that the justice secretary would be happy to have further discussions on the matter.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions. Before we move on, I point out to members that we have taken 48 minutes to get through First Minister's questions today but only 11 members have been able to make a contribution. A number of members' questions and the responses to them have been too lengthy. Members are giving huge preambles before asking their question and some of the responses are too long.

I have written to all members and I have spoken to all the party leaders. That clearly has not had an effect. I ask everyone to think about the situation before next week, and to make their questions shorter and the answers more succinct, please. That way, we will get through more and more members will be able to participate.

Universal Credit

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-07056, in the name of Alex Rowley, on support for Citizens Advice Scotland's call to stop the accelerated roll-out of universal credit. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the reported evidence from Citizens Advice Bureaux regarding the initial roll-out areas in Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK, which it believes highlights that the reality of universal credit risks leaving many people in Scotland without the support they need, pushing them into debt and leaving them unable to make ends meet; is further concerned that Citizens Advice Scotland, it understands, has reported that evidence from initial roll-out areas shows that, since universal credit was introduced, bureaux have seen a 15% rise in rent arrears issues compared to a national decrease of 2%, and an 87% increase in Crisis Grant issues compared to a national increase of 9%, and that two of the five bureaux in impacted areas have seen a 40% and 70% increase in advice about access to food banks, compared to a national increase of 3%; notes the call from Citizens Advice Scotland and a host of antipoverty organisations across Scotland for the UK Government to pause the accelerated roll-out of universal credit until the reported design and delivery problems have been addressed; notes the comments from the Chair of Citizens Advice Scotland, Rory Mair, that "universal credit has major delivery and design flaws which risk hurting families instead of helping them. These include long waits for payments that push people into crisis and debt, all the while battling a highly complicated process with little support"; considers that it is not right to proceed with the accelerated roll-out of universal credit in the knowledge that it will, it believes, result in tens of thousands of men, women and children in the Mid Scotland and Fife region and across Scotland being driven into debt and rent arrears and having to turn to foodbanks just to survive, and notes the calls on the UK Government to pause the process, listen to the evidence and act accordingly to address the issues.

12:51

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank everyone who supported the motion, which has allowed the debate to take place. I bring the motion to the chamber today to build the support of the Scottish Parliament behind Citizens Advice Scotland's call, which is supported by much of civic Scotland, to halt the roll-out of universal credit and to address the issues that are of concern.

My point is quite straightforward. Why would any Government in a civilised society continue to roll out a new policy that it knows is going to hurt tens of thousands of people, will drive people into debt and towards relying on charity to feed themselves, and will result in even more people in our country being driven into poverty? That cannot be right, and it is not right. The Tory party must think again.

It must listen to civic Scotland and stop this roll-out.

I lodged the motion for debate today after visiting various community organisations across Scotland and hearing at first hand about people's experience and what they are having to deal with, where roll-out of universal credit has taken place. I heard about the issues that people are facing and the increasing problems that organisations are having with helping people to cope with the roll-out.

CAS published a briefing in July that called for a halt to the accelerated roll-out of universal credit. On the back of that, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and every member of Parliament in the country to ask them to support CAS's call. All parties and organisations that want to help to alleviate poverty should work together to ensure that people do not suffer as a result of the roll-out of universal credit.

The motion that we are debating today highlights the problems that CAS has found in the pilot roll-out areas. On top of that, only last week 25 Scottish third sector organisations published a joint letter calling for the roll-out of universal credit to be halted. This week, we have seen an intervention from the Church of Scotland that draws attention to the experience of people as seen in churches across Scotland.

It is clear to everyone—apart, it seems, from the Tories—that something needs to be done to resolve the issues. The Tories seem to be burying their heads in the sand, in complete denial of the facts. Alongside the letters that I wrote to every MP in the country, I wrote to Ruth Davidson to urge her to lend her support to CAS's call, but sadly I have not heard back from her. I appeal to the Tories in Scotland—to Ruth Davidson's party—to get behind civic Scotland and to call for the roll-out of universal credit to be halted until those issues can be addressed.

I received a response from the United Kingdom Minister of State for Employment, who wrote back and claimed that the UK Government does not agree with the conclusions of the Citizens Advice Scotland research. He went on to say:

"The report is based on evidence from a self-selecting group of people".

That is just another classic example of the Tories denying that a problem exists as they continue to attack those who are least able to defend themselves and, in the process, to drive up poverty in our country.

There has been a 15 per cent increase in rent arrears, an 87 per cent increase in crisis grants and a massive increase in food bank use in areas

where universal credit has been rolled out. Those are facts, and it is not right to simply ignore them.

One of the biggest problems with universal credit, which we have heard about time and again, is the six-week waiting period at the start of the claim before payment. That is one of the things that are driving the increases in rent arrears and food bank reliance. What was the Government's response to that? The minister said in his letter to me:

"Many people coming to Universal Credit will have wages from their previous jobs to cover their expenses until their first payment."

How out of touch is the Tory Government? It is driving people into poverty and forcing people to rely on charity to feed themselves, and it simply assumes that people will have enough in their savings to cover their expenses for six weeks. It is wrong. Indeed, earlier this year, Citizens Advice Scotland published research that showed that 22 per cent of the public had no savings to fall back on and that a further 24 per cent had less than two months' income. That just goes to show yet again how much the Tories do not understand what day-to-day life is like for many people in our country.

Unless the delay period for payments is fixed, there is a huge risk of driving individuals and families further into poverty. The Government should not be defending those issues; instead, it should recognise the problems that it is causing and commit to fixing them before they cause even bigger problems further down the line.

It is clear that the system is deeply flawed and that we must work together to address that. I repeat: no Government should inflict something on its citizens that will do more damage than good. No Government should push people further into poverty, and no Government should be so arrogant as to ignore the concerns that have been raised by individuals, organisations and communities the length and breadth of our country. Until we find a solution to the problems that are found in universal credit, I urge everyone in Parliament to support the calls to halt the accelerated roll-out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a couple of housekeeping issues. Members who intend to be called to speak must press their request-to-speak buttons. A couple of members have not done that.

Twelve members wish to speak in the debate, so I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 8.14.3 of the standing orders to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Mr Rowley to move a motion without notice.

Alex Rowley: I would be pleased to do so. It is encouraging that so many people are involved in such a serious issue.

I move,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speeches should be of four minutes, please.

12:59

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I thank Alex Rowley very much for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The debate is timely and imperative. It is timely because my constituents—the people of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse, who live in the South Lanarkshire Council area—live in the next local authority area to receive the full roll-out of universal credit. Make no mistake: the debate is also imperative because the botched roll-out is, purely and simply, detrimentally affecting lives.

People—not claimants, customers or service users, but human beings—are going for up to seven weeks without any form of welfare from the Government. That is potentially seven weeks without food, electricity or other power, sustenance or other needs. The list goes on.

I put that in my speech this morning before I heard some news two hours ago from the selfless volunteers, whom I know very well, at the Hamilton District Food Bank. They are the true heroes of the front line, defending people from Tory reform. They advised me about people who came to see them today who have, as a result of the universal credit changeover, waited 12 weeks for any form of welfare. They have waited 12 weeks—three months. I will let that sink in. Members should try to imagine that happening to them or a family member.

Essentially, what the roll-out has achieved is a Tory-engineered systematic shutdown of any form of life for the “deserving poor”, as the Tories would put it: those who have the immense misfortune to find themselves in times of trouble and who are met with desolate silence from the UK Government—a bit like Ruth Davidson’s answer to Mr Rowley’s letter. That reeks of the callous and cruel nature that has become synonymous with the Conservative Government.

Since the partial introduction phase of universal credit in South Lanarkshire, my constituents have faced a myriad of problems, from significant delays in their payments that have forced hundreds into arrears, hunger and destitution, to an incomprehensible help system. What a laugh: a “help” system through which people are unable to contact the universal credit processing centre to resolve any of their issues.

While we hurtle at breakneck speed into the ever-growing digital economy, we cannot leave behind the people who brought us here. We cannot leave behind those who lack the technical online literacy that is needed to complete the deliberately complicated Department of Work and Pensions forms. That is not hyperbole; the forms are designed to be complex. They seek to exclude the vulnerable, the needy and the hopeless, and they aim to divide and to cause unnecessary hassle for those who have the audacity to claim from the UK Government.

The evidence is there and it cannot be ignored. In the two authorities in Scotland that have had most experience of universal credit full service—East Lothian Council and Highland Council—approximately 82 per cent of people who are in receipt of universal credit are in arrears.

The decision has real consequences. For South Lanarkshire Council, they are to the tune of £4 million, which is the amount that it has had to put aside to mitigate the cost of the roll-out. That is a chronic waste of resources. That money could have been added to budgets for schools, houses, health, infrastructure or anything else that the council wanted to do. Instead, it is used to deal with a Government that wants to demonise those who are at risk.

There is a risk to the safety and wellbeing of women, men and—regrettably—children, who will go hungry because the Tory Government insists on continuing its failed attempts to force through the roll-out. Let that sink in. Instead of heeding the warnings from CAS, charities, local authorities and welfare rights organisations, and listening to people who are on universal credit—they are the people who matter—the Tories will continue to make children hungry and to put their welfare in jeopardy.

I, for one, will not allow the Tory pursuit of ideological welfare reform to jeopardise any of my constituents.

I thank Alex Rowley for bringing the debate to Parliament.

13:03

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Presiding Officer, I apologise to you, the minister and other members in the chamber because I will, now that the debate is to be extended, be leaving early as I have been called to give evidence to the Edinburgh tram inquiry this afternoon.

The scale of change to welfare over the past few years has been dramatic, and the move to universal credit is one of the most significant and ambitious.

I suspect that we can all agree that the current benefits system is extremely complex. Claimants are entitled to different benefits from different agencies. For example, housing benefit is from local authorities, other benefits come from HM Revenue and Customs, and so it goes on.

There is wide support for the principles underlying universal credit, which should simplify social security by replacing a complex and chaotic system that has damaged people, held them back and trapped them in dependency for generations. The best way to help people to improve their lives is to help them into work, to give them a purpose and to allow them to earn money. Universal credit allows that to happen; in time, it will allow it to happen faster and quicker than was the case under the previous system.

East Lothian Council was the first local authority in Scotland to go to the full service in March 2016. Last year, I had the pleasure of visiting Musselburgh jobcentre, where universal credit is changing the way in which the jobcentre works. Simpler administration processes are freeing up staff to meet people face to face. The employment outcomes that matter most—

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is not taking an intervention.

Jeremy Balfour: I saw the way that jobcentre staff embraced their roles as work coaches and how that was transforming the whole relationship with claimants.

The digital take up of universal credit is another success story, with 99 per cent of new claims being made online, which will mean that in the long run the service will be more expedient and more user-friendly.

George Adam: Will the member at least take an intervention on that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please sit down, Mr Adam.

Jeremy Balfour: Overall, 82 per cent of universal credit customers have reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service. The figures show that it is working in practice. Claimants are spending twice as much time looking for a job as they did under the old system and they are moving into work faster, with 113 people moving into work under universal credit for every 100 who were doing so under the previous system.

When any new system is introduced, especially one that is as ambitious as universal credit, there will be operational difficulties. Citizens Advice Scotland is concerned—rightly so—about the most vulnerable citizens. However, we must ensure that that does not stop what is happening on the ground and that the success stories of individuals are not forgotten because of the propaganda from the other parties in Parliament. [*Interruption.*]

George Adam: *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please sit down, Mr Adam.

Jeremy Balfour: The DWP is holding surgeries across the country every week to provide digital support to claimants. I accept that for many people the idea of having to fill out all the forms online is intimidating. That is directly mitigated by the fact that people can drop in with no appointment and be given face-to-face advice on how to do it.

Universal credit is a single monthly payment. As we all know, universal credit remains reserved to Westminster and the Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Government the power to vary the housing costs element for people who are renting their homes and to alter the payment arrangements. The Social Security Committee took evidence on that this morning.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude your speech.

Jeremy Balfour: I support the roll-out of universal credit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

13:08

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Universal credit was supposed to be a new, flexible system—all the things that Jeremy Balfour talks about. It is no wonder that he would not take an intervention, because if his eyes were open, he would see that we are far from reaching the objectives of universal credit. Universal credit roll-out is an unmitigated disaster—that is before his very eyes. What more proof does he need?

We have discussed the six-week waiting period many times in the Parliament. As Alex Rowley has said, it is an absolute nonsense to say that any one of us could survive without our salaries—never mind no income—for six weeks. If the UK Government was prepared at least to fix the six-week problem, I would have some respect for members on the Conservative benches, yet it continues to press on regardless.

Let us make no mistake: if there is no change and the problems of universal credit are not addressed, that will have serious implications for Scotland because of the poverty levels here,

which we have discussed in the Parliament. I will read out some of the statistics. In Musselburgh, where the roll-out of universal credit in Scotland started, referrals to food banks are now the highest north of the border. That is not a coincidence. I, too, went to Musselburgh as part of the Social Security Committee's inquiry. I sat next to a gentleman who was trying to do his form-filling for universal credit on a very small smart phone. When people such as him make calls to try to sort out the problems that they are having, they are charged—you could not make it up.

The effect of the six-week waiting period for a first universal credit payment can be serious. As I have said, it can lead to food bank referrals, and it can cause mental health issues, rent arrears and evictions. On the navigation of the online system, the system would, in theory, be a good one if everybody was online. However, a high percentage of ordinary Scots who are claimants do not have access to the online system.

Councils have pointed out that universal credit rules force them to put up homeless families in short-term bed-and-breakfast-style lodgings to wait six weeks to qualify for rent support, which councils say is incompatible with laws that require them to move those families on to more suitable accommodation within six weeks. Further, homeless people in temporary accommodation, whether hostel or B and B accommodation, who go to register for benefits often do not state that they are homeless, as they are not rough sleeping, and are then put on to the wrong housing benefit, which causes them to receive underpayments.

The Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland has warned that, to date, the new universal credit has led to tenants finding it increasingly difficult to pay their rent on time—that is such an obvious failure of the system. The recent "Welfare Reform Impact report", which was published by the HouseMark consultancy group, showed that

"the average rent arrears debt of a UC claimant is £618",

which

"compares to average non-UC arrears of £131".

What more evidence do we need?

The universal credit issue is a serious one that we must get some action on: it cannot continue. Universal credit is deeply unjust and it will cause deep-rooted problems in Scotland if we do not get the changes to the system that are obviously required to make it the kind of system that it was designed to be.

13:12

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank Alex Rowley for bringing this important and necessary debate to the chamber.

The words "universal credit" are misleading and cruel because they give the illusion of something for everyone, whereas the reality is that it is anything but that. Universal credit, which was introduced by the Tory Government at Westminster, is merely a euphemism for more Tory austerity. It is the continuation of the attack on our poorest citizens and part of the wider destruction of the UK social security system. It is the same attack on the welfare state that the United Nations has called a "human catastrophe" for disabled people.

I remind members what has happened in the attack so far. The Tories have cut £30 a week from the disability benefit employment and support allowance, hitting those who are unable to work; they have implemented the hated two-child tax credit limit, which takes money from low-income mothers and fathers who desperately need it; they have removed the family element of working tax credits, again hitting low-income parents hard; and they have locked young people aged 18 to 21 out of housing benefit. Those are just some of the measures that have been taken by the Tories.

Universal credit has got off to a terrible start, but it is to be radically extended this autumn. That extension must be delayed. As a former board member of East Dunbartonshire Citizens Advice Bureau, I was all too aware of the fears of the bureau's staff before the implementation of the universal credit system. Those hard-working staff are on the front line and could foresee the misery that the system would cause to so many people who are already struggling to make ends meet every day. Sadly, their fears have been realised. With universal credit, benefits are paid in a lump sum, leaving many recipients unable to budget and increasing the risk of homelessness and food and fuel poverty.

East Dunbartonshire Citizens Advice Bureau is one of five bureaux piloting the so-called full service universal credit. In those areas, there has been a 15 per cent rise in rent arrears, compared with a national decrease of 2 per cent. A lot of statistics have been mentioned today, but they are worth repeating. The phasing out of disability tax credits means that more than 110,000 disabled people who are in work are at risk of losing up to £40 a week. There has been an 87 per cent increase in crisis grant issues in the pilot areas, compared with a national increase of 9 per cent—just think about that. Two of the bureaux have seen increases in advice about access to food banks of 40 per cent and 70 per cent, compared with a national increase of 3 per cent. As we have discussed, 39 per cent of claimants waited for more than six weeks to receive their first payment. The six-week wait is deemed acceptable by the Tories, who evidently expect people to live on fresh air.

The fact that the application can be made only online makes the process even more shambolic. Disabled people are the group in society that is least likely to have internet access. It is estimated that 35 per cent of them do not have access to the internet. In comparison, more than 90 per cent of the non-disabled population have access to the internet.

Put simply, people are sinking further into deprivation thanks to a roll-out riddled with error, and the roll-out must be paused until key problems are addressed. No organisation would go ahead with a scheme that had failed so badly in a trial, but, as ever, the Tories will plough on with their disastrous policy regardless of the human cost.

Universal credit is emblematic of the bitter and cruel treatment of people under this UK Tory Government. Thankfully, the Scottish Government's approach to shaping our own social security system could not be more different, even with the limited powers that we are receiving. In the name of humanity, will the Tories admit that the system is a disaster and stop the roll-out? To err is human, but to compound a mistake is simply madness.

13:16

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank Alex Rowley for securing this important debate. We have heard much about the botched roll-out of universal credit, and my own constituents in Musselburgh will know better than anyone about the problems that have been caused, because Musselburgh was one of the first areas in which universal credit was tested.

During the Social Security Committee's investigations into universal credit earlier this year, we met and heard from universal credit recipients in Musselburgh. Some spoke of health conditions that had worsened because of the stress of not knowing whether they could pay the rent. Others had to make endless numbers of calls on expensive phone lines and wait anxiously for a call back that never came, perhaps due to the call volumes that staff were experiencing. Some people told members that they had left their jobs—the precise opposite of the impact that universal credit seeks—because payment delays meant that they could not afford to pay for childcare.

East Lothian Council has been faced with significantly increased demand for emergency payments, with applications for Scottish welfare fund crisis grants being 20 per cent above what it expected. Some universal credit recipients simply cannot afford to pay the rent. In 2016-17 there was a 12 per cent increase in council tenant rent arrears across the board, but for universal credit

claimants the figure was almost double that, at 22 per cent.

Issues with the implementation of universal credit and associated information technology gremlins are only part of a much bigger problem. My constituents and people across the country are suffering not only because the roll-out is being botched, but because a whole raft of welfare cuts are secreted within universal credit. For many recipients, moving on to universal credit means having to get by with less support than they might have received previously, as well as having to deal with some of the teething problems that we have heard about today.

Research by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility shows that by 2020 universal credit will have taken about £3.1 billion out of the pockets of some of our poorest families, and that figure does not include the benefit freeze that will apply to universal credit. Sheffield Hallam University suggests that it will take out another £300 million in Scotland, and families with children will be the worst hit. A report from the Child Poverty Action Group and the Institute for Public Policy Research suggests that two-parent families with children will be worse off by an average of £960 a year in 2020 compared with the income they could have expected in the absence of cuts to universal credit, and single-parent families will be worse off by a staggering £2380 on average.

Those claims are not made only by CPAG. The analysis is shared by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility, which has said that universal credit

“is now less generous on average than the tax credits and benefits systems that it replaces”.

In light of that, it seems like a very cruel joke indeed that the white paper that launched universal credit claimed:

“No-one will experience a reduction in the benefit they receive as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit”.

The white paper also promised that 900,000 people, including 350,000 children, would be lifted out of poverty. CPAG claims that the opposite is the case and that universal credit will put around 1 million children across the UK into poverty. It is no wonder that the UK Government no longer makes those claims and has repeatedly not responded to requests for a poverty impact assessment.

I see that the Presiding Officer is indicating that I should close. Greens have previously called for the UK Government to listen to the experience of universal credit recipients and improve the system. In the light of the calls of Citizens Advice Scotland and many other third sector organisations and parties, it is clearly time to take action and halt the roll-out of universal credit until the problems with it are resolved.

13:20

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Alex Rowley for bringing the debate to the chamber. In the previous session of Parliament, I had the privilege of serving as the deputy convener of the then Welfare Reform Committee. In carrying out my duties in that role, I contributed to a number of reports on and investigations into welfare reform. I also contributed to the United Nations investigation into the effect on disabled people of the welfare reform process, which the UN has said will be a humanitarian catastrophe visited on the people of the UK by their Government. In the face of that and the information that we have had from all the third sector organisations, such as CAS, that signed the declaration to ask for universal credit not to be rolled out, I cannot understand why Tory members do not recognise what is happening in their country.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Adamson: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

In 2015, I visited the pilots in the Highland Council area to investigate how well universal credit was being rolled out. I and my committee colleagues heard from a number of panels, including one from the DWP, which we asked questions of. At the time, my overall impression was that the process was fraught with manual intervention, which gave me great concern about the sustainability of the roll-out across the country. People had managed to find fixes to problems, but the fact that the council and the third sector organisations that were involved said that the fixes were not scalable was a great concern for the roll-out of the new system.

Among the problems with universal credit in rural areas that were raised was that of the time and expense of transport to interviews. Another issue was digital exclusion, which Pauline McNeill and others have mentioned, and the inability of some people to access the internet to apply for universal credit. The seasonal and fluctuating nature of some employment in rural constituencies was another concern.

It was reported that 80 to 90 per cent of the people who were on universal credit were in rent arrears compared with 12 to 15 per cent of those who were not. The average level of rent arrears for non-UC tenants was £200, while for UC claimants it was more than £1,000, and for those in temporary accommodation it was £2,100. Universal credit claimants were potentially in arrears from the minute they applied, because they would not receive payment for five weeks.

That was the case in Highland; other members have mentioned 12-week delays.

The DWP had no idea of the impact on landlords. If nothing else, we would expect the Tories to be on the side of landlords and entrepreneurs, but the DWP had no idea that the changes to housing benefit and the ending of direct payments to landlords would be an issue. Another problem was that, when people with chaotic lifestyles moved accommodation, the landlord might receive no payment whatever.

The arguments have been well rehearsed. Many of the issues that my colleagues have raised were known about in 2015, yet the Tories continue to deny the human catastrophe that the citizens of our country are facing. I will call out what the Tories are doing for what it is—they are picking the pockets of the Scottish people, because we are having to mitigate the disaster that is universal credit. In doing so, as the First Minister mentioned earlier today, we are spending hundreds of millions of pounds. The Tories are picking the pockets of the health service, the education system, every person in the chamber, our friends, our families and our neighbours. I ask members to wake up and call out this disaster for what it is.

13:24

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I rise to support the motion. I apologise for having to leave early, but I have to chair a meeting of a patients group and I did not anticipate the extension of the debate.

I often speak with hyperbole in this place about the various responsibilities that we as decision makers discharge both in this Parliament and at Westminster, but the safety net that we provide for those who, for whatever reason, cannot provide for themselves should be the measure of any civilised society. My party has a proud history in the genesis and introduction of the welfare state in the early days of the 20th century, with the first state pension introduced under Lloyd George. In the 1940s, that great Liberal William Beveridge was the catalyst for the advent of social security when he identified the original “giant evils”, as he described them, of ignorance, idleness, squalor, want and disease. It is a failure of progress that, if we strip out the antiquated language, many of those evils still hold sway in our society today.

We should remember that, until this decade, the systems of welfare in this country had not undergone significant reform since their introduction, despite generations of incremental modification. For decades, welfare reform was sought by poverty campaigners, third sector organisations and academics so that we could

dispense with unneeded red tape and inject much-needed social mobility into the system.

It fell to my party, in its period of coalition government, to co-preside over that much-needed redesign. I would, however, that we had had different bedfellows in that task. There are elements of the system that underpins the process that I take no pride in at all, and there are aspects of the new system that I still find shameful. Nevertheless, I am glad that we were there, for I dread to think of the welfare system that our Conservative partners would have designed unencumbered. We all saw the measure of the ideological compass behind Conservative social policy in the ill-fated manifesto that Theresa May published in the spring.

Today, we are debating the flagship aspect of the welfare reform agenda—the roll-out of universal credit. I support the motion, which does not suggest that we tear up welfare reform or even junk universal credit but which speaks to the human cost of the inadequacies of the roll-out. A large undertaking such as that might well have been expected to have teething problems, but the difficulties in the areas of Scotland where it has started go far beyond that. People who are switching to universal credit have had to endure a six-week wait—and more—before receiving their first payment. That is intolerable in 2017, and it presents a material risk to the wellbeing of those people and their families. Put simply, it is pushing families into crisis. As we have heard, Citizens Advice Scotland has received reports of many clients resorting to emergency stopgaps such as food banks, crisis grants and food parcels, while others are going into significant rent arrears.

I support the call of my Labour colleagues for the Parliament to support a total halt to any further roll-out of the new system of universal credit until the issues that have been highlighted in the debate have been properly addressed. It makes no sense to plough on regardless and ignore the huge impact on vulnerable families that has resulted from crucial payment delays. With 25 different stakeholders backing the call, we, as a Parliament, must surely listen. The accelerated roll-out that is due in October must be delayed to prevent any more people from being pushed into financial crisis unnecessarily.

13:28

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and I thank Alex Rowley for lodging the motion and giving us an opportunity to call the Tories out for what they are.

I understand why Jeremy Balfour, who this morning joined the Social Security Committee—as

the convener, I welcome him to that committee—had to leave the debate early but, with all due respect to him, words fail me when I compare what he said with the evidence that I and the committee received at the jobcentre in Edinburgh. What everyone else—committee members and others—has said in the debate is absolutely true. The treatment that people are receiving is not what Jeremy Balfour says he saw, and I cannot agree with the way in which he apparently sees universal credit.

We have taken evidence from various people. As members have already talked about that, I will not go over it all again, but I will say that during the evidence taking, a lady burst into tears because she had received a text on her mobile phone to tell her that her money had been cut. As I said at the time, these mobile phones are like tags; every single day, people have to fill in a diary with what Pauline McNeill has called a summary. They have to say at what time they did this or that, the number of jobs they looked for, where those jobs were and so on. Many of those people are vulnerable and, as members might imagine, their situation is being made even worse with this sort of thing over their heads every day. That lady burst into tears while we were speaking to her at Musselburgh jobcentre.

That is the reality of universal credit. I will not go over everything that everyone has said, but the absolute reality is that people can go weeks and weeks—in some cases, 12 weeks—without any money. They cannot pay their rent or utility bills, they cannot buy food and they cannot go anywhere. This is supposed to be a civilised society and, according to Jeremy Balfour, universal credit is supposed to be the best thing since sliced bread. It is the absolute opposite.

People we have spoken to have said, “Yes, we need simplification of the social security system.” They do not welcome the idea with open arms, but they are prepared to look at and work with it. However, what we have is an absolutely diabolical mess that needs to be stopped now.

I have signed up with various individual organisations to halt the roll-out of universal credit, because it is—and I mean this—literally killing people. We need to stop it. It is literally killing people who are vulnerable, who are disabled and who have mental health problems—that is how bad the system and its roll-out have been. Given that the Tories are the only ones who seem to think that universal credit is great, I appeal to the few who are in the chamber to stop the roll-out and join the rest of the parties in the Parliament in admitting that the system is a mess and that it is killing people.

13:32

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I have to leave after my speech, Presiding Officer.

I thank Alex Rowley for bringing this vital debate to Parliament. I see that, today, the Tory party is adopting exactly the same practice as it adopted in the rape clause debate. It has one tokenistic speaker, along with four others who are unwilling to take part in the debate but who have been told by their whips to come and sit here in the chamber. Where is Tomkins? Where is he? Where is the social security spokesperson who is supposed to be here defending this disgraceful policy? He is off—three-jobs Tomkins is not even here to defend the policy, and yet the Tories lecture vulnerable and poor people about the benefits of universal credit. What an utter disgrace they are.

I whole-heartedly support the anti-poverty organisations in calling on the UK Government to pause the roll-out of universal credit until all the problems have been resolved, given its impact on my constituents across the Lothians and the impact that it will continue to have, if it is not stopped, on up to 600,000 Scots. Most normal people are a job loss, a relationship breakdown, an accident or a diagnosis away from the benefits system; I have been in that position many times in my life. Not all the people out there are, like us, privileged to be on £60-odd thousand a year, and not all of them have the opportunity to have two or three jobs or have inherited wealth to sustain them.

However, this discussion is not about other people but about everyone in our society who might at some time have to rely on that increasingly worn safety net. Citizens Advice Scotland and others are—rightly—calling for a freeze on the policy to allow the issues to be addressed. As everybody—apart from the Tories—knows, the impact of the new rules and policies that relate to the administration of universal credit is causing dire problems for claimants. How can people possibly wait six weeks for their first payment? That is a lifetime to people who have to sign on for benefit.

As a former housing officer, I know the worry and strain that that puts on tenants, which has an impact on their mental health, physical health and wellbeing and causes anxiety, depression and hardship; in some cases, as has been mentioned, people are taking their own lives. If we see crisis grants up by 87 per cent and food bank use up by 70 per cent, how can anyone tell us that the system is working? How can they tell us that? It makes no sense whatever.

I commend the Scottish Government for writing to the UK Government to call for a halt to the

service. Unsurprisingly, that call went unheeded by the caring, compassionate Tories. The Scottish National Party Government has stated that it will continue to press the case. I hope that it does and I hope that all of us will also continue to press the case. However, more needs to be done, and CPAG and others have suggested some ways forward.

Last week's report by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the UK Government's performance highlighted how the UK Government deals with disabled people. I do not care what party members are in; surely they have the self-respect to see that that is absolutely shameful treatment of all the people in our communities who have disabilities. It is incredible that some members cannot even bring themselves to say that that is disgraceful. I thought that some of the people on the Tory benches had more self-respect than that.

This Parliament must continue to apply pressure on the Tories, and I support the call by CPAG and others for greater investment in discretionary housing payments to alleviate some of the difficulties and for consideration of whether such additional investment might be required for a longer period, so that we can get a longer-term solution. We need to increase the capacity of advice services and support all that they do in order to help the most vulnerable people. We can either use the powers that we have here to help people and continue to argue with the Tory Government, or we can do nothing while the poorest people in our society suffer even more.

13:37

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I thank Alex Rowley for bringing this important matter to the chamber for debate. I welcome the joint letter and the cross-party support that it has received, and I hope that it will finally make the UK Government take notice of the devastating impact that universal credit is having on people, although given the response of the one Conservative member who has contributed to the debate so far today, I do not feel too optimistic.

As members will be aware, universal credit is already operational in the Highlands. It was piloted in Inverness and it now covers the whole of the Highland Council area. Because of the problems that we encountered in Highland, and in the other pilot areas, Angela Constance had already called for the UK Government to halt the roll-out back in March, but to absolutely no avail. It is yet another example of the UK Government not listening to the people of the Highlands and not listening to the people of Scotland.

As others have said in this debate, one of the main problems is that new claimants have to wait up to six weeks before receiving their first payment, and longer in some circumstances. I know that it is difficult for people in privileged positions who come from wealthy backgrounds to understand, but most ordinary people cannot manage to survive for six weeks with no income. Lengthy delays are resulting in tenants building up rent arrears and being pushed to seek crisis or hardship payments, and turning to food banks.

I and my colleague Drew Hendry MP have been campaigning for many months to have the roll-out of full service universal credit halted. Earlier this year we invited Jeane Freeman, the Minister for Social Security in Scotland, to a round-table meeting in Inverness so that she could listen at first hand to evidence of the harm. We heard the story of a pregnant woman who was forced to travel to Aberdeen so that she could get a national insurance number before she could claim any money. We heard the story of lots of people with poor digital skills and connectivity struggling with no money. We heard how housing associations find themselves in the unenviable position of having to pursue tenants through the courts, at huge public expense, for debt that is not of the clients' making.

We also heard directly from staff who worked in the council, in citizens advice bureaux and in housing associations, all of whom described the distress that they feel at being unable to help those people, because the removal of implicit consent means that they can no longer act on behalf of their clients. Instead, the client—that vulnerable person—has to navigate this impossible system on their own.

The most powerful testimony that we heard at that meeting was from the Macmillan CAB service, which helps people who are terminally ill to put their affairs in order before they die. Those folk have a limited amount of time and they spend the last months of their lives worrying and navigating an impossible system. Any politician worth their salt would look at this Dickensian policy with its colossal design flaws and realise that it has to be halted. The UK Government must accept that the roll-out is not working and halt it until issues are resolved. How many more people have to suffer?

13:41

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank Alex Rowley for bringing this debate to the Parliament.

According to the latest statistics, an estimated 54,000 people in Scotland are claiming universal credit.

Universal credit was designed to ease the transition from welfare into work. It was designed

to reflect people's earnings, changes in their income month on month and their wage frequency, whether that is weekly, fortnightly or monthly.

No one disputes that welfare should encourage people to work and that it should make sense for people to keep more money as they work and earn more.

Maree Todd: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please sit down, Ms Todd.

Annie Wells: That means responding to changing circumstances. If work is to pay, welfare payments obviously need to adapt to pay. In turn, that means some form of assessment. The waiting period at the start of a universal credit claim is a consequence of that. The assessment period—the month in which income is first assessed—starts within a week of a claim.

Sandra White: Will the member take an intervention?

Annie Wells: There are significant exemptions to that, such as for anyone claiming universal credit due to a break-up, anyone with a terminal illness, a young person leaving care, victims of domestic abuse and others.

The first payments are made within seven days of the assessment period ending. Once someone is in the system—or if they have claimed universal credit or a range of benefits recently—they do not face the wait again.

I completely empathise with people who wait up to six weeks for a first payment—a period of time that most people would struggle to synchronise with the common payment of bills month by month.

I am pleased that Lord Freud has indicated that, as the system rolls out, the wait should decrease, which we should all support.

I would welcome the DWP looking at further ways to reduce the time between the claim and the payment and I am certain that the welfare secretary, David Gauke, will be answering direct questions on that when he meets the lead signatory—Laura Pidcock MP—of the letter penned by Westminster MPs last month, now that Parliament has returned.

We have to acknowledge that a responsible welfare system that recognises individual circumstances needs some form of assessment. It is a question of considering the best way to implement the system, rather than the fundamental principles of the system.

George Adam: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please sit down, Mr Adam.

Annie Wells: Universal credit is easing the transition from welfare to work. Claimants are now spending twice as much time looking for work. For every 100 people who moved into work under the pre-existing system, 113 people are now doing so under universal credit.

In accordance with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, we know that work provides the best route out of poverty. We know from the latest Office for National Statistics figures that in the three months to June 2017, the UK unemployment rate dropped to a 42-year low and the employment rate rose to an all-time high of 75.1 per cent.

Maree Todd: Will the member take an intervention? Will the member respond to my—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please do not debate.

Annie Wells: I make a final point regarding the original purpose of universal credit in redesigning and simplifying the UK's notoriously complex welfare system. That move was welcomed by opposition parties at the time of its creation and I do not believe that support has moved away from that basic principle. During its early roll-out, opposition parties were even quick to criticise the UK Government for not rolling it out fast enough.

I again express my empathy for those who are waiting up to six weeks for payment and I would welcome any changes that the DWP could introduce to decrease that time period.

However, when it comes to the basic principles behind universal credit, we should not forget what we originally set out to achieve on a cross-party basis. The principle of rolling several benefits into one to create one simpler benefit remains a good one to work towards. That is something on which I am sure that we still agree.

13:45

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I thank Alex Rowley for bringing this vital topic to the chamber. Here we are, back from recess and back debating the horrors of Tory welfare policy. There have been several occasions relating to social security when I have thought that the Tories could sink no lower. The UN condemnation of their welfare reforms as “grave” and “systematic violations” of disabled people's rights was one of them. We also had the two-child cap and the rape clause.

Now the UN has described the Tory Government as having created a “human catastrophe” for disabled people. A human catastrophe—will Tory members look up from their

phones and let that sink in for a minute? Each time when I have thought that they could sink no lower, they have surpassed themselves, so I will not say that again today. If I have learned anything over the past year and anything today, it is that there are no limits to the depths of Tory callousness and Tory arrogance on this topic.

When the Tories are told about the damage that their policies are causing—they have been told consistently and repeatedly—they dismiss out of hand the evidence and the concerns presented to them. When in November 2016 the UN first condemned their policies as being in “systematic violation” of disabled people's rights, the Tory Government said that the report was “patronising and offensive”, and that Britain was a “world leader in disability rights and equality”.

When the Social Security Committee heard disturbing evidence from groups such as the Black Triangle Campaign, as well as from trusted MSP colleagues, about vulnerable individuals committing suicide as a result of distressing work capability assessments, the Tory Secretary of State in attendance said that he found it “unfortunate” that the issue was being politicised and that he disagreed with the analysis presented.

When MSPs from across the chamber, with the exception of those on the Tory benches, united to condemn the horrific Tory two-child cap and rape clause, this Parliament's voice was dismissed by a Tory MSP as nationalist grievance stoking.

When the UN recently described the UK Government as having created a “human catastrophe” for disabled people, the Tory response was to remind the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that

“the UK is a recognised world leader in disability rights and equality”.

I do not think so.

When it comes to social security, to the Tories trusted disability charities are wrong, respected MSP colleagues are wrong, this Parliament is wrong and the United Nations is wrong. Last week, 25 Scottish third sector organisations published a joint letter calling for the roll-out of universal credit to be halted. Will the Tory Government listen to them? Perhaps our colleagues on the Tory benches today can tell us who they will listen to, and when. How bad does it have to get before the Tories will act?

There is a real danger at this stage that we are running out of words to express our horror at the damage that is being done by those Tory welfare policies. Where on earth do we go from this human catastrophe?

We could be generous for a second and acknowledge the well-meaning thinking behind universal credit that is aimed at simplifying the process and at helping people into work. However, the contrast between the stated intentions of universal credit and its reality on the ground could not be more stark. As the evidence for the damage that it is causing mounts, we have to doubt the Tories' sincerity. If they want their stated intentions to be believed, they have to act immediately to pause the roll-out of universal credit, they must listen to the evidence that has been presented to them and they must act on the issues. That would not undo the severe damage that has already been done—damage for which there can be no apologies great enough—but it would prevent further avoidable damage from taking place.

Continued failure to act would be not only astoundingly arrogant but wilfully harmful. For a Government whose role is to care for its citizens, that would be unforgivable.

13:49

The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman): I thank Mr Rowley for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I, too, would like to express my gratitude to the 25 third sector organisations that have already been mentioned, to Citizens Advice Scotland and Citizens Advice England and Wales, and to the Church of Scotland for all the work that they are doing to press the case for the UK Government to halt the roll-out of universal credit until the problems are fixed. All of that is based on evidence. It is not political posturing; it is evidence. It is evidence based on first-hand, personal, direct experience of dealing with real people facing real hardship.

We are seeing an increased use of food banks as a consequence of the problems with universal credit, and an increased use of emergency aid, such as the Scottish welfare fund. What a pity that Mr Balfour is not here because, to counter his statistics on customer satisfaction in East Lothian, we have seen a 35 per cent rise in crisis grant applications as a direct result of the introduction of the full roll-out of universal credit. As Mr Rowley and other members have said, the six-week wait produces an increase in rent arrears and rising debt before people even begin to try to deal with some of the situations that they face.

It is not a question of how well people manage their money, and nor is it about directing people towards work. Thirty-eight per cent of the people receiving universal credit are in work and are experiencing those very problems. It is about enforced anxiety, debt, poverty and misery, and those things have been enforced by the UK Government.

Mr Balfour's description of how well universal credit is doing utterly beggars belief. It is jaw dropping in its simplicity and in its refusal to acknowledge what is actually going on. When Citizens Advice Scotland, which was one of the organisations that welcomed the initial policy intent to simplify the social security system, and which still supports simplifying the social security system, says that we have to halt the way that that is being done, because of all that evidence of hardship, the Government ought to listen.

I am grateful to Ms Wells for reading out the DWP's public relations notice, but her empathy and sympathy do not help to address the problems of increased poverty, increased rent arrears and increased hardship that the manner of roll-out of universal credit and some of the fundamental policy components are causing to people the length and breadth of the country.

I am also very grateful indeed to Mr Findlay—it is a pity that he is not here and I hope that he reads this—for calling out what is clearly the strategy of the Scottish Conservatives, which is to sit on those benches when confronted by a debate about a UK Government policy that is indefensible and to choose to speak while utterly ignoring the points that are being raised, or otherwise to sit silent. Let me tell them this. When they sit silent, they collude with the problems. When they refuse to address them, they collude with those problems. We will never ever let them off the hook.

The UK Government is not listening. As Maree Todd said, my colleague Angela Constance wrote in March to the Secretary of State outlining in detail the problems with the roll-out of universal credit and asking him to pause it and fix those problems. In return we received a five-page letter extolling its virtues.

In the face of all the evidence and experience north and south of the border, there is no rationale for not pausing and fixing the system, so we are forced to conclude that the only reason must be utter contempt for the damage that is being done, arrogance about believing that it is always right, and a failure and unwillingness to admit to the sheer incompetence involved in the roll-out. There is a unique combination of contempt, arrogance and incompetence. Let that be the final say on what the UK Government is all about when it comes to social security.

Yes, we have limited powers in this Parliament and we will use them, but the DWP will charge us for that privilege. Those limited powers, to offer a choice on making rent payment direct to landlords fortnightly, will be introduced, but we do not have the powers to deal with the most damaging aspects of universal credit or its fundamental flaws.

Social security should be there for us all, to help us, not trip us up. Our approach in this Parliament, which I believe is supported across the chamber, except by Conservative members, is to have a rights-based social security system. We recognise that it is an investment in us all, as Mr Findlay said, and that it is there to provide help and support. That is why, in the programme for government, the First Minister said that we will publish evidence-based papers making the case for extending the powers of this Parliament in key areas including social security. If evidence is needed to demonstrate that we have to take those powers away from the UK Government and bring them to this Parliament—which on the whole, with some exceptions, demonstrates compassion, humanity and an understanding of what social security is about—it can be found in the roll-out of universal credit and the tin ear that is shown constantly by the UK Government and the Conservatives in this Parliament.

I support the motion. I support the call for the UK Government to listen, dial back the arrogance, pay attention to its own incompetence, halt the roll-out and fix its broken system. I say again to Conservative members in this Parliament that they should either properly argue in support of a system that is fundamentally flawed and which causes hardship and misery or stop colluding with it through their silence, false empathy and failure to hold their own Government to account.

13:57

Meeting suspended.

14:30

Resumed debate—

Programme for Government 2017-18

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a continuation of the debate on the Scottish Government's programme for government 2017-18.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Our programme for government sets out an ambition of ensuring that our public services meet the changing needs of the people of Scotland, not least our ambitions for the delivery of high-quality health and care services for all. Our guiding principles are a belief in creating a Scotland where people live longer, healthier lives at home, or in a homely setting; where services are integrated around the needs of the individual and focus on prevention, early intervention and self-management; and where everyone can get the services that they need.

To help meet those principles, in December we published the health and social care delivery plan, which set the priorities for action throughout this session of Parliament. At heart, our approach is to invest and reform to meet the challenges that face our health and care services. We build upon a strong legacy: a record-high 90 per cent of Scottish in-patients say that overall care and treatment were good or excellent; and our accident and emergency services are the best performing in the United Kingdom.

It is vital to continue to increase investment. Building on our record levels of spend, we will ensure that the health revenue budget increases by £2 billion by the end of this session of Parliament. Within that, there must be reform—a deliberate shift in the balance of care. We will increase the share of front-line national health service investment in our community health services of primary and social care, as called for by Opposition parties in the Parliament.

To be blunt, that shift will not be easy, but it is necessary for the future. A stronger community health sector will give more timely support to people and, ultimately, relieve some of the pressures on our hospitals, but we need to ensure that performance continues to be supported. For that reason, we are investing in better services to meet rising demand. That is why, for elective care, we are investing £200 million to expand the Golden Jubilee national hospital and establish five NHS elective care centres.

Equally, we need to invest in the principles that we most value. Having examined the merits and challenges of extending free personal care for

people under 65, we will take forward Frank's law, as the First Minister announced. I pay particular tribute to Amanda Kopel, whom I visited this morning, and the people who have campaigned on that important issue. As a result, up to 9,000 people who currently receive personal care will no longer be liable for charges for the personal care that they need once the policy is implemented. I know that the policy has support across the chamber and I hope that we can continue to count on that support from all sides as we seek to ensure that the UK Government does not claw back any benefits from people as a result of the extension of free personal care.

We will build on our strong and capable workforce over this session of Parliament. We are well on our way to putting in place 250 community link workers in practices that serve our poorest populations, training 1,000 paramedics and ensuring that all general practices have access to a pharmacist. To build capacity for mental health care, we will deliver an extra 800 professionals to expand support.

We will strengthen the quality of services and introduce a safe staffing bill to enshrine safe health and care staffing in law, starting with nursing and midwifery. We will also continue to take forward national workforce planning. Following publication of the national plan for NHS staff this June, we are working with stakeholders to publish plans for the social care workforce and for primary care staff, including general practitioners.

Above all, we need to invest in the workforce, which is at the heart of our health and care services. The First Minister announced on Monday that we will lift the 1 per cent public sector pay cap. Our nurses and public sector workers deserve a pay rise.

However, investment alone is not enough. Our services need to change to meet the changing health and care needs of the Scottish population. That is reflected in our bold approach to mental health services. In March, we published our 10-year mental health strategy. To back our vision of a Scotland where people get the right help at the right time, we will improve support for children and young people. For example, in the coming months we will start a national review of personal and social education and the role of pastoral guidance in schools. We will also improve transition from child and adolescent services to adult mental health services.

We have announced investment in alcohol and drugs services—a key area of public health.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Many of my constituents—this is probably true in every constituency—are waiting 30 or 40 weeks for

access to mental health therapies such as talking therapies. The cabinet secretary cannot think that that is acceptable.

Shona Robison: That is why we published the new mental health strategy and are making a huge investment in the workforce, which is growing. We are investing in the workforce to ensure that we can reduce the amount of time that people are waiting, whether that is for acute services—for those who need them—or for primary care services. The vision for the new multidisciplinary team, with the new GP contract at its heart, is absolutely about ensuring that when someone goes to their GP, they can be signposted, then and there, to the right professional, whether that is a mental health worker or someone else.

We will also take action in areas of public health such as drugs and alcohol, as I said. As was announced in the programme for government, there will be an additional £20 million annually for alcohol and drugs services—of course, making the links to mental health, because we know that often mental health and addiction issues are combined.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary say what reductions have been made in the drugs and alcohol budget in previous years?

Shona Robison: We asked health boards to maintain the spend on alcohol and drugs services and—on performance—the waiting-time targets for alcohol and drugs services have continued to be met. However, in recognition of the need for more preventive work, the £20 million goes further than the £15 million to which Neil Findlay alluded—

Neil Findlay: Rubbish.

Shona Robison: I would hope that Neil Findlay could bring himself to welcome the additional £5 million that will go into alcohol and drugs services annually, because it will make a real difference on the ground.

Other public health issues are highlighted in the programme for government, such as diet and obesity. We will limit the marketing of products that are high in fat, sugar or salt, and we will consult on a new diet and obesity strategy, to explore what more we can do. There will be radical action to tackle some of the big public health challenges.

I have spoken at length about health, to illustrate something that is true in our approach to all public services: Scotland deserves services that improve and deliver, and those principles are enshrined in our programme for government.

14:37

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome the First Minister's announcement on Tuesday that the Scottish Government has, at long last, agreed to

implement Frank's law and deliver free personal care for Scots under 65. I pay tribute to the one-woman campaign that is Amanda Kopel. In the time in which I have sought to introduce a member's bill on Frank's law, she has become not just a good friend but—quite frankly—an inspiration to me and many other members of this Parliament. I spoke to Amanda on Tuesday and I know how grateful she is for the support that she has received. I put on record her and my thanks to the Dundee *Courier*, and particularly its former political editor, Kieran Andrews, who supported Amanda from the outset in campaigning for this most important change. It is only right that I also take the opportunity to thank the Parliament's non-Government bills unit for the help and advice that it provided to me as I sought to progress my member's bill proposal in the Parliament.

As Ruth Davidson said on Tuesday, if the First Minister and the Scottish Government want to get Frank's law working on the ground as soon as possible, they will have the support of members on the Conservative benches and, I think, of the whole Parliament. Let me say clearly to members on the Government benches that, for too many people in Scotland, Frank's law is needed today and was needed yesterday, and we need action from the Scottish Government to deliver the policy at the earliest opportunity.

It is more than 10 years since the Scottish National Party Government took full charge of Scotland's NHS, so this is an appropriate moment to assess the SNP's record in running our health services in Scotland for more than a decade. A legitimate place to start that assessment is the SNP's 2007 manifesto, which, I am sorry to say, is littered with now broken promises.

The targets pledged in 2007 for waiting times from referral to treatment and for cancer patients have been consistently missed. An NHS redress bill has failed to materialise. There was a promised reduction in antidepressants, but instead antidepressant use has soared. A pledge to ring fence mental health funding in the funding to health boards and local authorities was abandoned. Health checks for all men and women when they reach the age of 40 have been discontinued. The list goes on.

Similar analysis of the SNP's 2011 and 2016 manifestos reveals a further catalogue of let-downs. Not only has the SNP failed to deliver many of its manifesto pledges of improvement, this summer has seen a wide range of indicators confirm that our health service is moving backwards under this failed SNP Government: in the past year, the A and E waiting-time target has been met in just six weeks out of 52; the 18-week referral-to-treatment target has not been met for more than three years; waiting times for vital

diagnostic tests are increasing; more than one in 10 cancer patients are waiting too long for treatment; out-patient waiting times are growing—the number of out-patients waiting longer than a year for treatment has jumped by more than 400 per cent in the space of just one year; performance on seeing in-patients and day cases is deteriorating; and five out of six targets for stroke patients are now being missed.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: No, thank you. I want to make some progress.

In addition, over a quarter of adults are waiting too long for psychological therapy.

The list goes on. The Government is set to miss its target for getting GP services online. Delayed discharge is still costing hundreds of thousands of lost bed days. The proportion of significant and high-risk backlog maintenance in the NHS estate has increased under the Government. At the heart of so many of those problems across our health service is the sad reality that we have a worsening and severe NHS workforce crisis. The Scottish Government has had warnings about that for years, but it took it more than a decade to publish an NHS workforce plan.

Decisions that were made by SNP ministers during their time in office have exacerbated the workforce crisis—they need to have the humility to accept that. It was Nicola Sturgeon, the then health secretary, who made the very poor decision in 2012 to cut the number of student nurse placements. She argued at the time that the cuts were a “sensible way forward”, when the Royal College of Nursing was warning that the move was not sustainable and would impact on patient care.

More recently, in the 2016 budget, the SNP cut funding for alcohol and drug partnerships by £15 million, as Neil Findlay mentioned. Therefore, many members of the Parliament found it a little ironic to hear the First Minister announce on Tuesday funding for alcohol and drug services, when it is her Government that has put those services in such a difficult position over the past year.

Scottish Conservatives recognise that there is an ever-increasing demand for health services in Scotland, that we face significant demographic challenges and that, at the same time, we need to shift NHS investment into prevention, innovation and community services.

In the run-up to the 2021 election, we will continue to expose the Government's ever-growing record of failure on our NHS, but we will also work with NHS staff and health experts to provide positive alternatives that will offer a new

approach that we will ask the people of Scotland to endorse in 2021.

14:43

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of interests.

The SNP Governments over the past 10 years have consistently been the champions of public services, and nowhere is that more evident than in our NHS. The Westminster Government has embarked on a hostile campaign of cuts and enthusiastic opening up of services to private bidders, so we have been fortunate in Scotland that our health service is devolved, which has allowed our Government to follow a more productive, inclusive and person-centred approach than that in the rest of the UK.

Despite the restrictions of Barnett, the SNP Government has protected the front-line health budget and used the money wisely. The Government has actually increased spending, with the annual health resource budget up by 40 per cent—£3.6 billion—from 2006 to today. By the end of this session of Parliament, health funding will have increased by almost £2 billion on top of the £3.3 billion that the SNP had already delivered. We are investing £116 more per head in health than the UK Government is, and we continue to invest in our primary care and community services.

Since 2007, the SNP Government has increased staffing in the NHS, with 12,000 more full-time equivalent staff than were in place when the SNP took office in 2007. Staffing is projected to grow by another 1,400 full-time equivalent staff in the coming year.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Haughey: I would like to make a little bit more progress, Mr Findlay.

However, this is not just about putting more money and more people into the existing system and hoping for the best. We are building a health service that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century—one that will increasingly be about prevention and which looks to put the patient firmly at the centre of care.

Scotland was the first country in the world to implement a national patient safety programme, and hospital safety is continuing to improve. Figures show that between January to March 2014 and January to March 2017, hospital mortality has fallen by 8.4 per cent—it is a world-leading programme.

The integration of health and social care is another example of how this Government has

revolutionised health service delivery. Although integration is in its infancy, it is a model that is being looked at by others, not only in the UK but elsewhere.

As the First Minister outlined on Tuesday, the Scottish Government will look to limit the marketing of foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt. We need to work on the causes of ill health, and diet and lifestyle are massive contributors to a whole range of health problems, including diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

In addition, the SNP Government will implement a new soft opt-out scheme for organ donation, which will benefit many people each year who otherwise would not have life-changing or life-saving transplants. Where once families and friends would watch loved ones suffer and even die on an organ donation waiting list, now patients will have a chance at a new life. This Government will also work to implement Frank's law on free personal care for those under 65 who require it.

I am proud to say that our health service will adapt to address wider issues around promoting health and wellbeing; tackling inequalities; and supporting parity of esteem between physical and mental healthcare. We recognise in Scotland that we need to have holistic systems to tackle problems that have multiple contributing factors and, because of that, the Scottish Government will, in every year of this session of Parliament, increase the share of the NHS budget that is spent on mental health, as well as on primary health, community health and social care. An additional £107 million for health and social care integration, previously announced in January, will ensure that more people can be cared for in their homes instead of in hospitals.

At the Unison Scotland nursing conference last week, I heard about the inspiring nursing 2030 vision for the profession in Scotland from the chief nursing officer for Scotland, Fiona McQueen. She spoke of a nursing service that will be increasingly about prevention, addressing issues around promoting wider health and wellbeing, tackling inequalities and supporting parity of esteem between physical and mental healthcare.

She outlined the future of nursing in Scotland, where nursing will continue to develop as a personalised, rights-based service, embedded within a caring and compassionate professional relationship with individuals and communities. Nursing will continue to take into account wider physical, psychological, social, family, and community life, and nurses themselves will be prepared for increasingly technological environments.

In stark contrast to Westminster's treatment of nurses, the SNP Government has maintained

bursaries and free tuition for nursing and midwifery students. It has also ensured better pay and conditions for NHS Scotland staff as a whole, with entry pay in NHS Scotland £881 higher than in England and more than £1,300 higher than in Northern Ireland.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I have listened with great care to the member's comments on the NHS in Scotland. Is it her view that everything about the NHS in Scotland is positive? So far, I have not detected any kind of criticism at all. If the member represented people in the north-east, from Grampian, she would know that they are not very content with the NHS.

Clare Haughey: I thank Mr Rumbles for his intervention. Of course the NHS is not perfect; I did not say that it was. However, we have to acknowledge the extraordinary work that NHS staff do and the service that they provide to our communities. Every time that someone makes comments such as those made by Mr Rumbles, it hurts nurses and NHS staff.

I warmly welcome the First Minister's announcement that the 1 per cent public sector pay cap will be lifted. Band 5 nurses here are between £225 and £309 a year better off than those in England, and let us not forget NHS Scotland's policy of no compulsory redundancies, in stark contrast to the position in England, where there have been 20,000 redundancies since 2010 alone—20,000 redundancies.

However, the biggest threat to our NHS and public services is Brexit. Its effects are already being felt, even before we have left the European Union. Already, the Nursing and Midwifery Council has reported that only 46 EU nurses registered to work in the UK in April this year, down 96 per cent on July last year, when there were 1,304 applicants—and this at a time when we need to recruit nurses.

I welcome and applaud the SNP Government's consistent commitment to our NHS and to public health. The programme for government builds on the world-leading healthcare that we deliver in Scotland. It shows a commitment to funding and to evolving what healthcare means in Scotland. It recognises the value of the healthcare workforce and it places patients at the centre of care, where they should be.

14:50

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): One thing that this programme for government tells us is that the widely held view that this Government has achieved little in 10 years is really beginning to hit home and hurt. The First Minister has trawled campaign demands to concede, necessities to make a virtue of and other party's policies to pack

into a programme that is designed to give the impression of frenetic activity. Of course, while doing that, she has been sure to minimise any mention of the pursuit of independence, lest we are reminded that that is all that the past 10 years have been about. [*Interruption.*] I hear groans from the SNP benches, because independence is again the purpose that dare not speak its name.

In all of that, there were bound to be some things to welcome, such as low-emission zones, Frank's law, lifting the public sector pay cap and raising the age of criminal responsibility. However, when it came to the self-declared number 1 priority—improving education and closing the attainment gap—the most remarkable thing was that there was nothing new. To be fair, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has already laid out his plans and made it clear that he intends to bulldoze them through, no matter what anyone says. We could have hoped that he had listened to sense and changed course, but no—his contribution to this debate made it clear that everyone is out of step except John Swinney.

Mr Swinney declared himself baffled by a conundrum and a contradiction: how could anyone want reform in schools, yet oppose his reforms? It is simply because they are the wrong reforms. They involve regional directors, appointed by and answerable to Government, implementing a national framework that is developed by Government and which features standardised tests that have been designed by Government and are delivered in schools whose budgets have been decided centrally by Government, with everything being overseen by a national education committee that is appointed and chaired by the education secretary himself. The real conundrum is how on earth the education secretary expects anyone to believe that that is devolution and local autonomy. It is centralised command and control.

However, the biggest contradiction at the heart of this misguided reform agenda in education was evident when the First Minister said:

"Our premise is simple but very powerful: the best people to make decisions about a child's education are the people who know them best—their teachers and their parents."—[*Official Report*, 5 September; c 13.]

She is right. However, the decision of parents, teachers and headteachers is that the Government's reforms are wrong, misguided, damaging and unwanted. Educationists agree with that, as do the Government's SNP colleagues in local government. Further, just as we went into recess, the Government's international education advisers warned it against

"becoming too focussed on changing the structure of the education system when, arguably, the more important aspects are the culture and capacity within the system."

Teachers, parents, educationists and the international advisers not only agree that the Government is barking up the wrong tree but all agree on the real change that is needed: more resource, more capacity and, above all, more teachers. That comes as no surprise, after 10 years of cuts to education. After all, this Government has spent £1.25 billion less on education during its time in office than it would have spent if it had simply maintained spending; it has 4,000 fewer teachers in schools than it would have had if it had simply maintained numbers; and every year it is spending £491 less per pupil in real terms than it did when it came to power. The programme's only new education funding is £1 million for school libraries. That is welcome, but it amounts to around 50p per pupil per annum. That is not going to make up for £1.25 billion.

In the same way, lifting the pay cap is not going to be enough for teachers, who have seen their pay eroded by 16 per cent in real terms. Only today, we have seen research from the University of Bath that shows that teachers in Scotland have working conditions that are considered extremely poor, and that 40 per cent of teachers in our schools are planning to leave the profession within the next 18 months.

This Government has taken our teachers for granted for far too long. The truth is that making the reforms to education that we really need—restoring teacher numbers and making teachers' terms and conditions attractive enough to solve the recruitment crisis and stop those teachers leaving the profession—would require actual boldness and ambition on tax: the richest paying a little more. Instead, the First Minister says that she will have talks about talks about tax.

We have had all this for nine years with the council tax. We had manifesto after manifesto making promises. We had cross-party commissions and cross-party consensus, but we still have the council tax. It all turned out to be a smokescreen for a Government that pretends to be progressive but hides from the hard decisions every time.

The First Minister said that she was prepared to be controversial. If by that she means pursuing education reforms with no support, no evidence, no resources and no prospect of improving outcomes, I suppose that that is controversial, in that it flies in the face of all common sense, evidence and professional advice. However, it is not what we need, and our children and grandchildren will pay the price.

14:58

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Before I say the things that I want to say, I would

be remiss in my duty if I did not comment on the previous two Opposition speakers.

Miles Briggs was quite happy to specifically identify what he thinks are issues with the Government's record. However, he would not take interventions from me or my colleague John Mason because, quite bluntly, he knew that we were going to ask him about his party's record in its time in charge of the UK national health service, which is much worse than anything that is happening in Scotland. The UK NHS is the health service that is in real crisis. The word "crisis" is used a lot up here and down there, but the crisis in the NHS is in England, not here.

I could give a speech that was made up just of responses to Iain Gray's speech, but I have a lot to say. I will sum up Iain Gray's speech: "Let's not have any change to education. Let's just throw more money at it." That is what he said.

Spending time in the constituency over recess is one of my favourite aspects of being an MSP, although returning here to Holyrood was going to be a pleasure—right up until I heard those last two speeches. All the same, I have never been happier to be back in the thick of it than after reading the SNP's programme for government. It is a bold, exciting and visionary programme that we have in front of us. You can tell that from the reaction of most of our opponents. We just heard it: "This bit's good, but you stole it from us. The rest's rubbish. It's not enough. How's it to be paid for? Why only now? Blah, blah, blah."

Yesterday, we had the Ruth Davidson and Adam Tomkins comedy double act. They told us that we should build seven new towns and thousands more houses a year than we have in the pipeline—and we are meant to take them seriously.

Folks, before they were a comedy act, they used to be magicians. Ruth was the magician and, of course, Adam was the glamorous assistant. Their speciality was to make council houses disappear. Man, they were good at it. Their only problem was that they never mastered the art of bringing them back or replacing them. Their proposed policy looks like a belated attempt to make them reappear as if by magic and, of course, at no cost.

While Ruth and Adam have been playing vaudeville halls up and down the country, this Government has been getting on with the day job—and how. The programme consists of so much that I could spend another 10 minutes just speaking about it, but I will focus on education.

Parliament may not have been sitting over the summer and the schools may only have just returned, but despite what we hear Scotland's education sector has had much to cheer about

over the past few months. I hope that everyone will join me in congratulating all pupils who sat exams this year and thanking their teaching staff and their parents for the vital support that they provide.

Scotland's teachers, as they always do, have gone the extra mile to ensure that our children and young children leave school with great qualifications and are well equipped to progress into higher education or enter the world of work.

Iain Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

James Dornan: Of course.

Iain Gray: Mr Dornan is right: our teachers have gone the extra mile. Does he understand that, in return, they do not want his warm words—they want decent pay and conditions to do their job?

James Dornan: Yes. My committee, the Education and Skills Committee, has just brought out a report on workforce planning. I am confident that many of its recommendations will be taken up. Iain Gray pretends that he can get hold of a magic money tree. I do not know how many promises or wishes he made in his speech—

Iain Gray: Will the member give way?

James Dornan: No.

For the third year in a row, the number of higher passes gained by pupils surpassed 150,000, and a record number of Scottish pupils earned a university place on exam results day. Those are achievements that I am sure all parties across the chamber can commend.

Since the SNP's electoral success in 2007, I am proud that we have been able to achieve so much. There can be no doubt that Scotland is in a better place thanks to a decade of SNP Governments. The problem is that we forget just how dismal it was when we came into power in 2007. The Labour Government was in such a state that it was giving back money to Westminster because it did not know how to spend it.

The most recent programme for government is certainly the First Minister's most ambitious yet and it is welcome that the major reforms to our education sector remain a priority.

The programme for government gives the First Minister and her Cabinet the opportunity to look forward, refocus their efforts and refresh their agenda. However, it is also an opportunity to build on the strong foundations laid in the past.

The Government can be proud that free early learning and childcare has been increased from about 400 hours under Labour to 600 hours now, which will be almost doubled to 1,140 hours by the end of this session of Parliament. We can be

proud that £750 million will be invested through the attainment Scotland fund, which will drive forward improvements on educational outcomes in Scotland's most disadvantaged areas. We can be proud that the Government has rebuilt or refurbished 651 schools, more than 250 more than the previous Administration managed. We can be proud that tuition fees were scrapped in full—not Labour-scrapped by merely shifting when the fee is paid—which can save students up to £27,000 in comparison with the cost of studying for a degree in England.

I regularly point out the doom and gloom espoused by the Opposition parties, and the past few days and the past few speeches have been no different, but I am always incredulous, and find it a wee bit sad and predictable, when those on the Labour benches moan when we speak of teacher numbers, just as Iain Gray did in his speech. Labour acts as though it is the only party to be trusted when it comes to education. However, recent events show once again that that could not be further from the truth.

Local authorities have been responsible for sacking teachers and classroom assistants. If members want any evidence of that, they need only look at the situation in North Lanarkshire. Labour—propped up by the Tories I hasten to add—was in the door two minutes when it cut 198 teaching assistants; then it comes greeting about the SNP and the Scottish Government. Unfortunately for Labour, the electorate is not stupid.

For the past 10 years, the SNP has been busy governing for the people of Scotland. I am not sure what Labour has been doing, besides holding countless leadership contests, of course.

Members should make no mistake: as the convener of the Education and Skills Committee, I know full well the challenges that lie ahead for the Scottish Government. However, I have full trust in the cabinet secretary and the major reforms that he is undertaking, and in the fact that he will take the committee's recommendations into account.

I was delighted to meet the cabinet secretary only last week at Hillpark secondary school in my constituency to hear more about the Scottish Government's teaching makes people campaign, which is pushing for university undergraduates and people working in science, technology, engineering and mathematics to enter the teaching profession.

As I said, the Education and Skills Committee has released a report on teacher workforce planning after hearing a mountain of evidence from teaching professionals who advised, among other things, that more must be done to attract our brightest and best to become teachers. I look

forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's views on our report once he has taken the time to consider our recommendations.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Dornan, it is time to wind up. You have had seven minutes. Please wind up.

James Dornan: I share the Scottish Government's ambition of creating a world-class education system in which everyone has the opportunity to succeed and the gap between our least and most advantaged children is closed. In my own view, nothing that the Parliament or Government does will ever have greater importance.

I look forward to getting back down to business with my committee. I have no doubt that this outstanding programme for government will make it more likely than not that our children will be able to reach their maximum potential.

15:05

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): There is an old joke, cited since at least 1924, in which an Englishman asks an Irishman for directions. The payoff line is when the Irishman replies, "If I were you, I wouldn't start from here". Given the choice, I expect that, in framing this programme, the Scottish Government would not start from where 10 years of underachievement has put it—but that is where it is, and I will examine the justice elements of that programme.

Neil Findlay: I advise the member that it is all in the delivery.

Liam Kerr: Thank you, and I look forward to delivering my speech.

First is the commitment to crack down on drug driving, implementing specific driving limits for legal prescription drugs and an outright ban on illegal drugs. Good. That works and it saves lives. Since 2015, 14,000 people have been convicted of drug driving south of the border, compared with 74 in Scotland. That is, of course, an initiative from the Scottish Conservatives and I genuinely welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has listened to us.

We also welcome the move to extend the use of electronic monitoring of offenders in the community and enable the use of new technology where appropriate.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): I am surprised that the member thinks that the issue of drug driving is a Conservative policy point. When we said that we would decrease the drink driving rate in Scotland, we also said that we would then turn to the drug driving rate, which is exactly what we are doing.

Once it is implemented, Scotland will have the most progressive and robust legislation on drink driving and drug driving of any part of the UK.

Liam Kerr: That is precisely why I looked to welcome it and why Douglas Ross brought it up and the Scottish Government responded to it in February of this year. I was going to say that I welcome the maturity in taking on our good ideas, but I am delighted that Mr Matheson failed to show it.

We cautiously welcome the bill to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility from eight to 12 and align it with the minimum age of prosecution. It would be churlish to point out that Mark McDonald already announced that piece of legislation in December 2016. Indeed, more than half of the legislation proposed in programme has been announced previously.

Yet I am concerned. Why is the Scottish Government not standing up for victims? The Government could have taken the opportunity to introduce a genuine restorative justice programme to tip the balance back in favour of victims who too often experience a justice system that offers them nothing.

We also see no effort to ensure that life means life for Scotland's most dangerous criminals. Under the current system, families of murder victims cannot rest easy knowing that the criminals are sitting in their cells, waiting for the day when they will be let back into the community. We would change that system, and we will bring forward plans for a member's bill on the subject.

I am also concerned about the main justice headline grab in the programme, which is to extend the presumption against custodial sentences from sentences of three months to sentences of 12 months. The people of Scotland will be horrified to hear the sorts of offences that the SNP believes merit a presumption of a non-custodial sentence. The most recent figures show that more than 100 people were given a custodial sentence of less than 12 months for attempted murder or serious assault. Yes—17 per cent of those who were convicted of attempted murder or serious assault got fewer than 12 months. Under the new programme, they could escape jail altogether.

There is more.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member give way?

Liam Kerr: I am afraid that I have no time.

The Scottish Government, together with Police Scotland, repeatedly states that tackling domestic abuse is a top priority, which is quite right. However, of those whom I mentioned earlier who were guilty of attempted murder or serious assault, a considerable proportion were convicted with a

domestic abuse aggravation. It is bad enough for victims of crime to see their tormentor back on the streets immediately after sentencing, so how much worse must it be for a domestic abuse victim to have to let their aggressor back into the home following a serious assault? Had the proposed presumption against imprisonment been in place in 2015-16, 27 people who were convicted of sexual assault would have been spared incarceration.

The SNP may claim that community-based alternatives are robust, but a third of community payback orders were not even completed in 2015-16—and the figure is rising. The SNP may claim that its aim is to reduce reoffending through rehabilitation, but why then has purposeful activity in prisons been slashed by 300,000 hours in the past year alone?

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Will the member give way?

Liam Kerr: I am sorry; I have no time to do so.

Currently, more than 1,000 prisoners in Scotland are not engaged in work or purposeful activity. That is 17 per cent of Scotland's prison population.

The SNP does not like being accused of presiding over a soft-touch justice system, but that is exactly what is being delivered. Prison serves four key purposes: to punish criminals; to deter would-be criminals; to keep the public safe; and to rehabilitate those who have taken a wrong turning in life. Under the plans and the programme for government, three of those basic tenets have been cast aside. Choosing to empty prisons rather than use them to keep the public safe is the wrong approach, and the misguided proposals will do nothing to make Scotland safer.

In many ways, not least in justice, the programme is a tired programme from a tired Government. The Government is short on ideas and short on innovation, but long on bluster and back-bench sycophancy. Following 10 years of tears, the SNP would not choose to start from here but, thanks to losing sight of the day-to-day issues that the people of Scotland care about, it is where it is.

It is not a programme for government; it is a syllabus for soft-touch sentences.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you for keeping to time, Mr Kerr.

15:11

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I very much welcome the programme for government, which has fairness, equality and ambition at its

core. The Opposition parties—particularly the Tories—have failed to identify that.

I will reply to some of the comments that have been made.

I was a member of the Justice Committee, and I think that the work that has gone on in prisons, particularly with young men and on rehabilitation and trying to stop the revolving door, has been fantastic. What Liam Kerr said puts a shadow on the prison officers who mentor young men and on the young men themselves. We should be proud of what is happening just now. We want to get rid of the revolving door.

Liam Kerr used the word “rehabilitate” at the very end of his speech. It is not about trying to catch press coverage; Liam Kerr should consider the fact that we are doing a good job. If he or anyone else was doing that work to stop the revolving door for young people in the justice system and in the prisons, we should applaud that; we should not decry it.

That is not how I wanted to start my remarks. I have visited prisons, and I think that the work that is being done in them is very good. However, we can do more, and we are trying to do more.

I want to talk about the Social Security (Scotland) Bill, which will establish the first social security system in the UK based on the statutory principle that social security is a human right. We must emphasise that. Eleven benefits are being devolved to the Scottish Parliament: the disability living allowance, personal independence payments, attendance allowance, severe disablement allowance, industrial injuries disablement benefit, the carers allowance, the sure start maternity grant, funeral expenses, cold weather payments, winter fuel payments and discretionary housing payments and some powers relating to universal credit—for example, the splitting of the payment of moneys and rent. A huge bunch of powers is involved. Unfortunately, we do not have the full powers—I wish that we did.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): Sandra White has just listed a whole raft of powers. When will the SNP Government start to use those powers to make a difference?

Sandra White: I find that rich coming from James Kelly and the Labour Party. If the Labour Party supported us on full powers for the Scottish Parliament, we would have not just 11 benefits—we would have all of them. I will therefore take no lessons from James Kelly. We will put that forward as the bill goes through. The people who are affected are quite happy about the way it is going. They have all said in evidence that things cannot be pushed too quickly because the mistakes that have been made by—[*Interruption.*] Labour members may laugh, but the mistakes that have

been made with universal credit show that we cannot push things forward too quickly.

If Mr Kelly were to ask some of the people we have had as witnesses, he would hear that the powers that are coming will come at the right time and the right pace. It is a pity that he did not support us and instead supported the Tories with regard to Scotland having the full powers. I will not take any lessons from him.

This Government and this Parliament have the opportunity to shape a distinctly Scottish social security system with dignity and respect at its heart. As I said in reply to Mr Kelly, it is a system in stark contrast to the regime of the Tory Government-run Department for Work and Pensions.

I am the convener of the Social Security Committee, which is central to the passage of the bill. More importantly, with the commitment from the Scottish Government to include those with lived experience, service users will also shape the bill, ensuring that the services and processes are designed to deliver a system that not only is fit for purpose but has a commitment to a human rights-based approach, as I mentioned in my opening remarks.

The Scottish Government believes that people should get all the help that they are entitled to, which is why the bill includes a statutory principle that reflects the Scottish Government's commitment to maximise people's incomes and to encourage the take-up of all benefits.

To date, the Scottish Government has committed to increasing benefits for carers to the same level as jobseekers allowance by introducing a carers allowance supplement by summer 2018—there you go, Mr Kelly. It will deliver the best start grant by summer 2019—there you go, Mr Kelly, there is another one—to increase support for low-income families with young children. It will introduce the funeral expense assistance benefit by summer 2019 to provide critical financial support to people at a difficult time. It will improve benefits for disabled people and people with ill health and, unlike under the Tory Government in Westminster, there will be no assessments carried out by the private sector, as reiterated by the minister, Jeane Freeman, at general question time today.

The Scottish Government will also work with the Department for Work and Pensions to introduce flexibilities to the way that universal credit is paid, and I am aware that there is a meeting of the joint ministerial committee on 14 September when that issue will be discussed. There will also be grants from the Scottish welfare fund and discretionary housing payments, as well as help with heating

costs and the extension of the winter fuel payment to families with severely disabled children.

Most importantly, the Scottish Government will ensure that those who need support are aware of the benefits that are available to them with a campaign to maximise benefit take-up. That is important because we can provide the benefits and support, but if there is a lack of awareness of what is available, the system will have failed.

I am running out of time, but I want to raise one more issue. I would be interested to know the view of Tory members on the United Nations judgment on the UK Government's attacks on disabled people. The international experts on the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities delivered a series of damning attacks on the UK Government over its failure to implement the UN disability convention, and the chair of the committee told the UK Government's delegation that its cut to social security and other support for disabled people had caused "a human catastrophe" and that it was

"totally neglecting the vulnerable situation people with disabilities find themselves in".

That report is damning; more than that, what is happening is criminal. I would like to hear a response from the next Tory member who gets up to speak.

15:18

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): It is the fight against injustice that puts the fire in my belly, so I want to highlight two areas in the programme for government in which justice campaigners have brought about change.

In 2013, my colleague Jenny Marra and I visited Amanda and Frank Kopel at their home in Kirriemuir; it was not long before Frank passed away. That visit will stay with me until I die, because we were moved by the pain of Frank's wife and family watching their husband and father taken by Alzheimer's, and suffering the indignity of selling cherished items from a life in football to fund Frank's care.

The announcement on Tuesday that the issue of care provision based on age not condition will be addressed is a victory for Amanda and her family. However, they did not do it for themselves and it is too late for Frank. They did it so that others would not suffer the injustice that they suffered. I say to the health secretary that there must be no smoke and mirrors on this issue and that it must be the start of addressing the overall crisis that we now have in social care.

From the campaign to ban transvaginal mesh, I know how difficult it is to get the mainstream media to talk about issues of women's health and

wellbeing, so I commend filmmaker Ken Loach, my colleague Monica Lennon, the Trussell Trust and all the other pressure groups that have brought the issue of period poverty into the public consciousness.

James Dornan: Will the member also commend Gillian Martin, women for independence and many of the other people who were raising the issue some time ago? I would hate to think that he was just being partisan.

Neil Findlay: If Mr Dornan had been listening, he would have heard me commend all the other pressure groups who have brought the issue to the public consciousness. It would be beneficial if he would listen.

The programme for government completely fails on the biggest issue affecting every community in every town, which is the unprecedented and sustained attack on local services through a deliberate policy of chronic underfunding. Since 2010, £1.9 billion has been cut from our councils. We know that the Tories loathe local Government and have never believed in the public provision of services funded by our collective taxes. That is why time and again they used the law to restrict the power of councils and councillors—rate capping, the poll tax, the sale of council housing, competitive tendering, the abolition of the regional councils, surcharging and more.

We expect that from the Tories—that is why they exist. However, in recent years the SNP has exceeded even the Tories, with a centrally imposed council tax freeze, centralisation of police, fire and other services, cut after cut, and now education reforms that Michael Forsyth would not have dared to introduce.

Council revenue funding is down by 11 per cent since 2010. In West Lothian, £96 million has gone, with another £66 million to go. Midlothian Council has to cut another £42 million and the City of Edinburgh Council has to cut an eye-watering £148 million more. I have not heard a word about that from any SNP back bencher and I do not expect to.

Tens of thousands of jobs have gone already. Clare Haughey mentioned that 20,000 jobs have gone in the English NHS. That is a scandal, but it pales into insignificance when we consider the number of jobs that have gone in local government. No one on the Government side mentions that. Jobs have gone in the environmental services that keep our streets clean and in social services that support the elderly, the young and the vulnerable. Grants to voluntary groups have been cut, then frozen, then ended altogether. Education support staff are put on temporary contracts that are then not renewed.

Youth work has been cut. Staff are undervalued and grossly underpaid—

Mairi Gougeon (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Neil Findlay: No, thank you.

I welcome the end to the pay cap, but it has to be funded and go some way to making up for the seven years of wage decline. We need new cash, because it cannot be funded through more job losses and service cuts. If a factory shuts or jobs are lost in any sector, we see a task force, the partnership action for continuing employment team and other Government support. What support have our council workers received? Absolutely nothing.

I say to the Government that that cannot go on. It breaks my heart to see the services that were built up over the years by skilled public servants and dedicated councillors of all parties being systematically dismantled. It is the oldest trick in the book: underfund services to the point where they cannot function, accuse them of being ineffective and then hive them off or expect the third sector to pick up the pieces at a reduced rate.

James Dornan: Will the member give way?

Neil Findlay: No, thank you.

All the while, poverty and inequality increase. Walk the streets of this city any morning and you will see the rough sleepers, the homeless and those with mental health and addiction problems. A £10 million fund to address rough sleeping at a time when £1.9 billion has been ripped out of council services and integrated joint boards have had their drug and alcohol budgets slashed by several times that number is a tragic insult.

Councils are the front line of the fight against poverty and health inequality. Housing, schools, mental health projects, day centres, classroom assistants, libraries, youth workers, welfare rights and social work, community centres, home care, planning, economic development and transport are all that front line. The health service fixes ill health, but those services prevent it in the first place. Those are the services that civilise our society and they are being eroded to such an extent that senior council officers fear that we are heading to a point where it will be possible only to provide statutory services. That is a damning indictment of 10 years of a Scottish Government for which rhetoric triumphs over reality every time.

15:24

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): It is a somewhat sad reflection of our political culture that the position of Opposition parties is always that Government programmes and announcements are

disappointing and too modest and that parties that have been in power for 10 years or more have run out of ideas and steam.

However, speaking as someone who has been an MSP since 1999, when I read the programme for government and heard the First Minister's statement, I was genuinely very impressed. There is a sense of refresh about it and it is an ambitious, bold programme that will make a real difference when it is implemented to Scotland's economy, social justice and—something in which I have an interest—the future of Scotland's environment; and it will generally improve the quality of life of people living in this country. I am impressed by this programme for government.

One of the opening remarks in the programme is perhaps an understatement in that it says that

“Brexit will continue to provide the backdrop to much that we do over the next year.”

There is a danger that the way in which the Brexit negotiation go will undermine many of the good intentions that the Scottish Government has and which the Scottish Parliament shares.

As a local MSP in the north of Scotland, I of course read *The Press and Journal* every day of the week. I noted this morning that it had two stories about the dangers that Brexit poses to the north of Scotland. In the farming pages, under the headline “Warning over cut in migrant workforce”, Minette Batters, deputy president of the National Farmers Union—the English NFU—said:

“An abrupt reduction in the number of EU workers able to work in the UK after we leave EU would cause massive disruption to the entire food supply chain”.

The other main story on Brexit in *The Press and Journal* this morning said, under the headline “Aberdeen may face brain drain due to ‘Brexodus’”:

“Aberdeen is facing a brain drain of EU citizens, with almost 50% planning to leave Scotland due to Brexit, it has been claimed. The figures come from an international study from KPMG, which showed Scotland faces losing nearly 63,000 EU citizens, mostly young qualified workers with highly-demanded skills such as IT and engineering.”

I suspect that the next year or so will be overshadowed by the Brexit negotiations and their impact on Scotland.

Last week, I was very lucky to have a good briefing from the income maximisation section that Moray Council set up recently, which is helping hundreds of families across Moray, particularly some of the more vulnerable members of our society, to cope with welfare reforms and to ensure that they get the benefits that they are entitled to. I was surprised to learn that 50 per cent of the funding for that very valuable unit comes from Europe. That just shows us how EU funding—never mind the labour issues that I have

just mentioned—is an issue that filtrates through to all corners of our society and makes a real difference to people's lives.

In terms of income maximisation, I welcome in the programme for government the idea of providing a financial health check to families on low incomes because of the impact that welfare reforms are having on our society. I also welcome the new social security agency that is being set up, which Sandra White mentioned, with 1,500 members of staff being recruited to work in it. I urge the Scottish Government to ensure that not all those 1,500 members of staff are in the central belt or our main cities but that many of them work in communities the length and breadth of Scotland, particularly in rural Scotland.

It was a very welcome comment that the new social security agency will have dignity and respect at its heart, especially when we contrast that with what has been happening with the UK Government, which has just been slammed by the UN for

“grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities.”

The social security system that we set up must make life easier for people rather than harder, which is what the UK Government system is doing, and it must support claimants and not pile on the pain, as is happening at the moment.

We have an issue in Moray, for instance, whereby many people have to travel to Inverness to have their assessments carried out. Those are people who are not capable of travelling because they have, for example, anxiety problems or serious mental health issues. Anecdote after anecdote has been sent to me in the past 24 hours about the stress that people in Moray have been put under because they cannot get assessments on their doorstep. I will be raising that issue with Scottish ministers and I hope that they will put pressure on UK ministers and raise the issue with the Department for Work and Pensions.

The situation in Moray is outrageous. I have heard that people are spending money on their own fuel to take clients to assessments in Inverness because they have no way of getting there under their own steam. I had people on the phone to me yesterday from some in my local communities who are really anxious because they simply cannot make the journey. That situation is characteristic of the social security system that we have from the UK Government. I very much welcome the fact that the system that the programme for government has announced will have much more compassion at its heart.

I hope that, over the next year, the Scottish Government will put pressure on the UK

Government on a host of other issues that potentially might undermine many of our good intentions in the Scottish Parliament. For example, a constituent in Keith emailed me this morning to tell me that LloydsPharmacy wants to charge him an extra £50 for delivery to his AB55 postcode of a mobility scooter for his terminally ill wife, despite the fact that the website suggests that delivery to UK addresses is free. That is another situation in which compassion is utterly lacking in this day and age. LloydsPharmacy and other companies should be delivering medical equipment free to the north of Scotland and other rural areas of the country. I urge the UK Government to get on and sort out the regulation of the exorbitant and discriminatory delivery charges that we experience in rural and northern areas of Scotland.

I urge Scottish ministers to implement the programme for government, which is ambitious and radical, but we also have to make sure that Scotland's voice is heard in order to influence some of the ridiculous and draconian policies and decisions that are being made by the Conservative Government.

15:30

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):

Last year, Nicola Sturgeon came before the chamber to outline a programme for government that contained 13 bills, of which three have been passed. This year, she has presented us with 16 bills—some of them repeats—that will join the queue. The first question is: how are we to take seriously a programme from a Government that has such a poor record of delivery?

That delivery is needed. There is little more important to people than having a roof over their head, yet after 10 years of SNP Government, we have too many sleeping on the streets every night—we can see that just yards from this building. We have 5,000 children who are classified as homeless. More than 10,000 households are in temporary accommodation; many of them are in bed and breakfasts—some for as long as 18 months. That is up from last year. Of those households, more than 3,000—that is also an increase—include children. The Government has failed the most needy in society.

The Scottish Conservatives have called for a nationwide homelessness strategy. All parties, bar the SNP, have called for that. We can give a cautious welcome to having an objective of ending rough sleeping, but aiming to do something and promising to do it are very different things from delivering.

Shona Robison: Does Graham Simpson take any responsibility for the concerns that he has raised, such as those about people who are

sleeping rough and people who are in crisis? Some of that might just have something to do with the welfare changes that his Tory UK Government pushed through. I see such issues all the time in my surgery and I think that he might see some of them, too. Will he be honest in accepting the responsibility of his party's Government for much of that?

Graham Simpson: The SNP is the Government in Scotland. The homelessness crisis has been getting worse under the SNP, which has so far rejected proposals for a nationwide policy to deal with it. What is its response to the crisis? It is to set up a focus group and a fund, but with no clear message on what it actually wants to do.

People become homeless for all sorts of reasons. Helping them is not easy and I am not pretending that it is, but why not announce something that we know works—a housing first approach? In that, the first thing that someone who presents themselves as homeless gets is a home. To achieve that, we need more homes. That is why we in the Conservatives have been looking at how to achieve that.

Last week, Ruth Davidson set out some of our ideas, such as creating a new generation of new towns, backed by a new national housing and infrastructure agency and with a minister in the Cabinet leading the charge—not that I want to promote Kevin Stewart, Presiding Officer—or the idea of unlocking land and its value to put into infrastructure by using land value capture. Radical thinking of that kind is what is needed—not talking shops, but leadership. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Can we hear the member, rather than have conversations across him? Continue please, Mr Simpson.

Graham Simpson: I apologise on Mr Fraser's behalf.

We think—and Homes for Scotland agrees with us—that 25,000 new homes need to be built in Scotland every year across all tenures, but that is not happening. If we got on and built those new towns, we would have the chance to be forward thinking and to design them in a way that meets energy reduction targets. We could set energy efficiency targets that exceed the performance of most of what is being built at the moment and design streets that work for pedestrians, cyclists and—yes—motorists. We could design in the green spaces that people want. On the subject of cyclists, I welcome the increase in funding for active travel, and I look forward to seeing Humza Yousaf at pedal for Scotland on Sunday. I hope that he is not put off by the weather forecast.

We do not just need new homes; we need to improve existing ones. Thousands of properties are standing on a condition cliff edge. We need

action to help people in tenements, for example, to improve the homes that they live in. We will have more to say on that in the coming weeks and months.

Part of the answer to improving poor living conditions—which can lead to breathing problems, skin complaints, depression and marriage breakdown—is to improve energy efficiency. The announcement of a warm homes bill is not new. Such a bill was announced last year, but there is still no mention of it including measures to improve energy efficiency.

Fuel poverty affects a third of households in Scotland. Last week, I, along with Alex Rowley, Liam McArthur and Mark Ruskell—I grant that that is an unlikely alliance—wrote to Kevin Stewart. We called on him to set a date in the warm homes bill for the eradication of fuel poverty. The programme for government says that the bill will

“set a new statutory fuel poverty target”,

which is not quite the same thing.

I realise that I am tight for time. I end by saying that we need to do more to tackle homelessness. We need to build more new homes, to improve energy efficiency and to improve existing homes. The time for talking is over—it is time for action.

15:36

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): A number of speeches have been made and I will respond to points that have been made, as well as make some of my own.

There have been several mentions of the new Forth crossing, which I certainly welcome, but I would like to mention the completion of the M8, M73 and M74 project, which has been a huge success and is making life much better for many businesses and individuals in my constituency and beyond.

I am the deputy convener of the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee, so members will not be surprised that I want to talk about the economy. First, I would like to focus on some of this week's events.

One of the key challenges for Scotland is our lack of population growth. It is incredibly difficult to grow an economy with a static population. It was Jack McConnell who took a lead on the issue, understood it and realised that we had to tackle it. We have seen a levelling off of the previous downward decline, and the population has increased slightly in recent years. That is more than welcome, but I suggest that any Scottish Government will find it difficult to match the economic growth in England if our population growth falls way behind England's.

That is why it is all the more disappointing this week that the UK Government has not involved Scotland in its thinking about immigration post-Brexit. As well as having an impact on individual businesses, as colleagues have said, that will affect the whole economy. As Roseanna Cunningham made clear in her speech yesterday, the economy goes much wider than what can be measured by a simplistic measure such as gross domestic product. Factors such as the environment and inclusivity need to be included. There is no point in growing GDP by 5 or 10 per cent per year if only a very few people benefit from that growth. I was therefore a bit disappointed by yesterday's speeches by Jackie Baillie and Dean Lockhart, who both seemed to put a simplistic emphasis on GDP, even though they are on the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee and know that the situation is much more complex than that.

“Productivity” is another word that is bandied around, but there is a danger of using it simplistically. At least on the surface, reducing the number of staff in a restaurant or care home might suggest that the remaining staff are becoming more productive, but is that what we want from a restaurant or a care home? Maybe we would rather have more staff in the restaurant to provide customers with better service, and maybe we would rather have more staff in the care home to look after the residents better.

I therefore very much welcome the emphasis in the programme for government on including a wide range of factors in the economy. First, there is the use of electric or low-emission vehicles. As the First Minister said,

“we welcome innovation and we want to lead that innovation.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2017; c 18.]

The target of having no new petrol or diesel vehicles after 2032 is ambitious, challenging and exciting.

The Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee also covers energy, and a number of us were impressed by the possibilities for having hydrogen-powered vehicles as well as electric ones. Although electric cars probably have a higher profile for the time being, hydrogen should be seriously considered, as it potentially gives options for storing energy, for refuelling vehicles faster and for use within the existing gas network. Related to that is the commitment to low-emission zones in the four biggest cities by 2020, which is a big step in the right direction.

Secondly, the further work that is to be done on a citizens basic income—or a universal basic income, as some know it—is welcome. In a wealthy country such as ours, every individual and every family should be guaranteed a certain

income that is unconditional. Extra income that is above the basic level can be made conditional, but I do not accept that basics such as food, clothing and shelter should be conditional on anything—surely they are essentials in a country such as ours. Ruth Davidson suggested that she would not welcome a citizens basic income, but there is support for it from right-wing parties in other countries on the ground that it removes much of the complexity of the welfare system.

Thirdly, I look forward to the paper on income tax options. That is not an easy subject, and we must be aware of what England does, because people can move around. Too big a difference between the top rates could pose a bit of a risk. We need to make changes carefully and see how people react. We also have to accept that we are limited by not having control of national insurance, which is in effect part of the income tax system and which is not really progressive at all. Nevertheless, we are where we are, and I look forward to the debate on that topic.

I turn briefly to comments that we have heard from the Conservative Party. If I have understood the Conservatives' position correctly, they want more spending on health and education, as well as possibly in other areas, but they also want taxes to be cut. The Conservatives like to tell us that Scotland could be the highest-taxed part of the UK. My first response to that is that their position is inconsistent. If they are serious about having more staff in schools and the NHS, they must tell us where the money is to come from. Secondly, I suggest that they make a mistake in thinking that taxation is inherently bad. If Scotland has the best public services in the UK, and if that attracts families and businesses here because of our quality of life and the quality of the workforce, it can be a positive thing that our taxes are higher.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am always interested in hearing Mr Mason's arguments, but surely he contradicts himself. He is a member of a party that supports cutting air passenger duty—a tax—in order to grow the economy and stimulate greater tax revenues. Can he not see that his party's stance is just a reflection of what we have been arguing on a larger scale?

John Mason: One of the SNP's strengths is that we are in government and have been repeatedly put there by the public. Another is that we are realistic and willing to take on good ideas from other places. However, we will not go to the hypocritical place where the Conservatives are, of cutting tax and increasing expenditure, or the ridiculous place that Neil Findlay described to us this afternoon, of wanting more money for everything and never knowing where it will come from.

The Conservatives confuse the overall size of the economy with how our income and wealth are shared; those two things are not the same.

Neil Findlay: Will Mr Mason take an intervention?

John Mason: No—I do not think that I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Mr Mason is in his last minute.

John Mason: I conclude by welcoming a couple of other items that are in the programme. I very much welcome the proposals on organ donation and on rough sleeping. It is a bit rich of the Conservatives—the party of the right to buy, of selling off council housing and of sanctions—and of Graham Simpson in particular to pretend to care about homelessness.

I am happy to welcome the programme for government. We will all spend a lot of time looking at the detail of it, but for now it is sufficient that we agree that, as well as a healthy and growing economy, we want a society in which there is more fairness and less inequality.

15:44

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): “Bold and ambitious”? One thing that we can all agree on is that the First Minister's spin doctors were working overtime in the lead-up to Tuesday's speech. The biggest surprise of my first year as an MSP is how little legislating we have done in the past year. Maybe “bold and ambitious” was less about spin than it was about the necessity to make up for a year in which we have had lots of talk but little action.

Unfortunately—and disappointingly—the speech did not match the spin. The First Minister spoke of bold action, but the detail shows that these were merely bold words. Bold ideas might have included the Greens' citizens basic income policy or our proposals to use the Parliament's tax powers, but all that the First Minister has done is announce that she will talk about those things. There might be bold ideas, but there is no commitment. There are proposals that we welcome, such as those on early years and the Scottish investment bank, but neither of those things is new—they have been reannounced or are being reheated.

I agree with one thing—that we certainly need bold and ambitious action in education. However, what was announced was not bold, but blinkered; it was not ambitious, but dogmatic; and instead of new ideas, we got a reassertion of John Swinney's unpopular reforms and a commitment to keep on going regardless. His own consultation showed how widespread concern about and mistrust of his

reforms is. No matter whether we are talking about parents, teachers, academics, unions or experts, Mr Swinney has struggled to find support from any of those quarters. Moreover, in the debate that has followed, it has been clear that none of the Opposition parties is willing to support his proposals. For all the Deputy First Minister's reputation for competence, there is a danger that he will fail to pass an education bill through the Parliament.

The only potential source of agreement is from the Conservative voices across the chamber. That should come as no surprise, given the precedent for the assumptions and insights that are driving the reforms. What lies at the heart of the reforms is the logic, the dogma and the solution for schools that the Conservative Government pursued in the 1980s. With his governance review, John Swinney is simply bringing Ken Baker's school reforms to Scotland. The centralisation of control of schools, the undermining of local accountability, the national funding of schools and the ministerial micromanagement of what is taught in our classrooms are all the hallmarks of Ken Baker's reforms and make up the formula that the Deputy First Minister is applying to Scotland.

It was therefore odd to see Mr Swinney pick an argument with a potential ally from across the chamber—Liz Smith. He argued that his reforms had to be supported, because any reform must be good reform, and the only possible reforms were his reforms. In short, his argument seems to be one of reform for reform's sake. He is simply out of touch.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am interested in what the member says, because we have made it clear that we do not support quite a number of the Swinney proposals. Will the Labour Party explain whether it is in favour of the principle of reform to raise standards in our schools, given that those standards have been declining for such a long time?

Daniel Johnson: There are two clear reforms that we need. First, we need reform of resources, given the declining levels of investment. Secondly, the member will be aware that, in evidence session after evidence session, the Education and Skills Committee has heard about the mistakes made by Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. We have seen the reams of guidance and support from Education Scotland and the mishandling of the introduction of new examinations, but both institutions have been left completely untouched by John Swinney's reforms—indeed, Education Scotland is being placed at the heart of his reform to centralise control of the education system. If we want to look at reform, we need to look at those central institutions.

The real issue at the heart of this—I think that Liz Smith raised it on Tuesday, and we agree with the criticism—is that the creation of regional collaboratives will change our school system fundamentally. Regional directors will be appointed by the chief inspector of schools, which is a role that will report directly to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. Where will parents go if they do not agree with the annual improvement plan that the regional director will be mandated to produce? What will happen if a headteacher disagrees with the regional director? There will be no local accountability for educational policy or redress for its delivery, and headteachers will be part of a chain of command that ends at the cabinet secretary's desk and which explicitly links the inspection regime with the local management of schools. When they disagree with the regional director, a headteacher will know only too well that—metaphorically speaking—the director's desk sits just across the hallway from that of the school inspector.

The plans for governance are wrong-headed, but the school finance plans are downright confused. The Government is consulting on how it will fund schools; what is clear is that it wants to set budgets centrally, but what is far from clear is how that will happen. It does not matter how strenuously the denials are made either in the chamber or in glossy consultation documents—the central setting of school budgets necessitates a method of calculation that turns national priorities into local budgets. If it looks like a funding formula, sounds like a funding formula and acts like a funding formula, it is a national funding formula, and we have only to look at the turmoil south of the border to see where that leads.

It is clear that the changes are neither bold nor ambitious. They are dogmatic and are being stubbornly pursued. They are not supported by any parties in the Parliament, by parents or by teachers. Mr Swinney must stop and listen to the voices of criticism. He must change direction and stop the reforms, which are based on discredited policies from the past.

15:50

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Like many folk this week in Scotland and internationally, I was delighted by the bold and ambitious plan for Scotland that the First Minister set out on Tuesday. From lifting the public sector pay cap, to restricting the advertising of junk food, investing in active transport and the electrification of the newly dualled A9, there is plenty for the people whom I represent to welcome. This is my first opportunity to put on the record just how delighted I am at the announcement that ferry fares in the northern isles are to be reduced. That

is an excellent example of the Government working for our rural and island communities and delivering on manifesto promises.

In looking to the future of Scotland, I find myself in the unusual position of agreeing with something Adam Tomkins said on Tuesday:

“In Scotland we are not short of challenges and we are not short of new political thinking designed to address and combat them.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2017; c 47.]

I completely agree with that. We face a unique set of challenges, such as our ageing population and our vast and rural geography, particularly in the Highlands. Those challenges will often mean that we in Scotland have to lead change rather than follow in its wake. We will have to be bold and do things that might not have been done before.

I know that that is tough for members of a conservative nature, who like things to stay the same. The First Minister was absolutely right when she said on Tuesday:

“No one has ever built a better country by always taking the easy option.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2017; c 25.]

Therefore, we will need new political thinking to overcome the challenges ahead. A prime example is the Government’s openness to ideas such as a citizens basic income, which is one of the new and ambitious ideas that is growing around the world.

One of the most powerful things that a successful Government can do is create the environment in which its people can flourish. I will talk about a project in the Highlands that demonstrates that the SNP Government has done, is doing and will continue to do exactly that. It is an award-winning project that is attracting international interest and has received a great deal of support from across many Government portfolios. It covers housing, digital innovation, health and social care, employability and skills, the low-carbon economy, caring for our veterans and business with a social purpose.

Health and social care integration will be absolutely essential. Scotland is leading the way in the UK on that and we—the people of Scotland—should be justifiably proud of that.

In common with, I imagine, everyone in this chamber, I want to grow old and frail in my own community. In the Highlands, we have been working on a way to make that happen. Fit homes have been developed as a result of a collaboration between Albyn Housing Society Ltd, NHS Highland and Carbon Dynamic, a modular-build construction company that is a private enterprise with a social purpose. That is where the green credentials and employability strand come from. Also involved at the design stage are the people who will soon live in the houses. Those people

share the Scottish Government’s vision of a fairer, more equal country and have been empowered to deliver that vision in their local area and soon beyond it.

The fit homes are modular units that can stand alone or be added to existing homes. They are top-quality construction, are easy to keep warm, members will be pleased to hear, and change with changing needs. The same construction features that are going into those social houses are going into shooting lodges on the estates of wealthy folk in the Highlands nearby.

The houses are fitted with cutting-edge technology that can monitor health, thereby enabling folk to stay at home when they would otherwise be in hospital. The fit homes project is a preventative healthcare project, which can improve patient care and free up hospital beds. It was developed by innovators in the Highlands, to meet our unique healthcare challenges. It is an example of the great things that can happen when we create an environment in which people can flourish.

The project is also focusing on preventative intervention, using artificial intelligence and case-based analytics that were originally developed for our oil and gas industry. That knowledge base has been transposed into the health and care field, where the technology will enable agencies to intervene more quickly, if appropriate, and potentially prevent admissions to hospital. Moreover, through the social enterprise model, profit will be reinvested in health and care delivery.

The investment and commitment that this Government has made in enterprise and innovation and in health and social care integration, and the Government’s willingness to work across portfolios and try new things, are well established. The Government’s investment in superfast broadband infrastructure to close the many gaps that the UK Government has left, which were mentioned in yesterday’s debate, has enabled the technology that I have been describing to be developed in the Highlands.

That a social enterprise from the Highlands should be working in partnership to develop cutting-edge artificial intelligence, virtual reality and preventative health solutions, provides vision and inspiration to us all. I know that the people involved have not just UK but global aspirations.

I believe that the programme for government that was set out on Tuesday will create a better environment in which people can flourish, and will build the nation of leaders and innovators that Scotland can be. I believe that, because I see it happening already.

15:57

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am pleased to take part in day 3 of the debate on the Government's programme for Scotland.

I want to ensure that my constituents are part of an inclusive, fair, prosperous and innovative country.

A cultural strategy is being developed and will be published in 2018, following yet another public consultation. Culture is a driving force in our local communities and in our nation. Culture plays a central role in our attitudes, values and relationships.

My new constituency of Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire is buzzing with a vibrant and thriving culture. Summer has been jam-packed with a full programme of cultural experiences. In Selkirk, I was lucky enough to participate in the common riding from the town square up to the Three Brethren, on a coloured hireling horse called Vinny. This year's royal burgh standard bearer, Kieran Riddell, rode proudly ahead in a spectacle of community spirit, showcasing our unique Borders identity.

Other highlights of the summer were the civic weeks in Kelso—Kelso civic week marked its 80th anniversary—Hawick, Coldstream and Jedburgh. Great traditions such as civic weeks and common ridings teach us important values such as inclusivity and acceptance, and pride in Scotland's towns and their histories. It is fundamentally important to teach those ideals from an early age and ingrain them in our communities. Civic weeks have young people at their core; laddies and lassies are appointed as guardians of a rich tradition. What better way is there to show our confidence in and respect for the next generation than by trusting young people to honour and respect traditions that date back decades?

In advance of the year of young people, I must say that the Scottish Borders are not working for everyone. We are losing youth to the lure of the big cities. Many young people leave for university and do not return. We need to question why. The loss of some of our best and brightest because they do not recognise the Borders as a location that is professionally advantageous or a place to raise a family is the fault of this Government's central belt agenda.

Somewhere along the line, young people start to believe that the Borders might not be the place for them and that the area can no longer satisfy their aspirations, whether those be for a warm and affordable home, a good education, support to start a business, the opportunity to gain skills, fairness and inclusivity, or simply happiness.

We have the powers to create the right environment so that young people stay in the place where they grew up, to study, to live, to work and to give back to their communities. We must also encourage leavers to return, visitors to settle and new people to come and invest. We should not forget the values and needs of those young people. Their opinion and contribution are valued and they provide us with new ideas for innovation and entrepreneurial fresh thinking.

It is all good and well encouraging people to visit, and even better for people to stay, but there needs to be the infrastructure to support that. In that respect, I look forward to the infrastructure plans being published soon. The biggest or number 1 issue that impacts the lives of people every day is slow broadband. The programme for Scotland calls for more effective development of community broadband projects. However, in my experience, community broadband provides endless bureaucratic nonsense that does little to improve broadband issues in rural constituencies. Poor broadband speeds have a detrimental impact on local economies, especially rural ones. They damage businesses, small and large, and impact on lives. Constituents contact me daily complaining of slow broadband or broadband disruption.

Clare Haughey: What representations has the member made to the UK Government with regard to improving broadband?

Rachael Hamilton: In fact, I wrote to Fergus Ewing, and in his response he set out his stall by saying:

"Deployment timescales and related targets will be determined through the procurement process, which will launch later this year."—[*Written Answers*, 27 July 2017; S5W-10370.]

Forgive me for laying that out, but my constituents are very sceptical about what the Scottish Government is doing.

Clare Haughey might be interested to know that one constituent moved to the Borders with the promise of superfast broadband—

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: Can I make this point please?

Five years on, that constituent is still waiting and is now considering relocating. Is that what we want for our rural constituencies?

Kate Forbes *rose*—

Rachael Hamilton: I will give way in a minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your last minute.

Rachael Hamilton: Could I have some extra time, please?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am giving you some extra time, but it is about 30 seconds now.

Rachael Hamilton: It is time that rural constituencies were told when broadband is coming, and every effort must be made to ensure that it is fast. The fact is that geographical barriers still exist and rural constituencies are left behind. Rural constituencies tend to be fairly large but without adequate transport infrastructure. There are more potholes than roads, more horses than buses and a train that drops people off at a station with no link to go further.

Kate Forbes: Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: I do not have enough time. I am really sorry.

We need sensible policies, starting with an integrated transport system that makes living, working and enjoying accessible. We need civic weeks and common ridings that people can travel to with ease and cultural attractions that are adequately signposted. Young and old, from close and afar, need to be able to access jobs, culture and tradition.

Although the programme for Scotland refers to the 7stanes mountain biking centres in the south of Scotland, it aims to introduce dedicated carriages for cycles and other outdoor sports equipment only on rural routes in the north and west. Why not on the Borders railway? Already, through oversight, the south of Scotland is being left out of initiatives from which it would otherwise benefit.

With culture at the forefront and as a driver, other parts of Scotland can share in the growth that Scotland's cities have had. However, to do that, we need to get the basics right, such as infrastructure and housing, to keep young talent and to attract new talent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Bob Doris, I have a couple of housekeeping matters. Mr Doris is the penultimate speaker, so I remind members that those who have spoken in the debate over the previous two days should be here for the closing speeches. If those members are in their offices watching now, they should start making their way to the chamber.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I participated in the first day of the debate and I have returned to the chamber. I see that Mr Fraser and Mr Kelly, who have been present throughout the three days of the debate, will be responding for their parties, but I can see no one on the Government front bench who was here during the proceedings yesterday.

Is it competent for somebody to respond to a debate who was not present to hear it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a matter for the chair. It is a matter for the Government who it puts up to respond to debates, as you well know Mr Carlaw.

That is more time taken up. I was going to say that the front-bench speakers will now have an extra minute or so for their summing-up speeches. They are all very experienced, so I know that they will be able to speak for an extra minute without too much trouble.

16:04

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I think that Mr Carlaw was trying to buy some time so that back benchers could get to the chamber to hear my speech, so I thank him very much for that.

The programme for government is bursting at the seams with ambition for Scotland, so I would like to use my speech to highlight a number of opportunities that I feel the Scottish Government can seize in order to develop the programme further and build on what was outlined the other day.

For example, the proposed safe staffing bill will enshrine in law the principles of safe staffing in the NHS, starting with nursing and midwifery workforce planning tools. That is not a new thing; their development began in 2013. Those tools mean that we will see the correct clinicians at the correct place at the right time and at the correct staffing levels. The record number of staff in our NHS and the record funding from the Scottish Government will be underpinned with safe workforce levels that are on a statutory footing. We should all welcome that and we should all support that, but we can go further. I seek information from the Scottish Government on how workforce planning tools could be developed further in the social care sector. With health and social care integration, our care home sector should be part of an integrated approach to staffing levels and skills mix.

Every time I hear the Scottish Government talking about the five new elective centres for surgery, particularly for our older citizens, and the related £200 million spend, I really welcome that development. However, the money should be designated as community health spend, because it will be spent to enable people to stay in their houses. I think that budgeting that money as part of the acute sector spend is financially wrong because it is a community initiative, and not designating it as community health spend gives a false impression of the money that we are investing in community health.

Parliament should, of course, scrutinise the forthcoming education bill in great detail, although more localised control by headteachers, guided by the hopes, desires and needs of young people and their families, is something that we should all support. That control will be supported by local authorities and regional mechanisms, as well. Yes, we have to look at the details, but we can surely support the bill.

Daniel Johnson: The key point of the proposals that have been set out is that regional directors will be in control of policy and they will be put in place by central Government. How is that compatible with the localism picture that Bob Doris has just painted?

Bob Doris: I will say more about localism as I develop my speech, but I ask Daniel Johnson to engage with the bill rather than turn his face against it at this early stage. That is the wrong approach.

I do not recognise the funding position of Scotland's schools that has been outlined by some of the opposition parties. It is not the position in my constituency—Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn—where an additional £3 million-plus each year will now be invested to boost attainment, and will go directly to schools through the pupil equity fund. That should absolutely be welcomed.

I want to say one final thing on education before I move on to transport. In the chamber in January 2009, when we were discussing the new national qualifications that are now in place, I raised concerns about unintended consequences in relation to the lack of an exit exam for national 4s and other qualifications. I just wanted to raise that point, given its topicality.

On the proposed transport bill, I really hope, because of my experience with First Bus Greater Glasgow, that additional powers and regulations will be given to local authorities. I genuinely do my best to build a constructive relationship with the company, but doing so is not always the easiest thing in the world. The company is very courteous and I am trying to get that dialogue going. There is, however, no consultation process whatsoever when the company decides to change or to axe a service. It would say that the four weeks' notice that it gives to the regional transport authority is that consultation. It is not, and it is not good enough. Consultations about service alterations or cancellations must be put on a statutory basis, so I hope that that is in the transport bill, when it emerges.

I also hope that the transport bill gives consideration to coproducing routes or changing tendering rules in relation to routes because quite often, a bus company puts on a service knowing that it is socially desirable and knowing that it will

lose money, but then pulls the plug on it and the regional transport authority moves in to subsidise the service. There has to be a better way of doing things. There are huge opportunities in the transport bill, and everyone in the chamber should welcome it.

I am delighted that the proposed child poverty bill has been mentioned. I am also delighted to see the £50 million fund to direct moneys not to solve child poverty but to flesh out the framework that Parliament is legislating on at the moment.

Earlier this year, the *Evening Times* reported that 2,000 families in Glasgow were using food banks during the school holidays. I am delighted to see that the SNP city government in Glasgow is now looking at mechanisms to ensure that every young person will be fed during the school holidays, without means testing, in community centres and schools or wherever.

However, I think that there might be an even better way of doing that. In my constituency, I see a network of football clubs, dance groups, youth clubs, drama societies, music groups, sports groups, scout groups and a variety of other vibrant organisations. They sometimes struggle for cash, but during the summer holidays, the October week and so on, they effectively offer subsidised childcare; people pay £50 and their child goes to a football camp for two weeks. Let us use some of the money that we are talking about to fund some of those organisations so that each young person, when they come to their summer holidays, their Easter break or their October week, can have a schedule of activities via the drama clubs, the football clubs, the dance groups, the youth groups, the music and sports societies and so on, and let us make sure that they get a meal while they are there. There could be a more integrated way of tackling child poverty that boosts the other educational opportunities for young people and improves their social development outwith school.

I see that I am starting to run out of time. What I have genuinely tried to do today is what most members unfortunately have not done, which is debate the Scottish Government's programme for government. I have mentioned only a few of the forthcoming pieces of legislation in the programme. It is bursting at the seams with ideas, but most members in this chamber have sought to make party-political points rather than to engage with it. I hope that that yah-boo politics disappears quite quickly and that we come to a cross-party consensus to improve the bills and get them on the statute books.

The programme for government is ambitious for Scotland, and that is what this Parliament should be all about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Richard Lyle, who is the last speaker in the open debate.

16:11

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I want to begin by associating myself with comments that have been made by my SNP colleagues over the past few days. I share their view that the programme for government is ambitious and is filled with ideas and a passion to deliver for all the people of Scotland.

There are many bills in the programme for government, but I want to focus on a number of key areas, including my subject of the week, which is the “Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland 2016-17” figures, the impact of Brexit on our economy, and the impact of planning on our desire for economic growth. Those issues of course frame my two main points, which concern our record of achievement on the economy and our future plans to deliver for Scotland.

The SNP Government has a record to be proud of on the economy, including its establishment of a highly competitive business rates regime, its extension to 100,000 of the number of business premises that pay no business rates due to the small business bonus scheme, its cutting of the business rate poundage by 3.7 per cent for all business properties, and its action to support Scotland’s trade, exports and international connections. Indeed, the SNP Government has presided over the Scottish economy’s longest period of uninterrupted growth since 2001.

I am sure that many members will have gathered by now that I am rather sceptical about the accuracy of the findings of the GERS report, particularly in the light of the answer that was given by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution in response to a question that I asked in the chamber yesterday. We have to remember that many items are involved in a country’s economic standing. [*Interruption.*] I am sure that there are some people who will disagree with me—I just heard some of them trying to do so—particularly those who want to continue to talk Scotland down. I believe that a review of GERS would be a welcome step forward. That view is supported by people outwith this chamber.

I remember that when, more than 50 years ago, the UK Labour Government was bankrupt, it had to go to the International Monetary Fund for a bail-out loan, and I also recall the severe balance of payments deficit that the UK had under both the Conservatives and Labour. It is funny that no one wants to talk about the balance of payments nowadays, or about the trillions of pounds of deficit that the UK Parliament now has.

James Kelly: Will the member take an intervention?

Richard Lyle: No. I have no time.

I want to reflect on the independent review of the planning system. Planning stimulates the economy. The forthcoming planning bill will ensure that there is a greater focus on delivering the development that Scotland needs, with the infrastructure to support it. We must be proactive in bringing investment to Scotland and to our many areas that will benefit from the economic upturn that projects will bring. Whether we are dealing with large-scale building projects or housing development, we have to ensure that we develop timescales that meet the needs of local people and developers.

I agree with the desire to set out a clear view of how areas will develop in the future. If others are critical of the current planning process, they have to support the intention to speed it up. I note that one member has highlighted the delay in planning applications and I agree that that must be looked at. Yes—planning has to take account of green belt, but if we want to speed up planning and build new towns, as some people have suggested, the review should go a long way towards supporting those aims. We need a planning system that is streamlined and pragmatic, that supports innovation and development, and which encourages the growth of our communities and industries—growth that, of course, grows our economy.

We have to work with communities, businesses and entrepreneurs to provide economic growth. If we do not allocate green-belt land to build on, where will we get the new towns, houses or jobs for our population? I believe that the bill that has been announced in the programme for government will build on the recommendations of the independent review that was carried out by a panel of experts last year, and it will help to support economic growth, the delivery of houses and increased community involvement in planning decisions.

I am proud of this SNP Scottish Government. I am proud that it is getting on with the day job. It is delivering the type of forward thinking and space for innovation on which our nation will thrive.

The programme for government that has been outlined by our First Minister sets our nation on a trajectory for the coming years that will shape and pave our way to a fairer and more prosperous future for Scotland and its people. However, it should be remembered that that is set against the backdrop of Brexit and the increasingly reckless approach that is so customary of the Conservative UK Government. Indeed, while our Government acts with innovation, ambition and future thinking

to grow our country and our economy, the UK Government has been found out as having no plan for Brexit and its associated negative impact on economic growth.

We now see the pound-to-euro rate slumping—the pound is nearly on a par with the euro. Over the past year there has been a massive devaluation of the pound against the euro and the dollar. Brexit paints a bleak image—so much so that some people in this Parliament want another Brexit referendum. I say good luck to them.

There is hope. Ultimately, our programme for government shines bright with hope, ambition and a desire to improve the life chances of everyday Scots, be that on the economy, for which we will deliver a national investment bank to support growth; on our investment in delivering innovative low-carbon energy solutions; through lifting the public sector pay cap—the people who keep Scotland running are the public sector workforce; and through our plans for education, justice and the environment.

The message from the debate over the past few days is clear. The programme for government that has been put forward by our First Minister—and by the SNP Government, in its 10th year in government—is one that delivers for the people and for Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to closing speeches, I thank the members who have taken heed and turned up. However, we have a rather substantial list of members who took part in the debate over the three days but are not in the chamber now. Their names have been taken down and we will decide what punishment they will have in due course. I have a range at my disposal—I have to have some fun.

16:18

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): At the top of this debate on Tuesday, the First Minister rose to deliver the intent of her programme for government. She travelled some well-trodden paths of self-congratulation, but I want to recognise some measures on which she has heeded the calls of other parties and for which she should receive justifiable praise. They include the news that we shall soon pass Scotland's own Turing's law, and with it pardon those who were wrongfully criminalised for their sexuality; her Government's willingness to extend the presumption against prison sentences of less than 12 months, while finally increasing the age of criminal responsibility to 12; her commitment to meaningfully consider the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the fact that she will not stand in the way of John Finnie's efforts to end the physical

punishment of children in Scotland. For those things in particular, I offer her the thanks of members on the Liberal Democrat benches.

However, for each of those shifts, significant as they may be, the debate has seen the inadequacies of her Government and the inertia that now grips it laid bare: in education, where efforts to stop our slide down the international rankings consist of the unwanted centralisation of school governance; in the continuing shambles around common agricultural policy farm payments and its impact on the rural economy, which, as my colleague Mike Rumbles was right to point out, received not one line in the First Minister's statement; and in a health service that is missing targets and is desperately short of staff in nearly every discipline.

It is on the health service that I shall focus the remainder of my remarks, if you will permit me, Presiding Officer. There is no higher test of Government than the provisions that it makes for the needs of its citizens when they fall ill. We are all dependent on the NHS from our first day to our last. As such, its stewardship is the alpha and omega of public service delivery. However, over the summer, we have seen the true mettle of Government's efforts on that agenda and it has been found wanting.

For yet another cycle of parliamentary business, the rhetoric of this chamber to give mental health parity with physical health has not been matched by action. The excoriating reception for the delayed mental health strategy has been underscored by the equally pressing reality that there is no replacement for the suicide strategy that expired last December, despite our learning over the summer of an 8 per cent increase in people taking their own life in this country.

In child and adolescent mental health, we see young people like my constituent Dan McGregor forced to wait nearly a year for treatment. That alone is a national outrage, yet the number of children under 18 being prescribed antidepressants has doubled since 2010 because of insufficient provision of talking therapies.

In workforce planning, GPs' surgeries in our nation's capital are closing shop for want of partners, while half of all nurses told the Royal College of Nursing that staffing shortages had led to patient care being compromised on their previous shift. The safe staffing bill—this Government's response to that crisis—has been criticised by the sector for only paying lip-service to patient care. It will do nothing more than enshrine workforce planning tools in law. Those tools are already mandatory, yet they fail to deliver the staffing levels and skill mix required to meet patients' needs.

The failings of the Government's drug strategy can be measured out from cradle to grave. In the past three years, more than 700 babies were born with neonatal abstinence syndrome and required immediate rehab. In August, we learned that nearly 900 people died in drug-related circumstances last year; David Liddell, chief executive of the Scottish Drugs Forum, described that as

"a national tragedy that requires a fundamental rethink of our approach."

Put simply, that statistic on drug-related mortality sets us apart as the worst performing country in the European Union. Ask any expert and they will say that there is a causal relationship between this Government's 23 per cent cut to drug and alcohol services and that tragic human cost. That is an index of shame for this Government.

It would be all too easy for me, as an Opposition member, to point out where standards are falling and this Government's inadequacies of command. As we move forward into this year I will provide and offer radical and constructive solutions, such as a doubling of child and adolescent mental health services funding, a talking therapist in every GP surgery, a penny on income tax for education to restore funding to our nurseries and schools and for college places, and the immediate restoration of funding to our drug and alcohol partnerships.

At the end of her statement, the First Minister described the kind of Scotland that she wants to build. I do not think that a soul in this chamber doubts her integrity or does not share much of that same ambition, but we will never be the best place to grow up if our kids can get a better education south of the border or while kids in crisis can wait up to two years for mental health treatment. We will never be the best place to be cared for when we fall ill if people cannot get a doctor's appointment and patients have to wait hundreds upon hundreds of days for hospital discharge. We will never be the best place to grow old while our senior citizens cannot access the care packages that they need to live independently.

This debate traditionally sets the tone for the year ahead, so in the spirit of consensus I reiterate our thanks to the Government for heeding the calls of my party, and of others, in the areas that I have described. I reach out to the Government in all sincerity in the hope that we can work together, so that it might not only take responsibility for the failures identified, but listen to the plurality of solutions that come from the members on other benches in this chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

I call John Finnie to close for the independents. You have up to seven minutes, Mr Finnie.

John Finnie: Thank you, Presiding Officer, but I am closing for the Green Party.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I beg your pardon. Hush my soul. I am historically correct but wrong.

16:25

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I welcome many of the announcements in the programme for government. For example, we are very pleased that the public sector pay cap is to be scrapped. However, we need to realise that expectations will need to be managed as there is a requirement to deliver on years of lost income for valued public servants.

Part of the discussion that we need to have is about tax powers, and the Scottish Green Party should be counted in on that discussion. Two years ago, we proposed using the new tax powers to cut taxes for people who are on lower-than-average incomes and to raise taxes for those who are on higher-than-average incomes. That is more progressive than the across-the-board rises that others are proposing, and it is entirely about making Scotland fairer and raising funds for high-quality public services. We will be happy to engage with others on the issue. However, we have one plea. Let us be creative with those powers rather than just making tweaks to a system that we have inherited from the United Kingdom Government. Last year, we got the Scottish Government to cancel a tax cut for higher earners, so let us see if we can go much further this time.

It has been suggested that this is the greenest programme ever. Time will tell, but in the interim, the Scottish Green Party will scrutinise. We recognise that we have no monopoly on environmental issues and we welcome the growing consensus that the planet faces significant challenges and that collaborative working is required.

Many of the First Minister's announcements have the potential to mitigate climate change but, as ever, the devil is in the detail of, for example, the finances behind each of the announcements, the policies that will be developed, the way in which those policies will interact, their overall direction of travel, and their review and assessment.

I will talk about some of the policies individually. The phasing out of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2032 is to be welcomed, as is making the A9 Scotland's first fully electric enabled road. If that is the plan, let us start from the north and head south from Thurso for once. It is a good ambition but,

given the fact that many of the manufacturers are stopping making petrol and diesel engines, was it not going to happen anyway?

Shifting to electric cars can help to reduce air pollution and climate change emissions, but it will not tackle congestion. Investment in our railways, buses and bike lanes will do that. The programme for government says that the electric superhighway sends an important signal on the future of motorised transport in Scotland. It certainly does—it sends the signal that the motor car is still king.

There is a similar push to electrify the railway that runs alongside the A9. The Scottish Government had an aspiration to electrify all the lines between Scottish cities by 2030. Next year, the Highland main line will get refurbished high-speed trains. I spoke to a rail expert about that and he described them as diesel guzzlers. Surely that situation cannot go on beyond 2030, because those trains will be more than 50 years old.

We welcome the doubling of funding for active travel to £80 million from 2018-19 but that, of course, reflects the previous underinvestment and should be compared with the annual £150 million subsidy that the Scottish Government plans to give the most polluting form of transport by cutting the air departure tax. A cut for aviation will increase inequalities, which is entirely inconsistent with the Scottish Government's commitment to social equality. Aviation is used disproportionately by those in higher income groups, and 70 per cent of all flights in the UK are taken by the wealthiest 50 per cent of the population.

In contrast, people on lower incomes depend disproportionately on buses, walking and cycling, and the recent Scottish budget saw spending frozen on those modes of transport. To put the £150 million into perspective, it is almost three times the total support for buses through the bus service operators grant. We welcome the extension of the bus fund, but it is quite apparent that the Scottish Government has low expectations for buses. Indeed, our transport minister recently said:

"Our own survey data shows that the proportion of bus journeys undertaken in rural areas is significantly lower than that of urban areas. As such, currently in rural areas there can be limited capacity for mode shift to bus."—*[Written Answers, 14 March 2017; S5W-7631.]*

There is no reason to believe that that is a limiting factor in modal shift. Rather, it is a recognition of the shortcomings in the quality of transport in semi-rural and rural areas. However, the Scottish Government's position was that it did not envisage growth in bus use. I hope that the new approach signals a change.

On the innovation fund, the £60 million to deliver wider low-carbon energy infrastructure solutions for Scotland is very welcome. It will, of course, take a lot of energy in every respect to deliver on that. A bill is coming up on planning, which the Green Party maintains a keen interest in. There are opportunities to reflect some of the policy announcements in the decisions that are taken on that bill.

I turn to the ScotRail franchise contract. We welcome the cross-party engagement. The Scottish Green Party's call is unequivocal: we want to see rail nationalised. Although that is not presently possible, we would like the service to act like ferries in serving our communities, not shareholders.

Low-emission zones in the four largest cities are very welcome. That announcement is maybe an example of Green pressure bearing fruit. My colleague Mark Ruskell led a debate on the issue earlier this year and has asked questions at First Minister's question time on it. Of course we welcome the creation of four zones in the cities, but there are 38 pollution hotspots across Scotland in a number of areas, including in Inverness, which is my home town. There must be consultation. In the consultation that is going on, the Scottish Government must consider the funding options and it must jointly fund with the local authorities.

The advisory group on reducing waste, the possible levy on coffee cups and the deposit return scheme are good.

On what is missing, a Government that allowed dogs to be mutilated could have offset that shameful episode by having a complete ban on fox hunting and closed-circuit television in abattoirs.

The announcement on a human rights advisory group is very welcome.

The position on education is unacceptable. In addition to a reform of school governance, the plans include

"a comprehensive review of how local decisions are made and how local democracy is working".

Education is a huge part of local government, and if the Government proceeds as planned, local democracy will not work. I ask the Government to listen to the range of voices on that.

Finally, I welcome, of course, the announcement on care for under-65s with degenerative illnesses. I hope, like the cabinet secretary, that Westminster will not claw back the benefits.

The presumption against custodial sentences of 12 months is very positive, but Conservative colleagues would do well to understand the

intention and that sentencing judges have autonomy. Sheriffs must, of course, have confidence in alternatives to custody. The £20 million for drug and alcohol services has to take into account the moneys that have been lost.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please close.

John Finnie: I thank the Government for the support for the proposed bill on equal protection from assault for children. I hope that it does the same for my colleague Mark Ruskell's proposed 20mph limit bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give my apologies again to the Green Party. That was a lapse.

16:32

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to close this debate on the programme for government on behalf of Scottish Labour.

There has been a bit of an up-and-down atmosphere over the past three days. Perhaps people are still getting over their summer holidays. We do not need a postcard to know where the SNP has been on its summer holidays: it has been on a fishing expedition, looking through the manifestos of the other parties in order to pinch ideas for its programme for government.

We welcome the fact that the pay cap will be ended—after the SNP had voted against ending it—and that there will be an organ donation bill, legislation on which was piloted by Anne McTaggart in the previous session. We also welcome the fact that there will be progress on free access to sanitary products in universities, colleges and schools. My colleague Monica Lennon brought that issue to the fore, particularly through the publication of her proposal for a member's bill.

We welcome all those initiatives, but the programme for government is characterised by a real lack of ambition and particularly by a lack of any demonstration that the Government wants to use the new powers that have been handed down to it. *[Interruption.]* I say that to Mr Swinney. It is an absolute scandal that in modern Scotland we have 260,000 children in poverty. The figure has risen by 70,000 in the past five years under the SNP's watch. Although the £10 million fund is welcome, it is simply not enough to address the scale of the problem, particularly when the SNP has had more powers passed on to it.

We had 40 minutes from the First Minister. We heard about the rehashed education reforms, but we did not hear about the anxieties of parents and teachers who have had to look at a school system with 4,000 fewer teachers and 1,000 fewer support staff and watch standards begin to plummet as a

result of the lack of investment and resources from the SNP Government.

We welcome the action on rough sleepers, but we get the impression that the Government does not realise the scale of the crisis in housing. There is an element of complacency, which is not surprising, as the Government underspent the housing budget by £20 million last year.

The Minister for Childcare and Early Years (Mark McDonald): Will the member give way?

James Kelly: Not at the minute.

That was despite the fact that there are many thousands of people on the waiting lists for housing.

The other thing that characterised the debate on housing was the contribution by the Scottish Conservatives, as housing is their new big idea. We heard from Ruth Davidson and Adam Tomkins on that. It was galling for me to hear those speeches as I thought about how the Tories ran down the housing stock in the 80s and 90s and made savage cuts to local government funding so that local councils could not replenish the housing stock. Unfortunately, when the Tories returned to power in 2010, they pursued a welfare programme that drove too many people on to the streets to sleep rough. Their words on housing come with a complete lack of credibility.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Mr Kelly mentioned welfare. Will he apologise to members for his Labour Party colleagues in the House of Commons voting with the Conservatives for further austerity measures?

James Kelly: Perhaps Mr McMillan should apologise to the people of Inverclyde for voting through a budget that cut £160 million from council services.

We heard from many SNP back benchers during the debate. They seemed to gloss over the reality of what is happening in Scotland. We can perhaps excuse some of the younger members—rumours of a reshuffle continue to abound, so, obviously, they want to get into the First Minister's good books. Their mentions of a programme that is bursting with ambition really meant, "Please, First Minister, can you give me a job?"

However, we cannot excuse the most senior members of the SNP. Stewart Stevenson trumpeted the SNP's great record on climate change, but failed to mention the fact that the Government plans to reduce air departure tax by 50 per cent, which will not only take £189 million out of the budget but undermine the Government's target to reduce carbon emissions.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: No, I will not. I am running out of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If you wish to, Mr Kelly, you can.

James Kelly: No, I want to get on to Keith Brown, who seemed to completely ignore or was oblivious to the low-pay nature of the economy. As Alex Rowley said, there are 71,000 zero-hour contracts in Scotland and there are 466,000 people who are still not being paid the living wage, two thirds of whom are women. That is an absolute scandal.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown): Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: I am sorry. I would, but I have already gone beyond my time.

The real test for the SNP Government will be the budget bill. That is when we will see whether the SNP is prepared to put its money where its mouth is and back up the warm words in the programme with actual action that not only scraps the pay cap but preserves jobs and services and addresses the needs of Scotland's communities.

16:40

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It has been a long debate, which I will do my best to wind up in the time that is available to me. I echo the tributes that a number of colleagues across the chamber have paid to Kezia Dugdale. Being the leader of a political party is a great responsibility, and she served her party with great vigour and commitment. I am sure that we all wish her well in the future.

We now have what has become an almost annual fixture in the parliamentary calendar—the race to be the next Scottish Labour Party leader. It is remarkable that, of the 23 current Labour MSPs, no fewer than nine have been leader, deputy leader, acting leader or a candidate for one of those positions. That is 40 per cent of the entire Labour leadership in the Scottish Parliament—such a lot of leadership, but so little to show for it.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Would the member care to reflect on how many times he has tried but failed?

Murdo Fraser: Only the once, but we stand in awe of Ms Baillie. Why has she not put her name forward? She would be the people's choice to lead the Labour Party. I say to her and the 13 other Labour MSPs who have not yet stood for

leadership, "Don't worry—your turn will come along soon enough."

The three days of debate have been about the Scottish Government's programme for the coming year. As my colleagues have pointed out over the past three days, we will support aspects of that programme. We welcome the easing of the public sector pay cap, although we await the detail of that proposal. We welcome aspects of education reform, which are bringing in Conservative ideas—of empowering headteachers and involving parents more—that my colleague Liz Smith has talked about for years. We welcome plans to implement Frank's law, which my colleague Miles Briggs has campaigned for, alongside many others, to extend dementia care to those who are below retirement age.

However, in too many other areas, the programme has the wrong priorities or fails to meet expectations. Let us take what was said about the economy, which the First Minister indicated earlier in the summer would be a priority for the Scottish Government. On the very day that she stood to read out her programme for government, we learned that Scotland has slipped in the UK's prosperity rankings and now stands at ninth place among UK nations and regions, compared with seventh in 2015. According to Barclays wealth and investment management, only Wales, Yorkshire and Humber, and the north-east of England have poorer-performing economies than Scotland. Today, the Clydesdale Bank and Yorkshire Bank published their small and medium-sized enterprises health check, which showed that the health of SMEs across the UK is at its highest level for 18 months. That is good news, but Scotland lags behind the UK average.

The need for action on the economy is greater than it has ever been before. However, rather than bold action, what we see is a mishmash of proposals, reannouncements of ideas that are already in train and a rehash of old ideas.

One of the centrepieces of the Government's programme for the economy is the creation of a Scottish national investment bank. In welcoming that on Tuesday, Ruth Davidson said that it had first been announced in May 2013. Ms Davidson was being uncharacteristically generous to the SNP. I checked and when I looked back at that fine newspaper *The Courier*, I read this report:

"The Scottish government has earmarked £150 million to establish a Scottish Investment Bank, First Minister Alex Salmond said yesterday at the STUC Conference."

That report is not from 2013 but from 22 April 2009—eight years ago. Eight years later, the project is finally being taken forward.

I hope that progress is faster than it has been on some other much-vaunted Scottish Government

initiatives. Last year at this time, the First Minister announced the creation of a Scottish growth scheme to give a £500 million boost to Scottish business. Half a billion pounds was to be invested in the Scottish economy. Here we are, 12 months later, and how much has been paid out of that half a billion pounds? Not one penny to support the Scottish economy. This is a Government that must do better.

The SNP Government has also told us that it will take forward the recommendations of the Barclay review and that we will hear more about that from the finance secretary next week. However, is it not interesting that two of the headline proposals from the Barclay review—reducing the large business supplement back to the UK rate and reintroducing a tax break for new premises that lie empty—simply reverse the policy choices that the previous finance secretary made, which have been shown to be serious errors? This is an SNP Government that is having to spend its time mopping up its previous mistakes.

Where is the money to be raised from to pay for all that? If the Scottish Government follows the Barclay review recommendations, the money will come from charging charitable bodies that provide sports and leisure facilities. Sports clubs, local authority swimming pools, leisure centres and gyms will all be hit with rates bills, which will mean that they have to put up their charges for those who want to swim or exercise. How that squares with Scottish Government policy on encouraging more active lifestyles and tackling obesity is lost on me.

Rather than a speech that addressed those concerns, what we were treated to yesterday from the economy secretary was a bizarre rant in which he claimed, in a speech that was laden with errors, that no one in the Conservative Party had acknowledged the opening of the Queensferry crossing. I do not know where he was on Monday, but he must have missed all the pictures and comments from all of us who were privileged to be at the opening of the crossing, and he must not have been listening on Tuesday to my colleague Jackson Carlaw, who talked for about three minutes on the Queensferry crossing and his contribution to that process as the convener of the parliamentary committee involved. The SNP Government hears only what it wants to.

The Queensferry crossing was not the only engineering marvel from Fife this summer, because there was in addition the magnificent new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth. Where was the Scottish Government press release, where were the tweets and where were the selfies taken with the workers at Rosyth or Govan? Not a peep was heard from the Scottish Government about that. The First Minister acknowledged the aircraft

carrier only when I shamed her into it at First Minister's questions before the recess. That is the difference between the Scottish Government and the Conservative Opposition, because we on these benches celebrate all Scottish successes, while those on the Government benches celebrate only the successes that are stamped with the letters "SNP".

Rather than having me judge the SNP's programme for the economy, we can look at what businesses are saying. The Scottish Retail Consortium and the Federation of Small Businesses have raised concerns about the proposed deposit return scheme and said that it lacks a detailed business impact assessment. They are concerned about progress on the provision of superfast broadband, but their greatest concern is about what is proposed for income tax, as there is a clear hint from the First Minister that the SNP is about to create even greater tax differentials between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Nothing could be more damaging to growing our economy than making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom.

We can support aspects of the programme for government, but too much of it focuses on the wrong priorities. Whether it is stopping sending serious offenders to jail, as Liam Kerr indicated, hiking taxes or dragging its feet on economic reforms, this is an SNP Government that is heading in the wrong direction. It might think that the programme for government is a relaunch that sets it on the right track, but even nationalist commentators are not convinced by the Government's record. Writing recently in *The Guardian*, the commentator Kevin McKenna, who is a supporter of Scottish independence, said this of the SNP Government:

"On health, education, taxation and on its attitude to Scotland's hard-pressed SME sector, the SNP had 10 years underpinned by large majorities to reverse generations of decline. They opted instead for an easy life when they could have been bold; they blew it."

If that is the judgment of nationalist commentators, the SNP Government can hardly expect us or, indeed, the Scottish people to be more generous in our support. It is a Government that must do better.

16:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): I confess that while listening to Murdo Fraser's closing remarks, I thought that starting off by talking about electoral success was not a strong hand for Mr Fraser. My colleague John Swinney has a mantelpiece with more Murdo Frasers on it than he knows what to do with, given Mr Fraser's electoral pedigree. [*Laughter.*] Mr

Fraser is not best placed to give anyone at all advice on how to succeed in elections.

On Tuesday, the First Minister set out a bold and ambitious programme for government. It is a programme that recognises the significant achievements of the past ten years and is ambitious for the future of our nation. It recognises Scotland's place as an outwardly focused global contributor that is committed to human rights and to protecting the environment that we cherish and in which we live.

Creating that inclusive, fair and prosperous society requires our public sector organisations to play their part in delivering a more socially just Scotland. This afternoon's debate has focused on public services, which are at the very heart of what we want to achieve with our programme for government.

When my colleague Shona Robison opened the debate, she highlighted some of the challenges that we face in our NHS. There can be no part of our public sector that struggles more with having to face up to the changing nature of our society—including the demographic changes of which we are all aware, advances in medicine and treatment, and changes that we need to make in how we will deliver NHS healthcare in the future. As Clare Haughey highlighted in her speech, which focused on our NHS, that is not just about structural reform or renaming services; it is about fundamentally changing how our NHS and health services are delivered.

A key part of what we have done, as a Government, has been the integration of health and social care. People talk about integration of health and social care now and dismiss it as though it can be taken for granted. Anyone who has worked within the NHS or social care will know that integration of health and social care has been the holy grail for ensuring the delivery of more effective services to the people of Scotland. That is also the case across the rest of the UK. England and Wales continue to struggle to deliver integrated health and social care, which has largely been undermined by the ever-creeping privatisation of the NHS there.

We have made major strides in how we integrate our health and social care system here in Scotland, which will deliver real change to the way in which services are delivered to the people who require them. That is an example of reform and change in the way that we deliver our health and social care system. As someone who worked in that sector, I know exactly the difference that it is making and how services are being developed today.

The First Minister also set out in her statement on Tuesday our ambitious plans for our education

system, including strengthening it by closing the attainment gap, by setting out radical reforms for education governance, by giving headteachers new powers and responsibilities and, importantly, by strengthening the voices of the teachers, children and parents who are at the very heart of our education system.

A number of members who spoke today about public services made reference to social security—in particular, the creation of the new social security agency. Our agency will work very differently from the callous approach of the Conservative Government at Westminster. We will have a social security agency that is based on fairness, dignity and respect—all three of which are missing from the welfare system in England that is being run by the UK Government.

To set out our ambitions compared with the UK system, making sure that our system has fairness, dignity and respect at its heart, the first benefit that will be paid from it will be the carers allowance, which will support carers to make sure that they can continue making their important contribution to our society.

To build on that, the first new benefit that the new agency will pay will be the best start grant, which will help to support mothers and babies at the key point when they need financial assistance. That exemplifies our ambition to have a better welfare system in Scotland, which we will ensure treats those who have to make use of it with dignity.

Mike Rumbles: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Matheson: I will give way to Mr Rumbles once I have finished my point.

It is difficult to listen to Conservative members talking about rough sleepers without acknowledging the callous actions of their Government in London and the damage that it is doing to individuals and communities through its cuts to welfare provision in our society. There can be no MSP who has not had a constituent in tears over the way they have been treated by the welfare system that has been created by the UK Government. We should not just dismiss the United Nations report that talks about the humanitarian crisis that has been created by the changes that have been made to the UK welfare system. Before coming here to lecture us about tackling rough sleepers, the Tories should look at themselves in the mirror and recognise the damage that they are doing to people day in and day out through their Government's callous actions in cutting welfare provision.

Mike Rumbles: The cabinet secretary has made some very important points with which I agree. However, in her statement, the First

Minister said nothing at all about the rural economy and the problems that it faces, one of which is the problem with farm business payments throughout rural Scotland. The cabinet secretary has a few minutes to address that issue, so I ask him to do so, because there are many people out there waiting for it to be addressed.

Michael Matheson: If Mike Rumbles cares to look at the programme for government, he will see that we are implementing a range of measures to support our rural communities and our rural economy. We will continue to progress ambitious plans to support our rural communities and our rural economy.

I turn to justice issues, and to the rather bizarre suggestion that it was the Conservative Party that came up with the idea of drug-driving tests. The reality is that the drug-driving test was proposed in the independent North report. Scotland is the only part of the UK that is fully implementing it, to make sure that our roads are safer.

I turn to the presumption against short sentences. At times, listening to the Conservative Party on justice matters is like listening to someone reading out a *Daily Mail* editorial. As the international and domestic evidence shows, short sentences are very ineffective in tackling offending behaviour.

In Scotland, we have got reoffending down to an 18-year low. Why is it down? It is down because we have increased the use of community disposals. We want to build on that and use the evidence that demonstrates the significant impact that the use of such disposals can have. In doing so, we will reduce both the risk that a person will commit further offences and the risk of people being victims of crime. We have listened to the views of victims. That is why, before extending the presumption against short sentences, we will—with Parliament's support—make sure that all the provisions in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill are implemented.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Matheson: My time is limited and I want to make further progress.

Another piece of legislation that has not been mentioned—I particularly regret Alex Cole-Hamilton's failure to mention it, given his background—is the proposed vulnerable witnesses and pre-recorded evidence bill, which will allow us to increase provision of pre-recorded evidence. Why is that important? It is important because it will give us the opportunity to take children out of our court system. It will allow us to make sure that we can fundamentally alter the experience of children who have suffered traumatic abuse and the way in which they engage

with our justice system. Last week, I went to Iceland to see the barnahus model in action. It is inspirational. We are determined to bring it to Scotland. We want to reform the way in which our justice system works for our children and young people and vulnerable witnesses. The proposed bill will help us to achieve that.

This Government has a strong track record over the past 10 years of fundamentally reforming our public sector, building on the progress that we have made through reforming our laws and making sure that we build a strong economy here in Scotland. It is a Government that is committed to creating a socially just and progressive Scotland, and this programme for government is ambitious and bold and will take this nation forward over the coming year.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Thank you, cabinet secretary. That concludes our debate on the Scottish Government's programme for government 2017-18.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are no questions to be put at decision time today.

Meeting closed at 17:00.

Correction

The First Minister has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):

At col 17, paragraph 2—

Original text—

I am grateful to Ben Macpherson for raising an extremely serious issue. First and foremost, of course, the case to which he referred was a terrible tragedy, and I take this opportunity to offer my sincere condolences to the young boy's family and friends and indeed to the whole community in north Edinburgh.

Corrected text—

I am grateful to Ben Macpherson for raising an extremely serious issue. First and foremost, of course, the case to which he referred was a terrible incident, and I take this opportunity to offer my best wishes to the young boy's family and friends and indeed to the whole community in north Edinburgh.

At col 17, paragraph 3—

Original text—

As that tragedy and Ben Macpherson's comments illustrate, there is a real and significant risk of serious harm from the theft and illegal use of motorbikes—harm to residents and to the young people who engage in that illegal behaviour. The behaviour has to be stopped, and agencies are working with local members of the Scottish Parliament and, importantly, the community in north Edinburgh, to find solutions.

Corrected text—

As this incident and Ben Macpherson's comments illustrate, there is a real and significant risk of serious harm from the theft and illegal use of motorbikes—harm to residents and to the young people who engage in that illegal behaviour. The behaviour has to be stopped, and agencies are working with local members of the Scottish Parliament and, importantly, the community in north Edinburgh, to find solutions.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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