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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 6 May 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Dr Karen Campbell, parish minister of Marchmont St Giles in Edinburgh and national chaplain for the Royal British Legion Scotland.

The Rev Dr Karen Campbell (Marchmont St Giles Parish Church and Royal British Legion Scotland): Tonight, in the Usher hall, "Scotland's Salute - A Tribute to VE-Day 80th Anniversary Concert" takes place. I will lead a time of remembrance, with an opportunity to take a minute of silence to remember the sacrifice of the second world war generation.

As I stand there tonight, one of the people I will remember is Ken, who was wounded at Monte Cassino. His unit went into a bombed-out building. Half of them went to one side and were immediately killed. Ken's side survived, but Ken and some of his comrades were very badly wounded.

Ken was put on a stretcher, and they proceeded up the road. As each mortar came in, the stretcher bearers dropped him to the ground and dived into the gully at the side of the road. That went on several times, until Ken pointed out that they were heading towards the enemy—so they turned around, went back up the road and the whole palaver began again.

Soon, he was picked up by an American jeep and taken to a US field hospital, where he was given penicillin. He always said that he was one of the first Brits to get the drug, which we did not have at the time. It saved his life.

He was then shipped to a hospital in north Africa. One of the Queen Alexandra nurses there was Sadie, who helped to nurse him back to health. She was soon to leave Africa to travel with her unit through Sicily into Italy, and then France and Belgium. Like Ken, she would witness unimaginable suffering.

Sadie and Ken did not see each other for 50 years, before they became next-door neighbours in their retirement complex in my parish, each with their own stories and memories, and nightmares that never left.

Before Ken got home, for 10 weeks, his wife had a telegram that read "missing, presumed dead". He used to say that that was why he did the shopping and the cooking—to make up for the hell that she went through.

Those who have experienced war rarely talk about its horrors. When they do, they might tell funny stories, with all the horrors in plain sight but hidden by other words. As I have said, Ken and Sadie went through the unimaginable, and their thoughts were first and foremost always with their loved ones.

They were both people of faith who found Christ's love: wide and high and deep, unchanging and tender for the most broken and vulnerable, and so profound that it shaped them to be the people they were after the war.

This victory in Europe day, I give thanks for the men and women of faith and no faith who served and made this world a place of peace and opportunity for people like you and me to live in and be the people we are without fear. Today, we must recognise how precious peace is and work to make it happen each and every day.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Reported Rape Cases (Increase)

1. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that the number of new rape cases being reported to police has increased by more than a third since 2020-21. (S6T-02508)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Sexual violence is abhorrent, which is why we are taking robust action through the equally safe strategy; focusing on prevention; ensuring that perpetrators are held to account; and improving our laws, such as through the current Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which would introduce a sexual offences court.

I am, of course, concerned by any rise in the number of new rape cases being reported. There are multiple potential factors behind that, including a greater willingness of victims to come forward. I very much want people to have continued confidence in reporting such crimes, and I encourage victims and survivors to access support services, which is why we have increased funding to Rape Crisis Scotland's national advocacy project to more than £6 million over the next three years.

Ultimately, however, it is the people who perpetrate violence and abuse—the majority of whom are men—who must change their actions and behaviour. It is only through fundamental societal change that women can be protected.

Katy Clark: Does the cabinet secretary believe that there has been a rise in the number of rapes in society in recent years, or does she believe that the increase relates to higher levels of reporting, as she mentioned? Is the Scottish Government doing any work to get a better understanding of whether there has been an increase in sexual violence, particularly given some of the challenges that we face?

Angela Constance: I very much thank Ms Clark for her topical question. That has been a conundrum that many of us have wrestled with. We know that underreporting was historically an issue, and, currently, it remains an issue. Any endeavour that improves the situation and encourages more victims and witnesses to come forward is to be welcomed.

Therefore, my answer is that it is a bit of both. Am I concerned that sexual offences remain underreported? Yes. Am I also concerned about

the prevalence of sexual offending in society? Yes, absolutely.

Katy Clark: It would be interesting to hear from the cabinet secretary on another occasion whether the Government is doing any work to look at the underlying trends. What information can the cabinet secretary give about the profile of women who are reporting rape—for example, does it tend to be younger women or older women? Have there been changes to that profile in recent years? There have been suggestions that there has been an increase in the number of rape reports from very young women and girls. Does the cabinet secretary understand that to be the case, or is it something that she is looking at?

Angela Constance: It was remiss of me not to say to Ms Clark in response to her first supplementary question that we work, and will continue to work, with all partners across the justice system—in particular, the police, the Crown Office and the courts—to understand the specific underlying factors. Victim support organisations that we work with and support will have a perspective on the issue that will add to the fundamental facts and the profile of victims and witnesses.

There are concerns that, due to the nature of offending, including online offending, a wider range of women are now affected. There have always been particular myths about rape, including that it is predominantly targeted towards younger women, yet we know that, historically, women over the age of 40 are at risk to the same degree.

I will endeavour to get far more granular and up-to-date information to Ms Clark and the Parliament.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As was highlighted in Katy Clark's line of questioning, there are many factors behind changes in the incidence of sexual offences reporting. The latest increase is to be taken very seriously, and I hope that it reflects the fact that more women feel able to come forward. Will the cabinet secretary further outline what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that every woman who comes forward feels respected and supported throughout the whole process?

Angela Constance: We all want women to feel that they can report sexual offences knowing that they will be taken seriously and treated with respect at each stage, from reporting to the police through to any court action. However, I recognise that going through the court process can be extremely challenging for victims, which is why we are actively aiming to improve that experience through the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill.

The key reforms in the bill are about embedding trauma-informed practice and introducing statutory anonymity for victims of sexual offences, and I hope that those measures will continue to support victims and will encourage public confidence in reporting.

In addition to that, we want women to be supported by specialist organisations, which is why we will invest £21.6 million in delivering the equally safe strategy, which supports 115 projects.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In 2023-24, the median time from offence to verdict for non-historical sexual offences, including rape and sexual assault, was more than three years. Victim Support Scotland is clear that long court delays make victims less likely to report crimes. What precisely has the cabinet secretary done to reduce the timescales since those figures came out, and when will victims see results?

Angela Constance: Victims are seeing results in overall delays and in the court backlog right now. I do, of course, accept that the time taken for solemn cases to reach conclusion is too long. The court backlog caused by Covid has been significantly reduced, by more than 50 per cent, and the number of outstanding scheduled trials is now less than 20,000 when, at its peak, it was 42,000. We accept that there is much more to do with regard to solemn cases, while bearing in mind that we are seeing increasing numbers of reports of serious sexual offences, which might well result in increasing numbers of prosecutions, and that there is every indication that our courts, particularly our solemn courts, will continue to be busy.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Last week, constituents contacted me because they were worried about the risk of rape and sexual assault in public parks in Edinburgh. They mentioned the lack of lighting that makes our parks unsafe at night, especially in winter. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that our built environment is not contributing to such horrific attacks?

Angela Constance: Mr Choudhury raises an important issue about the physical environment. The Scottish Government works with our partners in local government, via the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, but safety and lighting are issues for local government.

I go back to my initial answer: women in this country will be safer when men change their behaviour.

Mother and Baby Deaths In Hospitals (Significant Adverse Event Reviews)

2. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what immediate

action it will take to address the reported failure by NHS boards to publish significant adverse event reviews related to mother and baby deaths in hospitals. (S6T-02503)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): In February this year, Healthcare Improvement Scotland published its updated national framework for reviewing and learning from adverse events in NHS Scotland. National health service boards must operate within that robust national framework, which includes a template for sharing learning from adverse events locally and nationally. The Scottish perinatal network has facilitated tailored, cross-board learning opportunities following adverse events to share learning across the maternity and neonatal community.

The Scottish Government is currently meeting directly with leaders from all NHS boards as part of a programme of work to improve significant adverse event reviews. That programme includes on-going engagement with Healthcare Improvement Scotland on the renewed approach to reviews, and my officials will meet Healthcare Improvement Scotland on 15 May to discuss that important work.

Stephen Kerr: I pay tribute to the *Sunday Post* journalist Marion Scott, whose outstanding public interest journalism has, once again, exposed failings that have had devastating consequences for families in Scotland.

We know that, despite the Scottish Information Commissioner saying that they can be published, more than 500 redacted significant adverse event reviews of the avoidable deaths of mothers and babies have not been published—not one. Those tragedies should have been investigated and learned from; instead, they have been hidden.

How on earth has that been allowed to happen under a Government that promised openness and accountability after previous scandals in maternity care? When exactly was the minister made aware of the widespread failure by NHS boards to publish those reports, and what did she do about that?

Jenni Minto: Any death of a mother or baby is a tragedy, and I extend my heartfelt sympathies and condolences to all who have experienced that trauma.

We have to recognise that the vast majority of public engagement with our national health service is positive, but we are certainly not complacent. I read the piece in the *Sunday Post* on Sunday. I understand from Healthcare Improvement Scotland that, in 2023, the Scottish Information Commissioner determined in response to a freedom of information request that individual SAERs were effectively part of the patient record

and that NHS boards would be at risk of breaching patient confidentiality if they were to be published in full. However, as I highlighted in my first answer, the Scottish perinatal network has done a lot of work on the matter to ensure that patients, families and carers are at the centre of the review process and, importantly, to ensure the safety and psychological safety of staff.

Stephen Kerr: I appreciate what the minister has said. However, we are not talking about the full reports; we are talking about the redacted reports. We are talking about children who have died, about mothers who have been lost and about families who have been left with no answers, no justice and no access to reports that should have been shared with them as a matter of basic human decency.

When a family that has lost a baby asks to see the review of what happened, is there any justification at all for refusing them that redacted information? Will the minister now say unequivocally that those reports must be published? Does she agree that there can be no place—none—for secrecy or defensiveness in our NHS, that families deserve the truth and that accountability is not an optional extra but the absolute minimum that we owe to those who have suffered the worst imaginable loss?

Jenni Minto: The SAER is a review that is carried out by experts into what went wrong and why. It is there to create a fuller picture of what happened and what changes need to be made as a result. SAERs are learning and system learning exercises that are incredibly important. The revised framework that was introduced by HIS includes a template for boards to use when reviewing SAERs. It also includes a new learning summary template that will be published on a new online community of practice once completed.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In addition to what the minister has described about actions in adverse event reviews, can she advise what updates the Scottish Government has had from health boards across the country regarding the steps that are being taken to sustain and enhance maternity services, including in Wigtownshire in the west of the NHS Dumfries and Galloway region?

Jenni Minto: On 6 February 2025, the Scottish Government published a suite of documents for implementation by NHS boards that were produced to support the aim of improving maternity and neonatal care in Scotland. They are the product of a co-development approach that has drawn on the expertise of our clinical and third sector partners. We are currently developing a robust process for monitoring progress towards implementation. A report will be published in the coming weeks that will summarise responses from

all NHS boards on implementation of the recommendations in “The Best Start: A Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland”.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): We knew about the concerns previously. Whistleblowers at NHS Lothian raised concerns about staff shortages at a maternity unit last year, and an investigation that was launched back in 2024 found that there has been a toxic relationship between managers and midwives. One midwife, who remained anonymous, spoke to STV News last year and said:

“Management didn’t listen to staff concerns—we’d say we’re short staffed and they’d say it was fine.”

I imagine that that will not be the only case of such relationships between managers and midwives in a health board. How do we correct that culture to improve relationships between managers and midwives and encourage whistleblowing, should there be concerns?

Jenni Minto: I welcome the apology from NHS Lothian to its maternity care staff following the report of the independent review of its women’s services. NHS Lothian has committed to working with staff in maternity services to ensure that they feel supported at work, safe to raise concerns and able to thrive. I expect NHS Lothian to take that work forward as a priority to ensure that that learning is translated promptly into action to improve staff experience at work, so that they are empowered to continue to deliver the best and safest care that is possible for mothers, their babies and their families.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Stephen Kerr for raising a really important issue. I hope that the minister will have more to say about the issue—families deserve more. Does the minister feel that the Government has done enough to ensure that the shared learning from significant adverse events happens is shared with staff? If the families are not getting the details, how do we make sure that those things do not happen again? Our staff are also at risk.

Jenni Minto: I agree that we have to ensure that we get the right support for our staff who work in NHS maternity units. As I highlighted in one of my responses to Stephen Kerr, one key thing that the Scottish perinatal network highlighted was the importance of staff psychological safety. As I said in my response to Meghan Gallacher’s question, I very much support the work that NHS Lothian is doing to ensure that its staff get the right support to carry out their roles, which are incredibly important to all of us who live in Scotland.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It seems that the only answers that are available to the bereaved families at the heart of

the issue are in the journalism of the *Sunday Post*. They are getting precious little from Scottish ministers and nothing from inside this chamber.

The minister will recall that, on two occasions last year, following a spike in neonatal deaths and adverse neonatal ward events in 2021 and 2022, I asked her to make Government time available to debate those findings. First, she said that she would look at that; secondly, she told me that there were no plans. Will she now, at the third time of asking, make parliamentary time available for consideration of those very concerning events?

Jenni Minto: I remember my previous conversations with Alex Cole-Hamilton. I am content to take that away.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes topical question time. Before we move to the First Minister's statement, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery the honourable Pat Weir MP, speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Parliament of Queensland. [Applause.]

Programme for Government

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the programme for government for 2025-26. The First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:22

The First Minister (John Swinney): Tomorrow will mark one year since I was honoured to be elected as the First Minister of this country, which I love. I spoke then of my ambition to create a vibrant economy in every part of our country, my determination to tackle the challenges that are faced by our beloved national health service, and my hope that we—as a Parliament and a country—could come together to focus on solutions rather than allowing our disagreements to dominate.

Over the past year, amid real challenges and deep uncertainty on the global stage, progress has been made. In ways big and small, a corner is being turned. The Government is working hard and is determined to get Scotland on track for success.

That progress has been evident in the way that we do our business here, in our Parliament. The fact that four parties were able to come together to negotiate in good faith and pass a budget that delivers record funding for our national health service is testament to what is possible.

Today's programme for government is presented in that same spirit. It contains many of the fruits of our budget process, elements of which are there only because of the co-operation of other parties. However, it is also a programme by a Scottish National Party Government that cares deeply about Scotland and has total confidence in Scotland's ability to rise to any challenge and weather any storm.

Before I turn to the elements that are in the programme for government, I will talk about some measures that are not included. With a year to go until the end of this session of Parliament, there are, clearly, limits on the amount of legislation that we can present. The Government remains—as do I, personally—entirely committed to tackling misogynistic abuse against women. Regrettably, I do not believe that there is sufficient parliamentary time to make progress through a stand-alone bill, although I will plan to introduce such a bill at the start of the next session of Parliament. We will, however, take the action that we can take during this session, by adding “sex” as a protected characteristic to existing hate crime legislation to protect women and girls, and by taking further

steps through our policy to tackle unacceptable abuse of women and girls in our society.

Conversion practices that seek to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity are harmful and abusive. Over the coming year, we will seek to work with the United Kingdom Government to deliver a legislative ban across England, Wales and Scotland. However, if agreement is not possible, we will publish legislation in the first year of the next parliamentary session. Members of the LGBTQI+ community should have no doubt that we will work with them to protect and defend their rights.

Times are tough, and times are changing in ways that I know bring real anxiety to our citizens and real fear to many in our business community. But my promise to the people of Scotland is that, amidst the uncertainty, there is one thing that they can be sure of: this Government will always seek to do what is best for Scotland. As First Minister, I will always put the needs and interests and the hopes and dreams of the people of Scotland first.

When I became First Minister, a year ago, I heard loud and clear people's concerns about the health of Scotland's NHS. They would tell me about their many positive experiences of high-quality care from the dedicated staff in the NHS—experiences of treatment and care that are invariably world class. However, they also spoke of difficulties in accessing that care—of waiting times that were unacceptable, adding to their anxiety—and of systems that they felt did not put patients first.

There are many issues that compete on a daily basis for the attention of a First Minister, but what could be more important than our national health service? I am proud that the £30 million that we committed has delivered not only the 64,000 additional NHS appointments and procedures between April last year and the end of January this year that we promised, but over 40,000 more than planned. Those extra 105,000 vital additional appointments and procedures are helping to reduce waiting lists and waiting times.

We have met the children and adolescent mental health waiting time standards, with more than 90 per cent of those waiting now seen within 18 weeks of their referral. More cancer patients are now treated faster. Compared with a decade ago, 16 per cent more patients receive care within the 31-day standard and 11 per cent more within the 62-day standard. Those are statistics, but behind each one is a person who has received the reliable and effective care from the national health service that they deserve.

Yes, there is progress, but there is also a very clear understanding that there is more—much more—to do. That is why a renewed and stronger

NHS is at the very heart of this programme for government. Getting our NHS on track is about reform that is fundamentally patient centred, it is about investment, and it is about increasing productivity and capacity. That approach will make it possible for us to deliver more than 150,000 extra appointments and procedures in 2025-26. The additional investment secured through the Scottish budget will enable us to expand specialist regional centres, and technology will mean more efficient use of operating theatres. As a result, there will be a 50 per cent increase in the number of surgical procedures that we can deliver compared with this year. There will also be a renewed focus on cancer diagnosis and treatment, and targeted investment so that health boards can clear backlogs and substantially improve waiting times.

I could spend the whole statement talking just about the steps that we are taking to improve access to the national health service. However, before moving on to other issues, I will highlight one other area that I know is of particular concern to many people. Although many people's experience of their general practitioner service is excellent, for many others, there is deep frustration over the difficulty in making appointments and what has been described as the 8 am lottery. That is of central importance to me, which is why we are acting to reduce pressure and increase capacity in the system so that it is easier for people to get the care that they need when they need it. That includes, in the year ahead, a further expansion of pharmacy first services, with pharmacies being the right first port of call for many ailments. It also means the delivery of an extra 100,000 appointments in GP surgeries that are focused on key risk factors such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity and smoking.

This year, primary care, which includes GPs, is receiving a bigger share of new NHS funding, and we are committed not only to increasing GP numbers but to protecting Scotland's advantage, which means having substantially more GPs per head in Scotland compared with elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Members across the chamber will know that, alongside the NHS, our constituents are also deeply exercised about the on-going cost of living crisis. We have experienced a decade and more of financial insecurity, higher prices and squeezed real incomes. Life feels substantially tougher for many of those whom we serve.

The economy means jobs, growth and investment, and I will talk about all of those elements. Above all, however, the economy is about people's quality of life, their household budget and their ability to pay the bills.

The Scottish Government will always do what it can to deliver the best deal for the people of Scotland. In concrete terms, that means a commitment to keep council tax bills, which are already 30 per cent lower on average in Scotland than in England, substantially lower than elsewhere in the UK. Water bills, which are already 20 per cent lower than those in England, will remain lower, as will income tax for the majority of workers in Scotland. Prescriptions will continue to be free in Scotland, as will eye appointments and bus travel for young, disabled and older people. Students will continue to pay no tuition fees. Parents will continue to benefit from a package of early learning and childcare that is worth more than £6,000 for every eligible child. Free school meals, which save the average family £400 per child per year, will be expanded and more breakfast clubs will be introduced.

Together, that is my cost of living guarantee. It is a package that, year on year, delivers savings for the people of Scotland. It is a package that exists nowhere else in the United Kingdom.

We are always looking to enhance that package of cost of living support where we can. That is why we took the decision in the budget to restore a winter fuel payment for Scottish pensioners, with the poorest receiving the most. Those payments will be made this year.

It is also why we are committed to doing even more. Last year, in the face of severe budget pressures, we took the difficult decision to end the peak fares pilot on our railways. However, now, given the work that we have done to get Scotland's finances in a stronger position, and hearing the calls from commuters, climate activists and the business community, I can confirm that, from 1 September, peak rail fares in Scotland will be scrapped for good.

That decision will put more money in people's pockets and means that less CO₂ is pumped into our skies. Once again, tens of thousands of Scots are saving money. Once again, it is a better deal for people because they live in Scotland. It is better for Scots because there is a Government that always strives for what is best for Scotland.

Alongside the cost of living pressures, the consequence of a series of body blows from austerity and Brexit, to the spike in inflation and energy costs that followed Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, new threats are emerging that have the potential to cause extensive damage to the Scottish economy. Tariffs will impact directly on many Scottish exporters to the United States, while a US recession and a global trade war will have direct and indirect effects on almost every sector of our economy.

The programme for government has been published earlier than usual, partly because it allows a clear year of delivery on the NHS and other public services—that is, delivery in those areas that matter in the day-to-day lives of our citizens. It has also been published now because of the scale of the looming economic challenge that we face. For the sake of Scottish jobs and for the sake of protecting people's quality of life, we are taking new steps and accelerating action to ensure that Scotland's economy is better placed to ride the economic storms.

Members will see the detailed and extensive section on the economy in the "Programme for Government 2025-26" document, with action on planning reform, skills, housing investment, support for our rural economy—including our vital food and drink sector—promotion of Scotland the brand and more. However, I will highlight three particular initiatives that are designed to respond directly and specifically to the challenges that we now face.

First, working with Scottish Development International across its 34 international offices, we will deliver a new six-point export plan to enable Scottish exporters to diversify and to grow markets. The plan includes more support to enable small and medium-sized enterprises to participate in trade missions in established and emerging markets; additional grant funding to help companies to unlock specific, targeted international growth; and bespoke support in the key sectors of technology, life sciences, renewables and hydrogen to maximise international opportunities.

Secondly, to enable emerging Scottish companies to grow, we will create a new proof of concept fund, with a focus on supporting the commercialisation of research projects that have significant economic potential. We will deliver an improved ecosystem fund to further enhance Scotland's already effective start-up environment, including action to transform the number of women who start and scale up businesses.

We must not forget, even among the gathering clouds, that Scotland is an innovative nation and that opportunities exist that can deliver real and significant benefits now and in the future. This Government will prepare for the challenges, but we will also seek to position Scotland to make the most of the many and significant economic opportunities that still exist.

Thirdly, we will deepen our commitment to a just transition and an industrial future for Scotland. As members will be aware, the Deputy First Minister is actively engaging with potential investors to ensure a green industrial future for the Grangemouth site. A key element in the success of that work is the development of carbon capture

in Scotland, which is why it is now vital that the UK Government provides support not only to carbon capture projects in England, but to the Acorn project in Scotland's north-east.

The Scottish Government has previously committed up to £80 million to make that happen if the UK Government, in turn, makes the commitments that are necessary for the project to progress. Given the importance of this project to the Scottish economy—given its place at the very heart of the green reindustrialisation that is my ambition and, I trust, the ambition of all parties in this chamber—my Government is now willing, as part of a wider package of investment in industrial transformation, to remove that cap and increase the amount of Scottish funding that is available to make Acorn a reality, should the project be given the go-ahead by the UK Government.

I know that many in this chamber share my concern that Scotland is little more than an afterthought to a UK Government that is willing to invest in a supercomputer in the south-east of England weeks after cancelling the supercomputer for Edinburgh—a UK Government that moved heaven and earth to save Scunthorpe but will not do the same for Grangemouth. Perhaps, with swift action from the UK Government to support Acorn, which in turn will help us deliver the future that Grangemouth deserves, the Prime Minister will do the right thing by Grangemouth. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members—thank you.

The First Minister: Working to deliver a stronger NHS, giving the people of Scotland the best cost of living support of any part of the UK, and taking action to protect Scotland's economy and maximise our economic potential in the face of global challenges, this is a Government that has at its heart what is best for Scotland.

Since becoming First Minister last year, I have sought to focus Government efforts on four central priorities. We seek a wealthier Scotland, with higher standards of living for the people of Scotland and action to grow Scotland's economy; a fairer Scotland, with Scotland's growing wealth shared more fairly so that we can remove the scourge of child poverty from our land; and a greener Scotland, with action to maximise the benefits felt by the people of Scotland from our renewable energy wealth, benefits in terms of lower bills and well-paid jobs, and action to reduce emissions and protect and restore our stunning natural environment. We also seek public services that meet and, indeed, exceed the expectations of the people of Scotland. Have no doubt that many of our public services already meet those expectations, but, where action is needed to reform and renew, this Government will take it.

Progress for Scotland underpins each of our priorities and is at the heart of everything that we will do. I want a Scotland that we can be proud of—a Scotland that is the best that it can possibly be. That ambition is what gets me up every morning, and at the very heart of that is the eradication of child poverty.

Last year, when I presented my programme for government, I referred to the eradication of child poverty as

“the moral compass of my Government”.

It remains so, and it will until there is not one child left in poverty in Scotland.

I also said:

“it is the greatest investment in our country's future that we can possibly make.”—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; c 24.]

In these times of cost of living pressures, that investment becomes ever more important, because these things disproportionately hurt our society's poorest. That is why, over the current session of Parliament, we have increased the Scottish child payment from the original proposal that was put to us of a £5 payment to £27.15, and created a broader package of family payments that can be worth roughly £25,000 by age 16.

Our policies are making a difference. It is estimated that, on average, the lowest-income households with children will be £2,600 better off this year as a result of Scottish Government policies. By 2029-30, that is expected to grow to an average of £3,700.

The proportion of children who are living in relative poverty has reached its lowest level since 2014-15, and Scotland is making deeper and quicker progress than the rest of the United Kingdom. While the Joseph Rowntree Foundation predicts that child poverty will rise in other parts of the United Kingdom by 2029, it states that policies such as our Scottish child payment, and our commitment to end the cruel two-child limit,

“are behind Scotland bucking the trend”.

However, if we want to truly eradicate child poverty in Scotland, we must go further, and I recognise that. We are taking steps to lift the two-child limit, and we remain on track to deliver that measure to lift more children out of poverty next April. We must also ensure that public services are more joined up in their response, and more family centred and person centred, so that vulnerable families receive the focused help that they need rather than simply the help that is available.

In the coming year, we will consult on, develop and publish a tackling child poverty delivery plan for 2026 to 2031, which will outline the actions that we will take with our partners for low-income

families across Scotland to keep us on the journey to meet our poverty reduction targets for 2030. I can assure members that that will focus on reducing household costs, boosting incomes through social security and helping more people into fair and sustainable jobs, all of which play a central part in tackling not only the symptoms but the root causes of poverty in our society.

There is always much more that we are doing than can be mentioned in a short parliamentary statement. I therefore encourage members, and their constituents, to read the programme for government carefully. They will see our on-going commitment to achieving net zero by 2045; action to maximise the environmental and economic benefits from our vast renewable energy wealth; and steps to decarbonise heating and further decarbonise our transport network.

To give just one example, I am proud that we have achieved our target of installing 6,000 public charge points for electric vehicles, two years ahead of schedule. However, more is needed, which is why, in the year ahead, we will introduce a new rural and island EV infrastructure grant, supporting our commitment to establish approximately 24,000 additional public electric vehicle charge points by 2030.

The public will notice, in our programme for government, the priority that we are giving to the ABC of education—attendance and attainment, behaviour and relationships, and the curriculum. We are taking action in partnership with local government, parents, carers, pupils and schools to raise attainment and address problems of attendance; tackle behavioural challenges in our classrooms head-on; and reform the curriculum so that young Scots are fully equipped to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of this new age.

There is action to help to regenerate our town centres; investment in thousands of new homes; record funding for the culture sector; new protections for renters; expansion of dental provision; a focus on additional support needs in our schools, and much, much more.

It is a programme for government, but it is also a programme for a better Scotland. It is a programme for a stronger NHS, for a more resilient Scotland and for a wealthier Scotland. Centred on delivery and providing hope, it is a programme that seeks what is best for Scotland—a programme for government that gets our nation on track for success.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):

Today's flimsy programme for government is just more of the same from the SNP, and it will do little to restore public trust. It is no wonder that around one in three of the party's MSPs could not be bothered to turn up to listen to it.

That is because John Swinney is the politician who has failed to deliver for the past 18 years, has wasted more public money than anyone else and is now desperately trying to clear up his own mess. John Swinney cannot possibly be the solution, because John Swinney has caused the problems.

My party has long campaigned for greater spending on GPs, who are on the front line of the NHS. Today, John Swinney has promised to increase GP numbers, but the SNP made that same promise eight years ago and it has not been kept. Does John Swinney think that anyone out there will actually believe him this time?

My party has also been the lone voice of opposition to repeated SNP income tax rises. Hard-working Scots pay £1.7 billion more than they would under tax bands for the rest of the UK. Today, John Swinney says that he will stop turning the screw on Scottish taxpayers, but he has previously broken a similar promise not to raise taxes. Why did John Swinney not take the opportunity to reduce the painful tax burden that he has inflicted? People desperately want politicians to focus on the key issues that impact their lives, yet John Swinney says that he is going to use even more taxpayers' money to find an economic case for independence. Well, he is not going to find one, because there is no such case.

This is more of the same from the same old John Swinney—a politician who is completely obsessed by a lifelong pursuit of breaking up the United Kingdom. When so many other issues need our urgent attention, does John Swinney really think that it is right to waste time, energy and public money on that divisive nonsense?

The First Minister: I see that my appeal for the Parliament to find common ground has not made much headway with Russell Findlay this afternoon, but that will not stop me continuing to find some common ground in order to make progress.

On GP services, as I indicated in my statement, the Government will allocate a greater proportion of new NHS funding to the primary care sector, which will benefit GPs and result in the delivery of an extra 100,000 GP appointments for key conditions.

On the question of income tax, I remind Parliament of the comment that I made in my statement that the majority of workers in Scotland pay comparatively less income tax than would be the case south of the border. They also pay lower

council tax and water bills than is the case south of the border. Of course, if they send their children to university in Scotland, they do not pay tuition fees, which is a formidable saving for families the length and breadth of the country. In addition, if they have young children, they will get access to early learning and childcare, the expansion of which I presided over as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which benefits families the length and breadth of the country.

All those issues are relevant to the question about income tax. The other crucial point is that, although Mr Findlay persists in coming to Parliament and telling us that he wants to reduce income tax, he will not tell us about the cuts in public spending and public services that he would make in order to pay for that. That is just one of the big flaws in the arguments that Mr Findlay puts forward, and it is a £1 billion flaw in his argument.

Mr Findlay raised my support for Scottish independence. I have, of course, given a lifetime commitment to the question of independence. One of the reasons why I want Scotland to be independent is that I want Scotland to be a country that can enjoy a higher standard of living than is currently the case in the United Kingdom. Why is that more relevant today? It is more relevant because of Brexit, which was championed by the Conservative Party. *[Interruption.]* Well, all the evidence demonstrates my case that Brexit has resulted in a decline in the standard of living for people in this country. The way for Scotland to overcome the damage of Brexit is to rejoin the European Union, and it can do that by being an independent country.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Is that it? After 18 years in power and what could be John Swinney's last year in Government, is that the best that he can do? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Anas Sarwar: It is embarrassing. Nicola Sturgeon is probably messaging right now to say that it is awful—although it was interesting to see that she turned up to do a press huddle outside the chamber but did not bother to come in for John Swinney's programme for government.

Do not get me wrong. There are some things in the statement that I agree with, especially the bits that he nicked from Scottish Labour. Those are not exactly the borrowing powers that I thought the SNP had in mind. However, the statement fails to meet the challenges and ambitions of the people of Scotland.

The statement contains no recognition of the scale of the crisis in the NHS that has been delivered by the SNP, with one in six Scots on a waiting list. Where is the plan to fix that? There is

no recognition of the fact that our schools are falling down the league tables, which has been delivered by the SNP. There is no plan to fix that. There is no recognition of the fact that 10,000 children in Scotland are homeless, which has been delivered by the SNP. Where is the plan to fix that? There is no recognition of the billions of pounds of public money that have been wasted, which has been delivered by the SNP. Where is the plan to fix that?

The truth is that the SNP has no plan. That is because, after nearly two decades in government, if the SNP had had a good idea, it would have delivered it by now. Instead, all that we are left with is sticking plasters to cover and distract from the damage that the SNP has caused. The SNP Government is running down the clock.

Next year, Scots will face a choice: a third decade with the SNP or a new direction and new leadership for Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: SNP members do not want to hear it, but John Swinney has been at the heart of Government for nearly two decades. How can the man who broke it now pretend that he is the one who can fix it?

The First Minister: I will respond to the various issues that Mr Sarwar raised. On the health service, there were increases in in-patient and day-case activity over the 12 months up to December 2024. In my statement, I cited the various improvements that have been made in the performance of the national health service, which have been based on the new funding that the Government has made available. That funding will be more significant in the coming financial year. We are helping the national health service to recover from the impact of the Covid pandemic and delays in treatment. Mr Sarwar managed to breeze his way through that whole question without mentioning the impact of the global pandemic and the disruption that it caused to our healthcare services.

On schools, much higher levels of literacy and numeracy have been recorded in our schools, and the attainment gap is at its narrowest in a number of the key aspects of literacy and numeracy assessments that are made.

On housing, we have delivered more affordable housing per head of population in Scotland by a significant margin compared with developments in England, and by a very significant margin compared with the situation in Wales. I was interested to see that, today, my counterpart in Wales, Eluned Morgan, the First Minister of Wales, has set out her vigorous disagreement with the direction of the United Kingdom Labour

Government that was elected the last time that people were faced with a choice of Government.

Of course, we have heard none of that from Mr Sarwar, who has been right behind the UK Government on making welfare cuts that affect the poorest people in our country, right behind it on taking no action for the women against state pension inequality and right behind it on cutting winter fuel payments for pensioners in our country. I think that the people of Scotland will be able to see the contrast between an SNP Scottish Government that is delivering for them and a Labour United Kingdom Government that is selling out the poor and disadvantaged in our country and penalising pensioners. I think that they will choose the SNP.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to Lorna Slater's question, I point out that we are now 10 minutes into taking questions but have, so far, heard from only two members. Although brief questions would be appreciated, I ask for more concise responses, too.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I am delighted that the Government has finally committed to the Scottish Greens' policy of ending peak rail fares for good. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government said that it would not do that—it even voted against the Greens' calls to do so—but we have finally got there. More brave decisions will be needed if we are to make all public transport cheaper. The Scottish Government agreed to the Greens' proposal for a £2 bus fare cap to be run as a local pilot from January 2026. However, people all across Scotland need cheaper buses now. Will the First Minister avoid the hesitation that he showed over peak rail fares and get on with delivering another great idea from the Scottish Greens—capping bus fares all over Scotland for good?

The First Minister: I welcome Lorna Slater's encouragement on peak rail fares. The Government faced difficult financial choices at the time of addressing that issue. We have got public finances into a stronger position, so we are now able to afford that policy, which we will be delighted to introduce. Of course, it will make a big difference for travellers around the country.

On the question of cheaper buses, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport has progressed the pilot work that we agreed in the budget process, and we will examine its results with interest. Financial support through concessionary travel for people aged under 22 or over 60 and for disabled people is making a significant contribution to supporting bus travel in Scotland.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The First Minister had barely drawn breath before referencing his ambition to create a vibrant

economy. In this world of war and tariffs, heightened urgency and challenges surround that ambition. The First Minister rightly referenced the key levers that are critical to fostering growth, which are: planning reform, skills development, housing, and rural development. He is not wrong, but his record on those issues should give us all pause.

Does he accept that, for nearly 20 years, his Government has presided over a planning system that takes years to approve projects that, in other parts of Europe, would receive the green light within weeks? Does he accept, too, that we are not building enough affordable houses, which in turn makes it harder for us to recruit key workers, particularly in remote and rural areas? Does he accept that, thanks to his Government's erosion of further education, we are in no position to generate the skills base that we will need if we are to compete in the industries of the future, such as defence, renewables and artificial intelligence?

The First Minister: On the first of those questions, on economic performance, I point out that gross domestic product per capita in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent since 2007, when this Government came to office, compared with an increase of 6.1 per cent in the United Kingdom. That demonstrates that the Government's policies have supported and encouraged growth in the economy. We want to do more on planning. Ivan McKee, who is the minister with the relevant responsibility, has overseen a programme of planning reform to ensure that we are able to support developments where it is appropriate to do so. I counsel Mr Cole-Hamilton on asking us to make faster progress because, in the same breath, he will press us to ensure that we apply stringent environmental standards to protect the natural environment. On many of the aspects that he has raised, we cannot have it both ways.

On Mr Cole-Hamilton's final point, on housing, as I indicated to Mr Sarwar, the Scottish Government has a record of building more affordable houses per head of population than the Administrations in any other part of the United Kingdom, while also dealing with the consequences of the 14 years of austerity that started under the Conservative and Liberal Government in 2010. The fact that we prioritised housing in order to achieve that record is an indication of our commitment. I am delighted that Mr Cole-Hamilton and his colleagues were able to support us in the £768 million investment in affordable housing that we made in our budget.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I welcome the commitment to an industrial future for Grangemouth in my constituency and the £25 million that has been pledged thus far. Carbon capture and storage is an important part of the

industrial strategy, so I am also pleased that the Scottish Government is willing to increase the current commitment of £80 million for Acorn if that means that the UK Government will approve the project. Will the First Minister join me in continuing to call for that essential project to be given the green light at pace and, ideally, in the forthcoming UK Government spending review?

The First Minister: It would be enormously beneficial—actually, the word is not “beneficial”; it is essential that we get the green light for the Acorn project. I must use the word “essential”. It is a superb opportunity for Scotland. The UK Government has supported two carbon capture projects in England, and there is an undeniable case for the Acorn project. The Scottish Government is willing to be a more significant funder of that project if it gets the go-ahead, and I encourage the Prime Minister and the United Kingdom Government to give it.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): SNP MSPs have been nodding slavishly behind the First Minister, but beyond the Holyrood bubble, people and businesses will be scratching their heads in disbelief at today’s programme for government. The Government has failed to deliver growth, has imposed the highest taxes in the UK and has run down public services while failing against its own child poverty and net zero targets. I agree with Nicola Sturgeon that the SNP’s previous attempts to get the NHS off its knees were “awful”, but her scathing criticism surely applies to today’s blueprint as well.

I ask John Swinney this: has it not come to something when the principal call from business is for him to do no more harm? Despite John Swinney saying that his plans will boost exports and attract investment, will business not see through his flimsy rhetoric of an “innovation nation” and see instead a high-tax, low-growth Scotland, burdened by years of SNP overregulation and narrow-minded nationalist dogma?

The First Minister: Let us take some of that apart.

On our growth record, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent since this Government came to office, compared with 6.1 per cent in the United Kingdom. That demonstrates that we have been able to preside over a stronger economic performance in Scotland.

If that is not enough for Mr Hoy, we could bring things closer to home. In 2024, Scotland’s economy grew by 1.2 per cent. Mr Hoy might not think that that is enough, but that is more than it grew in the United Kingdom. I remind Mr Hoy that, when 2024 started, we had the completely useless and incompetent Conservative Government in

office, and it was delivering lower growth than we are delivering in Scotland.

Mr Hoy will have to change his script, because this Government is delivering for the people of Scotland on the economy, on jobs, on investment and on securing new economic opportunities, and we are going to build on that record in the years to come.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I welcome the expansion of specialist regional centres in order to deliver 150,000 additional appointments and procedures, which will reduce waiting times and waiting lists. I also welcome the 100,000 extra appointments in GP surgeries, which are focused on addressing the root causes of ill health.

How will the programme for government build on the recent progress that we have seen and ensure that more people can see their GP and get the care that they need in their community?

The First Minister: Two specific measures will help in that respect. One is the expansion of pharmacy first services, which will provide ever more access to healthcare interventions for members of the public. Secondly, the additional capacity that is being created in GP services will ensure that a range of appointments is available to deal with core health conditions. Together, those two measures will help to address many of the challenges that we face in accessing local healthcare services, which I recognise to be of vital importance to everyone in Scotland.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): We will have to wait to see whether anything actually happens, but it is welcome that, after just 18 years in charge of our NHS, John Swinney turned up in Dundee yesterday to say that the SNP has now agreed with Labour policy that the 8 am GP rush has to end.

Who caused the problem in the first place? Could it be the SNP Government that cut the number of GP surgeries by 25 per cent? Could it be the SNP Government that increased GP patient lists by 37 per cent? If the SNP had a plan to save Scotland’s NHS from the SNP’s incompetence, we would have seen it by now. Why should anyone believe that the people who broke our NHS can be the people to fix it?

The First Minister: The answer as to why is for the very simple reason that Scottish Government ministers are addressing the issues of concern to the public, strengthening the NHS in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic and ensuring that we have the capacity to meet the needs of the public in Scotland. That is exactly what we have done in addressing the concerns of the public in Scotland and ensuring that there is more capacity and more opportunity for people to access healthcare

services in Scotland. That is what the SNP Government has delivered.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The past few weeks have been extremely challenging for the LGBTQ+ community, and the tally of bad news continued with the lack of a bill to end conversion practices. Will the First Minister set out plans in the programme for government to advance the rights of LGBTQ+ people and to reassure the community that his Government will do everything in its power to protect our rights?

The First Minister: I happily give that commitment to Emma Roddick. I know that the past few weeks have been particularly challenging for members of the LGBTQ+ community. I recognise that, and I want to assure Emma Roddick of the Government's commitment to address the concerns that have been expressed. I have set out in my statement the rationale for the steps that we are taking on ending conversion practices by collaborating with the UK Government, which has indicated that it intends to take forward the agenda, and by ensuring that we provide funding support to organisations that will work to promote equality in Scotland in the forthcoming financial year. I give Emma Roddick the assurance that those commitments will lie at the heart of the programme for government.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The First Minister has recommitted the Government to a just transition and an industrial future for Scotland. What impact will last year's £23.4 million cut to the net zero and energy budget have on achieving that?

The First Minister: Mr Kerr will be familiar with the fact that the Government has to live within the resources that are available to it. We have had to deal with the significant pressure in the past two financial years of hyperinflation arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has fuelled public sector pay deals to levels that were not conceived of when we were setting the Government's budget. Therefore, we have had to make changes. What the Government has done is put forward a budget that has now been supported by the Parliament—although not by Mr Kerr or the Conservatives, so I do not quite know why he is complaining about anything financial to me. He was not willing to press the button to vote for the Government's budget; he was just prepared to sit over there, complain, not suggest any alternatives and fail to support the delivery of finances to support our public services. That is a capitulation with regard to the responsibilities of a member of Parliament.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Removing peak rail fares from September will greatly benefit my constituents in Paisley, considering that we have one of the busiest train stations in Scotland.

However, given that cost is a major barrier to shifting from the car to public transport, what steps has the First Minister outlined in his programme for government to help more people to travel sustainably by bus or train?

The First Minister: The steps that we are putting in place on peak rail fares, the support to the bus sector and the active travel work that is under way in the Government are three examples that I would cite to Mr Adam as measures that support the modal shift that is required to support our climate ambitions.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for advance sight of the statement.

The First Minister talks of the ABCs of education, so let me test his Government's record on them. On attainment, more pupils than ever are leaving school with no qualifications and the attainment gap in relation to a variety of measures is growing. On absence, rates are up and the Government has announced that it will monitor the data—so, when families needed action, they got simply observation.

On behaviour, violence is up and misogynistic abuse is growing, but, instead of addressing staff workload or pupil needs, the Government talked about a new action plan that has not even defined the problem yet.

On the curriculum, after years of reviews, consultations and rebrands, subject choice is narrowing, vocational routes are underresourced and reform has been delayed and diluted again.

Can the First Minister tell us this: after 17 years of broken promises and the squandering of a generation of young people's opportunities in the process, will he now admit that his Government has failed on education?

The First Minister: No, I will not. Subject choice is very extensive in Scottish education, and Pam Duncan-Glancy does a disservice to the education system to suggest otherwise.

On attainment—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear one another.

The First Minister: It is factually accurate, Mr Marra, believe you me.

On primary pupils' attainment, the literacy gap among pupils in primaries 1, 4 and 7 combined is at its lowest level ever, at 20.2 percentage points. That debunks what Pam Duncan-Glancy is saying to me.

When it comes to behaviour interventions, the Government is taking steps, which have been consulted on in Parliament, to support the

teaching profession in tackling unacceptable behaviour in our schools. Further steps are being taken to address the issue of absence from schools, which I recognise, and the Government accepts, is unacceptable at its current levels, because it deprives young people of their engagement in learning. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is bringing forward measures to ensure that the attendance issue is addressed by our communication and engagement with school communities in that respect.

I can assure Pam Duncan-Glancy that the Government is taking every step that we can to strengthen attendance and participation in education.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The recent blackouts in Spain and Portugal caused havoc to the vast majority of people in those countries, with the cost of putting it right having an initial estimate of around €4 billion.

Those countries rely heavily, as we do, on renewables. The First Minister has ruled out nuclear, and there is no coal. That just leaves gas. Does the First Minister accept that, to provide stability for the national grid, it is necessary to provide base-load or back-up? The only option remaining on the table is gas. Will you support new gas stations, which are tremendously cleaner and more efficient than the old ones, and which can help to protect us against the risk of blackout in Scotland and the UK?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

The First Minister: Mr Ewing raises an important point about the need for energy security and for base-load capacity. I do not doubt the premise of the question that he puts to me.

The issues can be addressed in different ways, however. As part of the renewable energy mix, we can take steps on long-duration energy storage technologies; we can take forward work on pumped hydro storage; and we can take steps on battery storage.

Mr Ewing asked me specifically about gas power stations. He will know that there is a live planning application with ministers, so I will avoid commenting on that question, but there is a wider solution to the important issue that Mr Ewing puts to me, which has to be addressed to deliver security and safety for the population of Scotland.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am pleased that the SNP Government is continuing to focus on supporting folk with everyday costs, through the cost of living package, during what continues to be a cost of living crisis for so many people. Has the Government carried out any assessment of how much the average

household benefits from policies such as council tax and water bills that are lower than those in England and Wales and other supports such as free tuition fees, childcare and bus travel, to name just a few?

The First Minister: I will address some of the specific points that Jackie Dunbar raises with me. Average council tax charges for band E properties are £600 lower in Scotland compared with England and £400 lower than in Wales. Our provisions on early learning and childcare essentially represent a benefit of about £6,000 per child per year. In relation to tuition fees, students in England pay £28,605, while Scotland-domiciled students have continued to have free university tuition. I think that those are some of the answers that Jackie Dunbar was looking for.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The programme for government outlines no timeline or plan to dual the A96; offers supposed milestones on dualling the A9, which was supposed to be finished this year; and contains no mention at all of other vital roads, such as the A75 and the A77. Does the First Minister accept that communities have been left in the dark over long-promised SNP upgrades to those vital roads? Can he guarantee that the upgrades will finally be delivered or even that they will be delivered at all?

The First Minister: On the A9, the programme for government reaffirms the timetable that has already been shared with the Parliament. There is no deviation from that timetable. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport was up at the Moy to Tomatin stretch of the A9 to see the start of the works there. In line with the timetable that she has shared with the Parliament, further steps will be taken for new sections to be put out to tender. Indeed, there is already a tendering exercise out for one of the other sections of the A9.

In relation to the A96, we remain absolutely committed to dualling the Inverness to Nairn section, including the Nairn bypass. Made orders were published on 12 March 2024 to deliver that particular road. Progress is under way, and we will continue to keep the Parliament informed of developments.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the First Minister expand on the six-point export plan? Which specific international markets will be targeted and through which export sectors, and how will the package of measures support Scottish companies to reach global markets at a time of particular economic uncertainty due to US tariffs?

The First Minister: Audrey Nicoll highlights an important issue around economic volatility. Part of what the Government is trying to do in the programme for government is to make clear where

we can take steps to support companies in navigating those examples of global volatility. We have a number of key markets, which are represented by the areas in which we have an international presence through Scottish Development International. We also have the benefit of the GlobalScot network, which helps us to establish connections. Technology, life sciences, renewables and green hydrogen, premium food and drink, and advanced manufacturing are some of the key sectors that the Government will pursue.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): A year on from declaring a housing emergency, we still do not have enough homes, the rate of building has fallen and more than 10,000 children are homeless. The Government has failed to get us anywhere near the delivery target of 110,000 affordable homes, and the 8,000 homes that were reannounced in the programme for government will not be enough to get that target back on track. That is not a surprise, given that the huge housing budget cut was only partially restored this year. In line with pleas made by Shelter and Homes for Scotland, will the Government pledge to build the homes that we all need, or will the 110,000 affordable homes target become another broken promise?

The First Minister: I have to correct Mr Griffin, who is normally very accurate about this information. This year's housing budget is higher than it was the year before the year in which we had to reduce the budget. That is what the Government is doing; we have remedied that particular issue. I encourage the Labour Party to accept the facts, move on and find something else to talk about or to moan about, given that we have addressed the issue about the budget that we have put in place. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: The second point that I would make to Mr Griffin—I made this point to him at First Minister's question time last week, and I am surprised that he has not taken account of it—is that, in Scotland, in the face of austerity, we have delivered more affordable houses per head of population than have been delivered in England or Wales. The Government's programme will build on exactly that.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Scotland's prosperity depends on having a highly skilled workforce, enabling a globally competitive economy in sectors such as aerospace and the life sciences. Providing more science, technology, engineering and maths skills is an issue that was raised by Colleges Scotland at the Finance and Public Administration Committee only this morning. What steps is the

First Minister's Government taking to deliver the unfilled demand for 15,000 apprenticeship places that the Open University says that Scottish employers currently require?

The First Minister: We are investing about £185 million each year, enabling 25,000 people to undertake modern apprenticeships each year. We will continue to support around 38,500 apprentices who are already in training as part of our wider programme.

The issue that Mr Gibson raises touches on the availability of an adequately sized working-age population, which is a strategic challenge for Scotland and is made worse because of the loss of the free movement of individuals as a consequence of Brexit. There are steps that could help us to strengthen Scotland's employment base if we had a larger working-age population who would be able to benefit from the training opportunities that we can provide.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The education section of the programme for government states that SNP ministers will ensure

"the removal of written exams in more practical subjects".

I have two questions for the First Minister. How do ministers plan to deliver that change this year? Does that move away from our traditional and rigorous Scottish exam system represent SNP exam policy and does the First Minister understand concerns that that could further weaken our education system and confuse employers?

The First Minister: If Mr Briggs is saying that the only way that the performance of a student can be assessed is by a written examination—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: That is what I take from Mr Briggs's question. The emphasis in the programme for government is on alternative methods of assessment that are already very common in our college and university community and contribute significantly to Scotland's international reputation.

There must be high standards in our examination system, but I do not think that those can be delivered only by high-stakes exams. In fact, some of the best assessment of performance can be made during an academic year. That is what happens in many of our universities and colleges and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is taking the sensible step of applying more of that in our school community.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I am pleased that the programme for

government will include a bill on non-surgical cosmetic procedures, making the aesthetics sector safer for patients and practitioners. As the First Minister will be aware, one of my constituents has lobbied for that for quite some time. Can the First Minister indicate when he plans to introduce that bill in the Scottish Parliament?

The First Minister: We will introduce the bill during the remainder of the parliamentary session, with the objective of ensuring that that legislation is complete by the end of this session. I commend Mr McMillan for the way in which he has pursued the issue, and I am glad that we have found the legislative vehicle that will enable us to take it forward.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The First Minister spoke in his statement about

“a fairer Scotland, with Scotland’s growing wealth shared more fairly”.

Is he thinking of a more progressive council tax or property tax, or perhaps about a wealth tax?

The First Minister: The point in principle is being applied in the Government’s approach to taxation and has always underpinned that approach. I want to ensure that we continue with measures that support those who suffer from and live in poverty so that we can assist them out of poverty and can create opportunities for them to thrive. Of course, we need well-financed public services to be able to do so.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): My constituents in Strathkelvin and Bearsden benefit every day from the SNP Government’s current cost of living guarantee, which gives them and their families support that is not available anywhere else in the UK. Which plans in the programme for government will provide further help for families and children in particular?

The First Minister: We took steps in the budget to make provision to expand a number of relevant areas. The bright start breakfast fund is one example of that and the expansion of free school meals to around 25,000 more pupils in low-income households will be another. The steps that we are taking to lift the two-child benefits limit will help to address some of the points that Rona Mackay has raised.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is striking that this is the final signature Government statement before next year’s election and yet the public gallery is almost empty.

Although the share of health spending given to GPs is down, waits are up. Why did it take a threat of a formal dispute by doctors for the Government to finally act?

The First Minister: I assure Mr Rennie that it did not. If he casts his mind back, he will recall that the Government has been engaged in dialogue with the GP community on those questions for some time. Indeed, in my speech at the National Robotarium in January, I reflected on the issues that we were addressing to make sure that we could improve access to GP services—the Government has delivered that as part of the programme for government today.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the First Minister’s statement. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow the front-bench teams to reorganise.

Programme for Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on the programme for government 2025-26. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:26

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The First Minister has set out an ambitious and bold plan for delivery over the next 12 months. As Deputy First Minister, I hold responsibility for cross-Government delivery and outcomes. Each of the commitments that the First Minister has set out demonstrates that this is a Government that believes in action to improve the lives of the people of Scotland today and tomorrow.

This Government is delivering positive change and tangible benefits with policies that people can see and feel in their daily lives, and my role is to ensure that that continues to be the case. However, with stretched public finances, we cannot do everything and hard decisions must sometimes be made, so we focus on what has the greatest and most positive impact for the people of Scotland now and how we can invest for the future.

This Government has always been very clear on what is needed, and the First Minister has set out his priorities. He set them out on the day when he accepted his position as leader of the nation, and he reiterated them today. They are, first, eradicating child poverty so that no child in Scotland sees their opportunities curtailed; secondly, growing a wellbeing economy to create new jobs and a fairer society; thirdly, tackling the climate emergency to help nature to heal and fight climate change, while investing in a greener future for us all; and fourthly, providing high-quality and sustainable public services so that we are healthier and every community, whether urban or rural, can thrive. I would hope that those four objectives are ones that every member can get behind in this chamber.

From global conflict to shifts in global trade, not all challenges can be controlled and solved in Scotland. However, we can collectively ensure that Scotland is ready and resilient. We can improve the lives of individuals, families and communities with the programme for government, and we are already doing so.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): In last year's programme for government, there were a number of bills that were going to benefit the lives of disabled people. Those bills were all dropped over

the past 12 months, and there is nothing in the programme for government for 2025-26 specifically for disabled people. You talk about helping the most vulnerable. What in the programme for government will help disabled people, who make up 20 per cent of Scotland's population?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to always speak through the chair.

Kate Forbes: I assure the member that this Government is absolutely committed to delivering for disabled people. He will not find this Government following in the footsteps of the United Kingdom Government, which has completely deserted disabled people.

I was coming on to some of this Government's achievements, not the least of which is the investment of £6.9 billion in a Scottish benefits system that prioritises dignity and fairness for every human being. In our efforts to eradicate child poverty, we have successfully delivered the Scottish child payment.

In tackling the climate crisis, we halved Scotland's emissions between 1990 and 2022 while growing the economy by 67 per cent, and we have created around 75 per cent of all new woodlands in the UK. We have installed 6,000 public charge points for electric vehicles, two years ahead of schedule.

To grow the economy from 2023 to 2024, through investment in Scottish Enterprise, we helped businesses to unlock a record £1.89 billion of planned capital investment. That has created or safeguarded more than 16,700 jobs. Those are tangible outcomes that people are experiencing today because of decisions that the Government has taken. In 2023, inward investment projects in Scotland grew by more than double the UK average and, for the ninth year running, Scotland remained the UK's top-performing area for foreign direct investment, outside of London and the south-east. Investors believe in the potential that the Scottish economy has to offer.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Kate Forbes: Over this session of Parliament, to December 2024, we supported the completion of almost 35,000 affordable homes, including more than 26,000 for social rent, and we have brought digital connectivity to some of the hardest-to-reach areas in Scotland. Between April 2024 and the end of January 2025, we delivered not only the 64,000 additional national health service appointments and procedures that we promised, but 11,500 more than had been planned.

Those achievements and many more than can be listed in the debate are the record of a

Government that is committed to action and has delivered for the people of Scotland.

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

Kate Forbes: I will take a number of interventions, starting with Liz Smith's.

Liz Smith: Two budgets ago, the real-terms cut in the economy budget was 8.3 per cent, at a time when the forecasters said that the overall budget had gone up by 2.2 per cent. Business complained at the time that that was doing nothing to advance the skills agenda that we desperately need in Scotland for new jobs and new industries. Will the Deputy First Minister comment on that?

Kate Forbes: I am incredibly proud of the work that our enterprise agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank have done over the past two years. We do not pretend that financial budgets are anything but challenging right across the UK. The Government has prioritised the areas of economic impact that will have the greatest potential for creating jobs and attracting inward investment. I referenced some of the Scottish Enterprise results from last year, from which we see that the agency is directly involved in creating jobs and ensuring that we attract inward investment. Those outcomes, which include the fact that we are the highest-performing area outside London and the south-east, demonstrate that we are investing in the right areas.

This programme for government has been brought forward because of a number of challenges that we are grappling with. The first is the lingering effects of Brexit, 14 years of austerity and inflation. There are also conflicts across the world, an increasing number of adverse weather events that have been brought on by climate change and the turmoil of tariffs, global trade wars and faltering economies. It is certain that we will see the effects of all that here, at home.

Craig Hoy: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: I will make a bit more progress and, if I have time, I will bring in other members.

The strain on the public purse and public services will continue. The strain on people's finances, the stress and the uncertainty cannot be wished away. However, the Government is ready and resilient and it will ensure that Scotland is ready and resilient, too. To that end, we are refocusing and redoubling our efforts. The programme for government sets out the concrete actions that will make our communities healthier, fairer, greener and more prosperous and will make Scotland a better place to live, work, create and invest.

As the minister with responsibility for delivery and outcomes, my focus is on ensuring that the Government's work is aligned with creating the greatest possible benefit for the people of Scotland. All the commitments in the programme for government do that. They are the actions that will make the biggest difference to improving people's lives.

In the coming year, we will develop the systems needed to effectively scrap the impact of the two-child cap. That will limit the impact of a cruel UK Government policy on families in Scotland and support them through the on-going cost of living crisis.

We will continue with the Scottish child payment, which, this year, is expected to support around 330,000 children. We will introduce a universal pension-age winter heating payment from this winter, so that all pensioners are supported to heat their homes through the coldest months. We will also support the delivery of more than 8,000 affordable homes for social rent, mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership. That will ease the housing crisis and provide people with significant relief from the largest of their greatest monthly expenses.

Craig Hoy: I saw a reference to business rates in the programme for government. England is looking at creating a fairer business rates system that is particularly fairer for high streets. Like me, the cabinet secretary will understand that Scottish businesses are calling out for similar measures here. Does the Government intend to undertake a reform of business rates, particularly for retail, hospitality and leisure?

Kate Forbes: I thank the member for the opportunity to clarify that. This Government introduced reforms to non-domestic rates a number of years ago, based on an independent review. We are aware of what the UK Government is planning to introduce, which we believe will be self-financing. That has consequences for Scotland, because the business base is different here. There are simply larger businesses in England to self-finance.

In recognition of the on-going concerns raised by the licensed hospitality sector on the valuation methodology applied to non-domestic rate properties, we have announced today that we will commission an independent review to report by the end of next year and consider any recommendations. That will be independent and is entirely in line with what has been requested by the hospitality sector.

In the minute that I have left, I note that we will also introduce a heat in buildings bill to set targets. We will work with the UK Government to reform the consenting process through the Planning and

Infrastructure Bill. Subject to the approval of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, we will begin work to improve outcomes for those who are at risk of homelessness and strengthen tenants' rights. We will see to it that more people can see their general practitioner and receive care in the community. We will invest up to £200 million in the Scottish attainment challenge programme. We will establish invest Scotland—which I am particularly pleased about—to showcase Scottish investment opportunities to global investors. We will support entrepreneurship by creating a £2.9 million proof of concept fund. We will invest £150 million to support private investment in supply chain clusters for offshore wind.

All of that will lead to more thriving businesses and more high-quality employment for people living in Scotland. With those actions and more, we will deliver the greatest possible impacts for Scotland—tangible benefits that people will feel in their daily lives. I look forward to this afternoon's debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton to open on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

15:37

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Today's programme for government is more of the same from the Scottish National Party. For 18 years, the SNP has broken promises, let people down and failed to deliver for the people of Scotland.

John Swinney's Government looks like a Nicola Sturgeon Government or a Humza Yousaf Government. Old dogs cannot learn new tricks, and John Swinney has spent two decades around the Cabinet table. He is not doing anything new here. This is nothing that we have not heard before. It is simply another series of SNP pledges that are not worth the paper that they are written on, and yet another paper on chasing the Loch Ness monster—a proposal on independence, to gather dust with the other 13 papers that he has already published.

Today's statement includes some commitments that we would welcome if we thought that they would ever be delivered, but they will not be. The goal to reduce child poverty is a laudable one, but the SNP regularly makes such big pledges with no clue how they will happen.

Kate Forbes: I wonder who the member thinks is responsible for Scotland having a lower unemployment rate than the rest of the UK and being the only part of the UK to see child poverty fall?

Rachael Hamilton: Kate Forbes is in charge of the economy. She will know that the Conservative Government made the UK one of the fastest-growing countries in the G7. I am surprised that she does not know that.

The programme for government speaks of reducing NHS waiting lists, but it has no clear and credible plan to do so. It speaks a lot about the economy, but it is lacking any tangible new ideas or proposals to deliver the growth that we desperately need. It is a document that does not live up to its ambitions.

After 18 years in power, this SNP Government is out of ideas, out of energy and out of touch with mainstream Scotland. Most people want the focus to be on the bread-and-butter issues that really affect their lives, daily concerns, hopes and needs. They do not want the usual nonsense from the SNP; they want a commonsense approach to improving their lives.

We believe that the public wants there to be a laser-like focus on several key issues. The SNP should have made the programme for government about bringing down bills, speeding up access to GP appointments, fixing the roads, raising school standards and delivering better value for money. My colleagues will talk about that later.

Those are the top issues that matter most to people in the real world. By not focusing on those issues year after year, the Scottish Parliament has left voters across Scotland feeling that politicians are disconnected and detached from reality.

I am sure that the SNP will claim that it is focusing on people's priorities, but the evidence shows that it is not. It never delivers. We just have to look at public services and at our economy to see that. If it were delivering, waiting lists would be lower, schools would be providing brilliant opportunities for all of our children, potholes would be fixed and good jobs would be available all across the country. However, people need only open their door and look out along the streets where they live to see that that is not the case. The SNP way has failed. It is not working and, on the basis of today's statement, it never will, because it is just, as I said, more of the same.

My party is setting out an alternative to the left-wing consensus of the SNP, Labour, Greens and Liberal Democrats. We are putting together a different way of doing things to deliver the change that Scotland desperately needs—positive commonsense Conservative policies that would improve people's lives.

First, bills need to be brought down so that people can control more of their hard-earned money and how it is spent. Scotland has the highest tax rates in the United Kingdom. Workers here pay more than people in the same job south

of the border, while businesses pay sky-high rates and a litany of other taxes.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The member is looking only at UK taxes. Does she accept that Britain and Scotland are low-tax economies compared with many countries in Europe?

Rachael Hamilton: John Swinney has imposed the highest tax burden on Scots on record, which is costing Scots £1.7 billion. [*Interruption.*] I am not quite sure whether the First Minister wants to intervene.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was not aware that the First Minister had sought an intervention.

Rachael Hamilton: Okay.

Bills must be brought down, First Minister. Families need a break from paying more of the burden of tax that you have put on them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Ms Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: The problem with paying more and getting less is not just about higher bills—

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: I do not see why not.

Patrick Harvie: The member is very keen that people's bills should be brought down and that they should not pay more but get less. Does she accept that private rented sector tenants in Scotland are paying more for their homes than they would if they had a mortgage? They are paying more but getting less, so will she support the proposal for rent controls?

Rachael Hamilton: I will absolutely—100 per cent—not support the proposal on rent controls that the Greens and the SNP are pushing, because that will stifle the housing market and drive people out. It will not deal with the housing crisis, and Patrick Harvie knows that.

Every year, the SNP grandstands that it is throwing more money at the NHS, but waiting lists remain too long. The Government must bring forward a detailed plan for faster access to GP appointments. That can be done by removing bureaucracy, using technology to streamline the process and by investing more directly in the front line.

Our roads are also in desperate need of investment. Fixing the roads has not been a priority for the SNP since it turned against motorists. It decided that the way to meet net zero targets is to punish car drivers and make them pay more, when better roads would help the

environment. It would mean that cars could travel more quickly and easily without emitting as much CO₂, and it would mean fewer costly repairs. In rural areas such as mine, there is often no other option than to drive, because public transport is so bad. Fixing the roads should become a focus of this Government again.

Raising standards in schools should also be a focus of Government. On the SNP's watch, they have fallen. When John Swinney was Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, our schools plummeted down the international league tables. Now, violence in schools has spiralled out of control.

Gender ideology and wellbeing take up too much time that should be spent on traditional learning. The Government must restore education standards by taking a tougher approach to bad behaviour, bringing back the focus on knowledge in the curriculum and investing in teaching posts.

Finally, but most importantly, the Government needs to get smarter at spending taxpayers' money. Providing value for money is essential to restoring the public's trust; they feel that Holyrood just does not get their concerns. People are paying more and they are getting less, year after year. They think that their politicians are at it, and that must change.

This programme for government is more of the same from the SNP. It is a John Swinney special—big promises with no plan for how to meet them. In a year's time, we will look back at this statement in the same way as we look back at all the other previous SNP statements. All that this will achieve is more broken promises and more failed pledges, along with a lack of trust in the Government and its ability to deliver change.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Baillie to open on behalf of Scottish Labour. Jackie Baillie, you have up to six minutes.

15:45

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): So many broken promises, so many wasted years and so many Scots let down—that is the legacy of this SNP Government and it is a legacy that is wholly owned by John Swinney. The First Minister has been at the heart of this SNP Government for almost 18 years. As finance secretary, he cut budgets for GPs and clawed back money from health and social care partnerships, which face a deficit of £560 million. As education secretary, he downgraded the results of 125,000 working-class kids and failed to increase teacher numbers by 3,500—instead, teacher numbers are down.

The SNP thinks that it can cut a budget, partially restore it and then ask us to applaud it for doing

so, but the public are not fooled. We now have a recycled, rebadged programme for government with nothing new, no vision and absolutely no guarantee of delivery. The point about delivery is key, because the SNP has had 18 years to deliver, and it has singularly failed to do so.

At the right hand of two First Ministers, Alex Salmond and then Nicola Sturgeon, John Swinney was trusted to run Government and to be the keeper of its secrets—oh, how he protected those secrets, whatever the cost. However, I think that John Swinney has demonstrated over this year that he is simply not up to the job and that he has run out of ideas—so much so, that the SNP has now taken to plagiarising Scottish Labour’s plans to end 8 am waits for GP appointments and to scrap peak-time fares. I am delighted, too, with the news about the joint education and NHS facility in Barra. Of course, that news follows my visit there with Donald MacKinnon, Scottish Labour’s candidate—*[Interruption.]*

I have to say that he is already—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Baillie, please resume your seat for a second.

I do not know whether Ms Baillie was in the chamber last week when I had to mention this to another colleague in the chamber, but we are in a Parliament and we are not part of a hustings, so please proceed accordingly.

Jackie Baillie: Indeed, but I was simply going to make the comment that, in that instance, we had a candidate visiting Barra alongside me and, before he has even been elected, we appear to have delivered. Next, I am going to Caithness to talk to maternity campaigners—perhaps the Government would like to intervene there, too, and restore maternity services in the area.

As a former education secretary, John Swinney should know better than to steal someone else’s homework, but that is what it has come to, because this Government has run out of ideas; nowhere is that clearer than in Scotland’s NHS. What is the SNP’s record? NHS waiting times are up, with 800,000 Scots on an NHS waiting list; thousands are stuck in hospital beds as they wait for social care packages. Patients are struggling to get appointments with their GPs, while the GPs are threatening to go on strike. Last month, the SNP published yet another NHS recovery plan—we have now had five plans in just four years. The SNP does not know what it is doing and we have the WhatsApp messages to prove it. Only last weekend, we learned that, days before its publication, former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had described one of the many NHS recovery plans as “awful”. For once, I agree with her.

After 18 years in charge of our NHS, there is no one else left to blame—it is entirely the

responsibility of the SNP. The SNP promised to recruit 800 more GPs by 2027. That is not going to be delivered—in fact, the number of GPs has actually fallen. Today, the Royal College of Nursing Scotland published its report on “The Nursing Workforce in Scotland 2025”, in which it says that there are not enough nurses to provide safe staffing levels.

The SNP promised to reduce waiting times, yet the peak of its ambition appears to be that, by March 2026, patients will be waiting only a year for treatment. Far be it from me to point out that the treatment time guarantee is supposed to be 12 weeks. In 2021, the SNP promised to create an NHS app; I looked forward to it. Four years on, that has been downgraded to a pilot in NHS Lanarkshire.

The First Minister says that we will have a renewed focus on cancer. Well, that is not before time, as his SNP Government has failed to meet the 31-day and 62-day treatment targets, in the latter case for 13 years. He has reannounced £5 million for hospices. That is great, but they have yet to see a single penny. There is no timeline, and yet again the SNP has not delivered. He boasts about child and adolescent mental health services targets being met, but that is because the figures have been fiddled, and children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism have been removed.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists points out that the SNP promised to invest 10 per cent of the front-line NHS budget in mental health, but it has invested only 8 per cent. Meanwhile, GP funding has fallen from 11 per cent of the health budget to 6.5 per cent. The SNP is showing us what it actually values, and it is not the NHS, nor is it social care.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Will Jackie Baillie give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Baillie is about to conclude.

Jackie Baillie: I do not have time, Mr Gray.

There is no good idea that survives the SNP. It has been in power for 18 years—if it had a good idea, it would have used it by now, but it does not, because that is the SNP: it fails to deliver, but it always succeeds in wasting our money.

I hope that this is the last programme for government that is delivered by John Swinney—and I am not the only one, because Scotland has had enough of the SNP Government. It is time for change.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Patrick Harvie to open on behalf of the Scottish Greens—for up to four minutes, please, Mr Harvie.

15:52

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I like to begin my contributions to these debates with one positive point, so I welcome the fact that peak rail fares are gone for good. The Greens abolished them, and the SNP brought them back. We criticised that decision and the SNP derided our criticism, not just on financial grounds but by pretending that the policy had not worked. Now, peak fares are finally gone for good. I am glad that the SNP has finally accepted that the Greens were right on that issue, but people need consistent low fares if they are going to change their behaviour, not that kind of chopping and changing.

As for the rest of climate policy, the proposed heat in buildings bill has been gutted; the target to reduce car traffic has been dropped, with no alternative put in its place; rail decarbonisation has been delayed; and there has been no serious progress on emissions from agriculture.

We have seen years of inaction on anything other than green electricity production, and that is what left the 2030 target out of reach. Now, the Scottish Government seems determined to abandon any serious policy ambition on the actions that are necessary to make this year's climate plan remotely credible.

On child poverty, we should all recognise that the Scottish child payment is one of the most important and successful policies of the devolution era, but it was possible only because the money was raised. Those of us who had, for years, made the case for progressive tax won that argument and forced the SNP to drop its no-change tax policy. That link remains—we can invest only if we raise the funds. In a profoundly unequal society, the funds are there to be found.

However, the First Minister now says that the Scottish child payment is at its limit and, worse, he is echoing right-wing rhetoric about not giving people too much in case they lose the incentive to work. That is an age-old story. For wealthy people to have an incentive to work or do anything, they have to be given vast salaries, bonuses and tax havens, but for people in poverty to have an incentive to work, they must be kept poor.

The First Minister: Will the member take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: If there is time in hand, Presiding Officer, I will do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is very limited time, but the First Minister may make an intervention.

The First Minister: I will challenge Patrick Harvie's disgusting characterisation of my comments. I want to make sure that people are supported out of poverty, but I want to enable

people to access employment. The characterisation that Mr Harvie has attached to that is not worthy of his place in Parliament.

Patrick Harvie: The comments that I read in the First Minister's interview were that he was worried that, if the child payment were higher, it would "reduce the incentive" to work.

Just like the goal to end child poverty, the Scottish Government's wider goal of investing in public services links directly to a new challenge—how to tackle the rise of the far right—which the First Minister has chosen to accept personally by hosting a summit on it. Too many centrist politicians around the world think that, to defeat the far right, we have to copy it. That has failed time and time again, and we cannot afford to repeat it.

I like to hope—and I do hope—that the Scottish Government would not go down that route if immigration were under its control. However, on social policy, I fear that it is beginning to follow that playbook. By abandoning progressive policies that once had the support of every single party in this Parliament, the SNP is now showing itself to be as much of a threat to the LGBTQ communities as the Conservatives and Labour are. As Helena Kennedy said, about the scrapping of the misogyny bill,

"We are seeing a retreat from some of these areas that are being characterised as 'woke'".

That is not the way to tackle the issue. We need to change the conditions of our society that give the far right its opportunity to manipulate people and spread its message.

Many participants in the First Minister's summit challenged us all to invest in public services, housing and conditions in local communities that need to change if we are to address the real and justified alienation that dangerous forces are exploiting. Repeated comments were made at that meeting that made very clear that we can build a fairer society that will recover from 15 years of austerity only if we continue to raise the resources that are needed fairly, whether that is through local tax reform or a wealth tax. However, I am sorry to say that today's managerial SNP Government seems to be terrified of anything that looks like the bold, ambitious change that our country needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alex Cole-Hamilton to open on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. You have up to four minutes, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

15:57

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am pleased to speak for the Liberal Democrats on today's programme for government.

I reflect on Willie Rennie's remarks that the chamber is almost empty. This pre-election giveaway announcement should be currying a lot more favour than it seems to be doing.

I have said many times that, before politics, I was a youth worker, and that is why I am here. I worked closely with children who lived in absolute poverty. I saw at first hand the huge impact that deprivation can have on young lives and how it too often defines their futures. The fact that so many children are being born into poverty in 2025 is a national embarrassment. The SNP has had 18 years to get this right, but we are still nowhere. The fundamental way that we get kids out of poverty is by growing Scotland's economy.

The First Minister: Does Mr Cole-Hamilton think that the challenge for the SNP Government was made easier or harder by his party's support, from 2010 to 2015, for the Conservative Government's austerity policies?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful for the First Minister's intervention, but he is talking about what happened 15 years ago. He cannot blame events of 15 years ago for what we are seeing today, which is the mismanagement of and failure to grow the economy.

Growing the economy is how we face the issue. The world is changing. Everything that we took for granted now feels uncertain. The free global economy is being replaced by punishing tariffs. Prices are soaring for everyday essentials and the energy and raw materials to build our homes and fuel our economy.

At the same time, the quality of the services that people rely on most is under real pressure, because those services are tied directly to how our economy performs. They include fast access to a general practitioner, a good education for our children, high-quality care for our loved ones, safe streets, reliable transport and well-maintained roads.

Without economic growth, local services decline, investment stalls and opportunities dry up. For the Scottish Liberal Democrats, building a stronger economy boils down to the key levers that I referenced in my question—boosting our skills base, reforming planning, tackling the housing crisis and rural development. Without a skilled, home-grown Scottish workforce that is ready for the industries of the future, such as defence, renewables, artificial intelligence and precision medicine, Scotland risks being left behind and those jobs going overseas.

Over the past two decades, the SNP Government has presided over the quiet death of further education, which has reduced our ability to produce the skilled workforce that Scotland needs. We need to reverse that decline, and fast.

Scotland is also actively driving away investment due to a planning regime that is ridiculously slow. In parts of Scandinavia, planning takes about seven weeks from the application to putting shovels in the ground. Here, planning applications are measured in years. A faster, simpler process that still gives a place to communities would attract investment.

Housing is inseparable from skills. If we cannot offer affordable homes, especially to key workers, we will not build the skilled workforce that Scotland urgently needs, where we need it.

Mental health must also be part of the conversation. The crisis in mental health is one of the reasons why so many people are economically inactive or unable to return to their careers, yet the Government has broken its commitment to allocate 10 per cent of NHS funding to mental health and 1 per cent to CAMHS. There is a workforce crisis in mental health, too, as well as a serious lack of provision for neurodevelopmental conditions.

There has also been a fundamental failure to help the tens of thousands of Scots who are still suffering from long Covid to get back to work.

People are tired of feeling that things are getting steadily worse and of there being little or no clear plan for how to improve them. They are demanding that we do things differently. We need change that is backed by good, competent delivery. People across Scotland see the consequences of delay and drift every day. They have waited years for action on crumbling roads and overstretched public services. In the Highlands, some communities are still waiting for the A9 and A96 to be made safe—a promise that was first made two decades ago.

There are other key areas where the Government must act now, but I am running out of time. We need a serious industrial strategy to underpin all of this—not just to attract new jobs but to make sure that they stay in Scotland.

This country has so much potential, but it needs a Government that is willing to match the ambition of the people who live here. After almost 20 years, this Government has been found wanting, and it is time for it to get out of the way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise back-bench members that they have up to four minutes. There is no time in hand and, if members wish to accept interventions, those must be absorbed within their agreed allocated speaking time.

16:02

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It can be easy to get caught up in the

doom and gloom of politics, especially given the current international situation. As easy as it is to get frustrated with what is not happening, we have to remember what is happening and what has happened.

There is a lot that SNP MSPs can feel proud of. The best start grant, Scottish child payment and baby box are all working to tackle child poverty and to ensure that every baby and parent in Scotland has the essentials that they need. Free prescriptions, eye appointments and dental care for certain groups mean that people do not have to choose between paying their bills and taking care of their basic health.

Movement during this parliamentary session to get on top of the out-of-control situation with second homes and short-term let properties in many areas, including a lot of the areas that I represent in the Highlands and Islands, has been incredibly positive. Those policies have not just provided extra revenue for local authorities; they have encouraged properties to be returned to the housing market.

There is work to be done to convince people of the merit of doing things the right way, not by resorting to reactionary rhetoric, blame culture or monsterring minority groups but instead, with a positive message, by delivering public services that benefit everyone in Scotland. It is important that we practise what we preach. We cannot one day criticise the rise of the far right and then the next day allow that same group to dictate our principles and policy, as the UK Labour Party is doing. It positions itself as an alternative to the Conservatives, but it is now adopting right-wing policies, sharing negative lines on migration and turning its back on the most marginalised by taking money out of the household budgets of disabled people and pensioners.

We cannot afford to let Nigel Farage and his campaigns of disinformation and despair win in Scotland. I can understand people feeling helpless and that something radical is needed to shake up politics and redirect power in favour of ordinary people. However, we need to be clear that the route to doing that is independence.

Fifteen years of Tory Government, initiated by the Lib Dems, have wrecked our economy, increased poverty and harmed countless people. They have brought us Brexit, depopulation and a raft of policies that were aimed at doing nothing but discrediting and diminishing devolved Parliaments.

Last year, UK Labour got in at Westminster and disappointed us again when it picked up the dehumanising brutal cuts and reforms to disability benefits that the Conservatives had started, and managed to break almost as many promises as it

had made in the election campaign. Farage is no friend to Scotland, either. A far-right Government will serve no one but the people who, temporarily, sit around our boardroom tables. We cannot win with Westminster.

I am sad not to see a ban on conversion practices included in the programme for government, but I hope to see progress made on that issue over the next year. In my time as Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, I met not only survivors of such practices but providers who were determined to be allowed to continue them. It is painful to think that those providers are out there now, causing more of the harm that was described to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.

I know that we can do better, and I am proud of the progress that we have made, but—both after independence and before it—there will be more to do if we are to become the successful, fair and socially just country described in the vision that brought me into politics in 2014. To prove that we can do better, we really need to do better where we can now, keep our promises and show everyone in Scotland that it is possible to deliver on priorities without excluding any group in society, whether they be disabled people, LGBTQ+ people or those living outwith the central belt.

We must deliver infrastructure projects in the north and the south, acknowledge and meet the need for greater financial support for households that include disabled people, and ensure that islanders and rural residents have the same healthcare outcomes as someone in the middle of the city. Taking such action will convince people that we can do more than mitigate—that we can eradicate poverty and demonstrate that an independent Scotland is a better Scotland.

16:06

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests in that I am a small farmer.

It is a little over a year since I entered the Parliament. In that time I have heard a lot of grandstanding from two First Ministers and their colleagues about their records in government. Despite their cries of success, I see so much in our public services in Scotland that is deeply concerning.

Just this week, we saw another critical headline in *The Scottish Farmer* as beef sector organisations

"launched a stinging attack on the Scottish Government over ... a 'lack of any meaningful intervention and policy direction ...' to support the national beef herd."

That is one of a series of headlines that have provided a damning indictment of this Government's approach and attitude to farming, crofting, fisheries and the wider rural sector.

The rural affairs portfolio was the only one that saw a real-terms cut in the last Scottish budget. Some £100 million of money that had been earmarked for rural homes was redirected to build homes in Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The new ferries earmarked for Islay have faced fresh delays, and the costs for the two new vessels from the Ferguson Marine shipyard continue to spiral out of control. All the while, rural communities suffer with increasing ferry breakdowns and cancellations. Rural roads remain a major issue. Today, a brilliant piece in *The Herald* has eviscerated the Government over its abysmal failure to deliver a long-term solution to the problems on the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful. Let us just be honest: road projects such as those on the A83 and the A96 will never be delivered under an SNP Government.

Residents across rural Scotland continue to face challenges accessing health and social care services. In Dunoon and Campbeltown, residents are unable to register with an NHS dentist; on the island of Barra, plans for a new hospital have been paused indefinitely; and local people have had to campaign just to get basic services at Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin.

Kate Forbes: Will the member join me in welcoming the two new hospitals that have been delivered on Skye and in Aviemore, which are open right now?

Tim Eagle: I am delighted to welcome them, but what about the other ones? What about all the people who still cannot access the services that they need in rural communities across Scotland? They are the ones who really matter. We cannot just take action for some people and do nothing for others.

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: I probably need to make a wee bit of progress—I am sorry.

The SNP promised to deliver a crofting bill this year, yet, despite that being spoken about in 2016, it has failed to publish a bill. The SNP pledged £25 million to provide new homes for key workers in rural and island communities. Instead, it has delivered just 17 homes. There has been failure after failure on policies for rural communities across Scotland.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I will make a couple of points to the member. First, a bill on crofting is on its way—it is

being drafted as we speak. Secondly, it was the Tory Government that introduced a policy that absolutely crashed the farming economy in England, while the SNP Government continued to provide direct support here, in Scotland. We have a stable industry in Scotland, while the English one absolutely fell apart—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that Mr Eagle has got the gist. Mr Eagle, I remind you that you have only up to four minutes.

Tim Eagle: I am quickly going to run out of time. I do not know whether I will be able to come back to Jim Fairlie on that in detail, but I say to him that the SNP has not delivered anything for agriculture in Scotland. That is the fundamental problem, is it not?

The First Minister is talking a lot—

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Tim Eagle: I have not got time, I am afraid.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Eagle is in his final minute.

Tim Eagle: Today, the First Minister has been talking a lot about the rural support plan, which is yet to come. We have been waiting for it for more than a year. SNP members speak about the world-leading Scottish fishing sector, yet it was the Scottish Conservatives who brought the debate on fishing after two years of waiting on the Government. They talk about new entrants being vital to farming, yet they have not delivered anything for new entrants in farming for 15 years.

If I believed that the SNP had done something positive, I would like to think that I would say so, but it has not. The SNP wants to focus on fringe issues that rip Scotland apart. The Scottish Conservatives want to focus on a new vision for Scotland—one that is about common sense, shared values, bringing down bills, raising standards and delivering better value for money. That would be a programme for government that would deliver for rural Scotland. *[Interruption.]* Today is yet more rhetoric—we are still hearing it now—and nothing new from an out-of-touch, out-of-ideas and out-of-time Government.

16:10

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Mr Eagle mentioned fringe issues. I will not be mentioning any of those today, because I do not have a fringe.

This programme for government is laser-focused on delivering for the people of Scotland through our mission to build a healthier, wealthier and fairer country. The programme is anchored by the clear objectives of eradicating child poverty, stimulating economic growth, improving our public

services and delivering a just transition to net zero. I want to focus on some of those areas, although four minutes is not long.

I will start with child poverty. The Scottish child payment supports more than 326,000 children, with more than £1 billion having been put directly into the hands of families since 2021. Now, the Scottish Government has committed to go further, lifting another 15,000 children out of poverty in 2026 by mitigating the impact of Westminster's two-child limit in Scotland. If only the Westminster Government did the right thing and abolished that two-child limit at source—at the Westminster level.

The cost of living is obviously a real worry for many households throughout our country. I am pleased to see that that has been taken cognisance of, with peak rail fares being scrapped for good and with the Government's pledge to reintroduce the winter fuel payment. I will not list all the other benefits that the First Minister told us about today that people in Scotland get but those south of the border do not.

However, in order to pay for some of those things, we have to have an economy that works. I pay tribute to the Government for looking at the economy very closely and for coming up with the six-point export plan, the proof of concept fund and the just transition moneys to create a green industrial future.

The First Minister was right: we need the Acorn carbon capture project. I am pleased that the Scottish Government put its money where its mouth is. It is time for Ed Miliband to do exactly the same and provide the resourcing for Acorn. I am also very pleased to see £10 million of funding for the advancement of hydrogen technologies, which are our future.

Finally, I turn to the NHS, because it is one of the most important things for our citizens. I welcome the commitment to tackle the 8 am lottery and to increase capacity by 100,000 additional GP appointments. That will be welcomed right across our country.

Today's programme for government is a milestone. It will move us forward towards creating a healthier, wealthier and fairer Scotland—one that is fairer for all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I call Sarah Boyack. You have up to four minutes, Ms Boyack.

16:14

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I start by drawing members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

The SNP has now been in power for 18 years, and my constituents are being failed every day, whether that is failures in the NHS or the deepening housing emergency in Edinburgh. It is unacceptable that the First Minister was in complete denial about the housing emergency when we have 10,000 children who are homeless, as Mark Griffin pointed out.

We are also seeing a lack of action on the climate emergency. We need more investment to support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to tackle forest fires, and we need to support people to make their homes energy efficient and affordable. There is a lack of support for solar panels, there has not been action to fix the incredibly complicated process to enable people to get new heating options and there is a lack of action on affordable heat networks. Those failures are bad for people's health and wellbeing. Those repeated failures to tackle the climate emergency mean that we are missing out on the thousands of green jobs that could be created right across our communities.

We have particular problems in the Lothians. Jackie Baillie made a powerful speech about the Scottish Government's failures in the NHS. The Lothians will have 84 per cent of Scotland's population growth over the next five years but NHS Lothian and the councils are underfunded. The integration joint board cuts that are being made now mean that essential services that keep people healthy are under threat. I raised that issue during oral questions last week and I got a disappointing answer from the minister. Our councils provided core funding for third sector groups, but really important services are now under threat, with services being reduced by £100 million in value in the past three years, partly through underfunding and partly because of unfunded increases in demand. Those services are not nice to have; they are essential in keeping people healthy.

Yesterday, I visited the Scottish Action for Mental Health Redhall walled garden, a therapeutic horticultural project for people who are struggling with mental health problems. It is now at risk of closure because there are plans to cancel the contract due to cuts in Government funding. That leaves highly vulnerable constituents with nowhere to turn, some of whom have been on waiting lists for referrals for well over a year. That will cost us all, because, if people's mental health deteriorates, they will not be able to work. I call on the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to acknowledge those challenges and to commit to working with NHS Lothian and the City of Edinburgh Council so that those essential services, which people rely on, are not lost.

We are not seeing the approach of investing in prevention that was highlighted by the Christie commission, and we are not getting the joined-up thinking that our constituents urgently need and deserve. That is really what motivates my member's bill—the Wellbeing and Sustainable Development (Scotland) Bill. The issue is about more than public health; it is also about the climate emergency. The failure to act has left Scotland repeatedly missing our climate targets. Disruption to plans in relation to heat in buildings has affected supply chains and caused a lack of confidence among those who could be recruiting, expanding and investing in infrastructure to deliver the jobs right across Scotland that our communities urgently need.

The First Minister highlighted Grangemouth, but, as we argued last week, people knew for years that action was needed to save the jobs in that refinery. We need to learn lessons from other countries and deliver the jobs that are now highlighted in the willow review.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: I will, briefly, yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, the member is concluding. You had only four minutes, Ms Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: Okay.

I welcome the action on Labour's call for the abolition of peak rail fares, but we need joined-up transport planning and delivery for trains and buses, and we are not getting it. There are new homes in places such as Winchburgh, which should have had a railway station, for example, so if we do not get that joined-up planning, we are not getting the action that people urgently need after 18 years of failure. It is simply not good enough.

16:18

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The ambitious but focused scope of today's programme for government is very welcome, given that, yet again, it is drawn together in the most difficult of times, as the UK Government chooses an austerity agenda that continues to limit Scottish Government actions and the fiscal context in which it operates. As the UK Labour Government continues to embrace the folly of Brexit, I welcome this programme for government, which centres on economic growth, tackling child poverty, improving public services and delivering on net zero. The climate crisis is very real.

Scotland hosts an abundance of small and medium-sized businesses, including in the energy

sector. They support well-paid jobs and play a fundamental role in the wellbeing of communities.

The Scottish Government's renewed focus on the economy over the past year or so has been very much welcomed across the energy industry. The fact that the current global environment for trade is challenging, not least because of US tariffs, makes it all the more important that our domestic policy gets it right for our businesses.

The UK Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions has increased the tax burden on businesses, with a disproportionate and hugely damaging effect on the most labour-intensive sectors. I welcome the First Minister's update on supporting our food and drink sector and the development of a new six-point export plan to support exporters to diversify and grow their markets.

Fundamental to the success of our businesses is having a skilled workforce. In the energy transition ecosystem, the long-term sustainability of our workforce is crucial to securing investor confidence and continuing to develop the next-generation clean energy technology that is already globally recognised and delivering on many of the Scottish Government's policy priorities. PwC's latest green jobs barometer shows that Scotland has the highest proportion of green job adverts in all UK nations and regions, with the size of the green jobs market in Scotland having tripled since 2021.

The north-east is already home to an incredible range of start-ups and technologies that have been successfully commercialised. I know that there is an appetite to tie in a new accelerator programme in the north-east to the national strategy for economic transformation. I gently put that on the Deputy First Minister's radar as part of a programme for government going forward.

The skills of our existing talented oil and gas workforce are transferable and mobile, so it is crucial that we harness them here, in Scotland, to scale up our offshore wind sector. I very much welcome the creation of a new £2.9 million proof-of-concept fund to support the commercialisation of research projects with significant economic potential and an improved ecosystem fund to support the start-up environment. That is highly relevant to the north-east and the wider Scottish economy.

I particularly welcome the removal of peak rail fares. That is an excellent announcement, and I welcome this afternoon's debate on increased Scottish Government funding, should the Acorn project get the go-ahead. I join the Scottish Government, business leaders and colleagues in calling on the UK Government to support Acorn without delay.

16:22

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)

(Con): Well, here we are, a year from the Scottish Parliament election and, rather than the Government coming to the Parliament to offer a bold vision for an economic, prosperous Scotland, we once again have an SNP First Minister who is standing on a history of broken promises and economic decline, on a record of failure and missed targets and on a background of decline in education and health coming to the chamber with a programme for government that demonstrates just how out of ideas and out of time the devolved SNP Government is.

Industries the length and breadth of the country are crying out for innovation and bold policies when it comes to a just transition and energy security. In the north-east, we know how hard those in our oil and gas sector have worked to ensure that oil and gas production in Scotland is world leading, ethical and green, providing vital resources for our economic wellbeing. Instead, the SNP Government continues with a presumption against new oil and gas and is determined to close off that vital resource to our country's energy needs. The Government remains opposed to small nuclear developments close to where energy is needed and central to achieving our net zero ambitions.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Douglas Lumsden: If I have time, I will come back to the Deputy First Minister.

Despite all the science and all the experts telling them what a vital contribution small nuclear can make to the resilience of our energy production, ministers remain luddites when it comes to nuclear.

The energy strategy is years late, and there is no sign of it in the programme for government. We all know why that is: it is because the SNP is a divided party on the subject. It is trying to satisfy its members who understand that jobs and wealth that are created by the oil and gas industry can provide an economic boost to Scotland and pay for our public services, while the other half of its members want to cosy up to the extremist Greens, throwing tens of thousands of jobs under the bus.

Communities from the south to the north are desperately asking the Scottish Government to listen to their concerns on energy infrastructure. For the good of our incredible countryside, I plead with the SNP Government not to carpet bomb our rural communities with monster pylons, substations and battery storage facilities. The devolved Government needs to press the pause button until we have an energy strategy, so that

we can have the right development in the right place.

Instead of the SNP using this programme for government to set out a commonsense approach to energy production and infrastructure in Scotland, we are getting the same old nonsense from the SNP. When it comes to Acorn, does the First Minister think that people in the north-east zip up the back, promising a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow when his Government has failed to spend a penny of the £80 million cash from 2022? The First Minister even popped up to St Fergus last year to announce another £2 million, which seems to be all that the SNP has left in that fund.

The Scottish Conservatives offer a way forward that is based on common sense. If we are still using oil and gas, let us use the resources that we have instead of importing them from abroad. If we have a good renewables industry, let us work with it to innovate and move forward. Given that we have a thriving agricultural sector, let us build it up and not impose unfair taxes on it, as the Labour UK Government has done.

The Scottish Conservatives will work with the Scottish people towards economic growth and prosperity for all and will not sacrifice economic growth on the altar of independence. This is a Government that is out of time and out of ideas. The programme for government shines a light on the failure of the past 18 years and on the history of failed promises and broken commitments.

16:26

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak on behalf of Scottish Labour on the programme for government and to follow Douglas Lumsden, who I note, with the greatest kindness to him, is never knowingly undermetaphored.

Douglas Lumsden talked about the importance of nuclear power, which allows me to make mention of it. We have already talked about Grangemouth and the decisions that, if taken five years ago, might have made the situation today very different. Torness in East Lothian has but five years on its current licence to produce energy, so it will be interesting to see the intervention from the current SNP Government with the warning of five years to go.

I welcome the First Minister's focus in the statement that was the precursor to this debate on seeking solutions rather than disagreements. The challenge for the Government is that the solutions that it has previously promised have virtually all failed to be delivered. However, as other members have done, I welcome the ending of the 8 am lottery and the abolition of peak rail fares. It is important that we start to see an improvement in

our NHS rather than an on-going decline, and it is important, with regard to the abolition of peak rail fares, which has been welcomed by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, that we get people back on to the trains.

However, if we look at some of the Government's previous promises, we see that there are challenges that it has to face. Avoiding facing up to those would mean that the promises that have been made in this programme for government will fall again and fail. There are only six bills as we go into the final year of the parliamentary session, plus two bills from year 4 of the session that will be brought forward.

One of those bills, which has already been mentioned in the debate, is on non-surgical cosmetic procedures. I very much welcome that. I strongly suggest that the Care Reform (Scotland) Bill comes back to the Parliament for stage 3 consideration before summer recess to make space for the cosmetic procedures bill, so that it is not lost as we move to the tail end of this parliamentary session.

In the short time that I have, I will go back over some of the Government's previous promises, assurances and solutions. Scrapping the council tax for under-22s—we have to go back to the SNP's 2021 manifesto for that—does not seem to have been delivered. The young persons guarantee in that manifesto promised to

"Fund the ... university, college, apprenticeship"—

the skills needs that we have heard so much about this afternoon—

"training place or job for every young person",

yet we have 84,000 young people not in education, employment or training.

A number of members have mentioned CAMHS. I welcome the Government's constant heralding of the fact that it now hits its CAMHS targets, but is that not at the price of entirely removing a significantly large number of children from those waiting lists and sending them to other pathways that do not yet exist? There has been a failure to invest the 10 per cent that has been promised for mental health, with only 8 per cent invested so far. Indeed, in March, NHS Tayside calculated that it would take a decade before those being added to the CAMHS waiting list today could be seen. We are talking about young people and children, who currently face a waiting time of six years.

In 2018, the SNP's then First Minister met Jamie Oliver and said that the childhood obesity rate would be halved by 2030, reducing it to 7 per cent, but it now stands at 17 per cent.

I could talk about four more pages of broken promises relating to our young people, but I will leave it there.

16:30

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): For completeness, and regarding Martin Whitfield's comments about the five bills to be introduced, two bills are still to be introduced during this session of Parliament, in addition to the 14 bills already in the parliamentary process, which highlights how busy Parliament will be over the next year.

Martin Whitfield: My request was to move the care bill forward so that there could be space for those new bills to be completed along with the others. Would the member welcome that?

Stuart McMillan: Thank you.

I am pleased to speak in this debate, following the First Minister's setting out of his clear vision for our country and for those who live here. I will focus most of my contribution on an issue that was first raised with me in 2018 by one of my constituents, Jill Best, a nurse who has worked in medical aesthetics since 2010. At the time, I was surprised to learn that injectable treatments that used prescription-only medicines were being offered without any regulatory framework, which is why I am really delighted by the announcement that the Scottish Government will legislate in that area.

The introduction of the bill on non-surgical cosmetic procedures will be welcomed by many people across the country, and I know that it has cross-party support. We have just heard from Martin Whitfield, and I know that Miles Briggs, Roz McCall and my colleague Colin Beattie have also all been involved in supporting that particular campaign. I also thank Jenni Minto, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, for meeting and listening to campaigners from the sector and for helping to get the bill into the programme for government.

The bill will help to deliver a non-surgical cosmetic sector that will be safer for all clients living in Scotland. The industry has grown significantly since my first discussion with Jill Best, but the lack of regulation leaves the authorities uncertain about the actual size of the industry in Scotland. That is why regulation is critical not only for improving patient safety but for giving an insight into the number of businesses offering those treatments at the moment.

Having recognised those concerns, I wrote repeatedly to the Scottish Government, highlighting Jill's worries and emphasising the need for action. The non-surgical cosmetic sector is here to stay and will continue expanding,

which makes legislation absolutely imperative. We have all heard reports of botched procedures; we have read the papers and seen the online news items. Those reports, including those of tragic, fatal cases, have fuelled concerns about unqualified practitioners, whose existence is deeply concerning. There is a risk that patients will be misled into thinking that the sector is currently totally safe, when there are individuals who are operating without being properly qualified.

I will touch on a couple of other aspects of the programme for government. I was struck by the contrast between politics in Scotland and in the rest of the UK. Our First Minister reiterated his commitment to eradicating child poverty while growing the economy, investing in public services and tackling the climate emergency. Prior to July 2024, the UK had a Government that actively worked against those priorities and there is now a Labour Government at Westminster that has failed to deliver on its election promises.

I remember that Mr Sarwar assured the nation, "Read my lips: no austerity under Labour."

His silence now is deafening. The fact that the Welsh Labour First Minister is calling out her UK Labour Government colleagues speaks volumes.

I welcome the programme for government, and I look forward to working with colleagues across the chamber as the bills proceed through the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:35

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The health announcements in the programme for government are small snippets of NHS reform and, as a whole, they do not deliver the wide-scale change that is needed in how we use the health service and treat ill health. The national conversation that was previously suggested seems to have disappeared.

There are good moves, such as the Government's recognition that we must vastly increase the number of people who are seen in the community at an earlier point. However, I have some real concerns, as does the Royal College of General Practitioners, about the timescale for and sustainability of the proposal. Increasing the number of GP appointments is a laudable goal but, given our current GP workforce and the pressures that they face, a focus on quantity alone risks backfiring. Patients and GPs alike value quality of care, yet the programme for government remains silent on that.

Beyond the 100,000 enhanced service GP appointments for those with key risk factors, how many more people are going to see their GP? Will all the proposed enhanced appointments require a GP? Blood pressure monitoring is often carried out by practice nurses. Diverting that to GPs will reduce GP capacity rather than increase it. What is an enhanced service GP appointment in the first place?

Training and retaining more GPs has to be a core part of any expansion in primary care, and that requires more money across the board. Although enhanced or more regular appointments for certain health conditions may be a good idea, there is nothing in the programme for government to improve and protect the health of the nation, which is key to keeping people well and preventing the need for some of those appointments in the first place.

The launch of an initial version of a health and social care app could be a huge step forward. There are already examples—good and bad—of digital interaction with patients to learn from. I believe that the Badger Notes app for maternity care would be a good place from which to start pinching ideas. It allows patients to see appointments, blood tests and blood pressure monitoring and it enables them to message their midwives, who often reply the same day. For those with long-term conditions such as diabetes, the ability to input blood glucose levels for review by a clinician would prevent some out-patient appointments from being needed, saving individuals from travelling to hospital for review, as well as freeing up appointment times. That is just one example. I hope that those things are being taken into account in order to improve efficiency.

Although it is not mentioned in the programme for government, I hope that the proposal for an app implies that we will see a single health record, at the very least to underpin the app. The Scottish Greens have called for that for a long time.

The expansion of the pharmacy first service is hugely welcome. I hope that it will include work that responds to my call earlier in the year, and that of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, to increase the patient information that pharmacists can have, which would enable the full potential of pharmacy first to be realised.

Although the test to prevent secondary stroke is a good step forward, there are other treatments that we should be funding, too. The transformational potential of thrombectomy to prevent and reduce disablement after a stroke cannot be overstated. Currently, we have a mostly Monday-to-Friday, 9-to-5 service, and people have to be lucky enough to have their stroke during working hours. Not enhancing that service is costing both money and people's health.

The additional funding for mental health services reverses previous cuts, but we also have a looming crisis with the lack of pathways for those who are looking for an autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis. I note that the Government believes that we should be providing people with the support that they need regardless of whether they have a diagnosis. Although we should be striving for that, we cannot rely on all workplaces or learning environments to take that approach without a diagnosis. Beyond that, we should never underestimate the validation and relief that a diagnosis provides for individuals. I appreciate that a waiting list for those with severe and enduring mental health conditions may not be the right place for people who are looking for such a diagnosis, but a pathway is clearly needed.

I have rapidly run out of time. I would have liked to have touched on a good few other issues including the work that needs to go on in Grangemouth to secure the future of industry, the lack of any mention in the programme for government of improving terms and conditions for social care workers, and the very welcome scrapping of peak rail fares. We have to see the Government turn those promises into tangible achievements with the impacts that Scotland needs.

16:39

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Today's slimmed-down programme for government has to be compared with the long list of broken promises that defines the SNP Government. Let us imagine for a few moments the path not travelled: the imaginary Scotland in which a child—little Jimmy—cycles to school on his free bike, a free laptop in his bag, passing the newly refurbished play park, finishing a can of Irn Bru and promptly returning it to the reverse vending machine, from which he claims his 20p. Little Jimmy does not need to worry if he falls off his bike and breaks his leg; he will be immediately whisked to one of Scotland's national treatment centres in an ambulance that was requested on the NHS app.

His family are off on holiday in the summer, zooming up Scotland's premier road—the long-since dualled A9—then heading west to catch one of Scotland's many reliable ferries, which have real and absolutely not painted-on windows. After the holidays, Jimmy looks forward to receiving his exam certificate from the exam board, which is, of course, entirely different from the Scottish Qualifications Authority, because education secretary John Swinney meant what he said when he scrapped the body that he had told to cut the grades of the poorest kids.

Craig Hoy *rose*—

Michael Marra: No, thank you, Mr Hoy.

After school, Jimmy looks forward to a career in the Saudi Arabia of renewables, with a reformed national skills programme supporting him in his ambition. When he buys his own home, the hated council tax is but a distant memory, because it was scrapped by Alex Salmond and John Swinney as far back as 2007. Of course, in the far future of old age, Jimmy rests secure in the knowledge that the national care service will be there to look after him.

That is the path not travelled, Presiding Officer. Instead, we are back in the real world, in which none of that is true and none of it was delivered, and in which the First Minister entreats us to believe that a corner is being turned, albeit that he is the one who has been leading us down that road for 18 years.

Of course, the right question is why a corner needs turning. The answer is in the Government's record. Every inch of that long record is John Swinney's, and it is not addressed by this limp and lukewarm excuse for a programme for government.

Jackie Baillie set out just some of that record of SNP failure that has laid low our NHS. Martin Whitfield highlighted the record on CAMHS and the fiddling of the figures on waiting lists. I met NHS Tayside on Friday, and can absolutely confirm that, in my area, the situation is a complete mess. A new pathway is now being developed to take the kids back into CAMHS, with 4,500 children in Dundee having been thrown aside. The First Minister has spoken to some GPs and so have I: yesterday, a Dundee GP called it a disaster and a disgrace—no wonder. GPs are clear that the SNP's closure of 25 per cent of the surgeries in Dundee and the fact that the patient list has increased by 37 per cent is creating a crisis in general practice.

There have been five NHS plans in four years. In public, the SNP Government says that those work but, in private, it acknowledges that they are—in the words of the former First Minister—“awful”. That is the right word. It well describes the SNP attitude to public money. The SNP has wasted £6 billion of taxpayers' money on ferries that do not sail, the scandal of delayed discharge and a national care service that will not deliver a single extra carer.

I will conclude—do I have four minutes or six, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Six.

Michael Marra: I will keep going, then. There is plenty more of this to come.

On all those issues, the Government has refused to listen to the repeated warnings from the

Auditor General, the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the Fraser of Allander Institute, the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the Institute for Fiscal Studies about the grave threat that is faced by Scotland's public finances.

Today, the First Minister announced yet another Labour policy: the scrapping of peak rail fares. He whipped his SNP MSPs to vote against such a policy just last year. Email correspondence that was released under freedom of information shows that, last August, his own Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, Shona Robison, advised that the Government

"simply can't afford this given the financial position."

What changed that situation was £5.2 billion of money from the Labour Government.

Kevin Stewart: Will Michael Marra give way?

Michael Marra: Gladly.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Marra has said that the SNP Government has stolen Labour policies. The Scottish public will be thankful that we have not stolen the policies of keeping the two-child benefit cap, slashing winter fuel payments for our pensioners or cutting benefits to disabled people.

Michael Marra: It is fair to say that, given the challenging financial circumstances, the additional £5.2 billion that the UK Labour Government brought to the Scottish Government's budget is what has enabled some of those new policies in today's programme for government. [*Interruption.*] I know that all SNP members will welcome that.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you. I am sure that Mr Gray will welcome—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Marra, could you resume your seat.

I encourage the Government front bench to respond to the debate in due course, which I will give them the opportunity to do. Members do not need to pass a running commentary on Mr Marra's contribution.

Michael Marra: With 20 per cent of the parliamentary term left to run, this is a case of the SNP clearing the decks for an election, rather than a case of setting up the country for success.

In his response to Mark Griffin earlier, John Swinney let the cat out of the bag somewhat. When we were focusing on the issue of homeless children in Scotland, he said that we should

"move on and find something else to talk about or to moan about".

The Labour Party will not do that—and we will see you at the ballot box.

16:46

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a practising general practitioner.

As a GP, I know what it means to deliver care under pressure. The pressure that we face today is not a passing crisis, but the result of 18 years of SNP mismanagement. Scotland's health is deteriorating. Waiting lists are longer, GP and mental health access is harder, and our NHS staff are stretched beyond reason. The so-called 8 am GP lottery is just one symptom of a broken system. John Swinney says that he will fix it but, based on his record, we know what that probably means: 9 am lotteries, more excuses, more blame and no accountability.

This is not just an NHS problem. The illness runs deeper: in education, where the attainment gap persists and the curriculum fails our young people; in transport, where projects are delayed, over budget and unreliable; and in the economy, where small businesses are stifled by red tape and uncertainty. Everything that this Government touches ends up weaker, sicker and more fragile. This programme for government should have been a treatment plan—focused, urgent and effective. Instead, it is the same tired prescription of central control, poor planning and even worse delivery.

When it comes to SNP outcomes, it is Scotland that suffers. Rachael Hamilton told us that, after 18 years, this SNP Government is out of ideas. The SNP grandstands with laudable targets but never achieves them, never delivers and never has a clue how to achieve its targets. Multiple members have told us that the war on car drivers continues. We have higher parking fees in my city of Glasgow, imposed by the SNP, more potholes and no progress on fully dualling the A9, which is yet another broken promise.

I agree with Jackie Baillie, who said that the RCN has said that there are not enough nurses to deliver safe care. Imagine that—not enough nurses to deliver safe care. The SNP has fiddled CAMHS figures, and SNP members have talked about the issue with such pride. Tim Eagle spoke of how the rural budget has been cut. Rural housing funding went to Edinburgh to build Edinburgh housing. There is no crofting bill yet, meaning failure after failure after failure for the people of rural Scotland.

Douglas Lumsden reminded us that the SNP is devastating the north-east of our country by destroying our oil and gas industry. We need an affordable transition, and the Scottish Government is not being honest with Scots about the fact that the average person will be paying for the SNP's failed transition.

Our NHS is on life support. Patients wait longer, staff are exhausted, and services are crumbling under pressure. We know that that is not new—it is the result of 18 years of SNP failure. Now, the First Minister heralds a year of delivery—what staggering self-delusion.

We have all seen SNP plans before, including Humza Yousaf's shameful, flimsy NHS recovery plan, which was supported by John Swinney and the entire SNP front bench. At the time, we called it out as being useless and not fit for purpose. We now discover that the then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, agreed with us and said on WhatsApp:

"I'm reading a revised draft of the recovery plan and still feeling need to translate parts of into acceptable English—and that is before I reach any substance."

She went on to say:

"My specific concern is that it's awful".

John Swinney stood up and clapped that recovery plan. Where was John Swinney when it came to improving our NHS then? He was at the heart of Government, destroying the NHS.

The programme for government is hypocrisy on steroids. The WhatsApp messages about this statement are likely to make for wonderful reading in the future.

Ultimately, that is the SNP in a nutshell: there is floundering, incompetence and infighting, and then half-baked ideas are foisted on the people of Scotland. Meanwhile, waiting lists grow, staff morale plummets, and the public pay the price.

This is not just the situation in health; it is the same story in education, transport and the economy. We have a Government that overpromises, underdelivers and never takes responsibility. In fact, on BBC Scotland's "Debate Night", Fulton MacGregor spoke about how the Government is as honest as it can be.

The SNP's record is not one of government; it is one of managed decline. Scotland deserves so much better. We do not need another year of slogans; we need competence, urgency and leadership that puts people before party.

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

16:51

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I thank members for their contributions.

There has been a bit of a theme in the debate. Those MSPs who got something through the budget to make progress on and who supported the budget contributed constructively to the debate, while those who did not banged tables,

shouted loudly and, in the end, offered absolutely nothing—they offered no ideas or policies for making progress in Scotland. There was an honourable exception. The first half of Martin Whitfield's speech was constructive, until he gave in to temptation and reverted to type in the second half.

Martin Whitfield: Members have made reference to a number of the proposed new bills. Does Neil Gray agree that we also have a number of bills that we need to shift? It is not a backlog but a logjam. Will we see the Care Reform (Scotland) Bill brought back before the summer?

Neil Gray: We want to make progress, for the reasons that Martin Whitfield set out. I have an interest in that regard. The scheduling of those bills will be brought forward as quickly as possible.

Jackie Baillie, in her conclusion, asked what the SNP's priorities are. I can tell her that they are record funding for the NHS; delivering for people who are accessing health services; delivering high-quality public services; eradicating child poverty; boosting the economy; and delivering on the climate emergency commitments.

Meanwhile, the Labour UK Government is projected to increase child poverty, has stifled the economy with the tax on jobs through increased employer national insurance contributions and has let energy bills increase when it promised to reduce them. It has also abandoned the women against state pension inequality—the WASPI women. Labour's failure in Government has opened the door to Farage, and it should be ashamed.

Members raised a number of other issues, but I will not be able to turn to all of them. Patrick Harvie referenced the peak rail fares removal pilot and supporting that in the spirit of consensus. He needs to be reminded that the pilot was extended after the Greens left the Government, and that we extended the pilot for a second time in the summer of 2024, as opposed to while the Greens were in government.

There are a number of very good contributions to reflect on. Emma Roddick delivered a thoughtful contribution on how we counteract the rise of Nigel Farage and the opportunity that is open to us through independence. I will take away Sarah Boyack's point regarding the linkage between mental health and economic inactivity. We are incredibly cognisant of that point, and it is something that we are delivering against, including in Lothian, where we understand that there are specific challenges.

I see that Joe FitzPatrick is seeking to intervene remotely. I will take his intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are not hearing you, Mr FitzPatrick. I invite the cabinet secretary to continue.

Neil Gray: Kevin Stewart focused on the health service, Audrey Nicoll spoke about energy and the economy, and Stuart McMillan spoke about his work regarding non-surgical cosmetic procedures while also addressing the fact that that has been a cross-party effort.

Kevin Stewart: On the health service, one point that has not been brought up very much is the expansion of pharmacy first, which I am very much in favour of. Can the cabinet secretary give us his assurance that pharmacists will help to come up with the details of that expansion to benefit folk across the country?

Neil Gray: Yes—pharmacists and others across the primary care sector are fundamental to the future success and sustainability of the health service, and I am happy to give that confirmation.

Also on a health theme, Gillian Mackay made a series of constructive health-related asks, some of which we are progressing. I would be more than happy to pick up on them and discuss them at our next meeting.

We understand the challenges the people are facing and the issues that families are dealing with. Turbulent times globally have seen costs rise, and the impacts of those rises pose risks for everyday life.

Decisions of Westminster Governments have not just worsened the cost of living challenges that the people of Scottish are facing; in many cases, it is the decisions of Westminster Governments that have caused the challenges, because Scotland is an afterthought for those Governments.

From Brexit to rising energy bills and austerity in the form of cuts to winter fuel payments for our pensioners, it is our people who have suffered. Only when it starts to cost Labour at the ballot box—only when the pain threatens its own power, not when the pain is felt by pensioners—does the party brief that it will consider its position. It is so disappointing to see that from a Labour Government—from a Labour Government, Presiding Officer. It is in the face of that situation that we have set out a clear, focused agenda to deliver for people and communities right across the country.

This programme for government not only sets out what we will do to achieve our key priorities over the coming year but underlines our many strengths and the many successes that have been delivered. Although child poverty levels remain high, we are making progress. We are investing in early learning and childcare, in housing and in measures such as the Scottish child payment.

Those investments will support families to escape poverty. Child poverty levels in Scotland are falling at a time when they are rising in other parts of the country.

In this programme for government, we are ensuring that businesses are in the best possible place to create jobs and grow the economy. A strong, dynamic and growing economy will support measures to invest in our public services and to eradicate poverty.

Our devolved employability programmes have supported tens of thousands of people to enter—and to progress in—work. Scotland has a track record of success when it comes to attracting investment, and we consistently outperform other parts of the UK. However, we are not resting on our laurels. That is why we are accelerating a targeted programme of key engagements on key investment. Scotland is, and will continue to be, a globally facing country—one that is open for business.

In our programme for government, we have set out a clear, focused agenda to deliver—to deliver for the people of Scotland and, as I have set out, to deliver for the whole of Scotland. This is a programme for government that is focused on hope and delivery. It is a programme that shows that the Government understands the reality of the headwinds that people are facing and that we are taking action.

We are seeing progress in our health service: accident and emergency waits are down; delayed discharge is down; and more procedures are being delivered. There is much more for us to do, but we are making progress.

Labour and the Tories cannot stand that, because, while we are delivering for the people of Scotland, they are contributing precisely nothing. They opted out of the budget process while others in the chamber achieved something for the country. They failed to vote for the budget—a budget that is delivering progress on eradicating child poverty, delivering for the economy and on combating the climate emergency and delivering for our public services—because politics is their priority.

Delivery is our priority. We are delivering, and those parties cannot stand it—[*Interruption.*] They do not like it—they are rattled. Farage has got them rattled, Presiding Officer—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you.

Neil Gray: Last year, Labour promised to cut energy bills, end austerity and deliver change. Instead, it has short-changed the people, continued to balance the books on the backs of

pensioners and disabled people, and allowed energy bills to go up—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: That failure to deliver has cost the Westminster parties this past week, but not nearly as much as it is costing the public, businesses and our economy. In stark contrast, this is a programme for government from a Government that will deliver for the people of Scotland, and I will be proud to work for its delivery and for further progress for Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the programme for government 2025-26.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-17448, on committee meeting time. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Education, Children and Young People Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament following Decision Time on Wednesday 7 May 2025.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-17448, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee meeting time, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Education, Children and Young People Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament following Decision Time on Wednesday 7 May 2025.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Eco-Schools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17145, in the name of Christine Grahame, on the 30th anniversary of eco-schools and success for St Andrew's RC primary school in Gorebridge. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates St Andrew's RC Primary School in Gorebridge on its commendation for learning for sustainability in the international environmental Eco-Schools programme, by the environmental charity, Keep Scotland Beautiful; understands that St Andrew's RC Primary School has gone above and beyond in its Eco-Schools activities across all of the required categories; further understands that Eco-Schools is currently celebrating its 30th anniversary, and that it is the largest sustainable schools programme in the world, operated internationally by the Foundation for Environmental Education and delivered by Keep Scotland Beautiful, and considers that such schemes are helpful in encouraging young people to take an interest in environmental issues.

17:03

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank all the members who signed my motion, allowing this debate to proceed, and the members who have stayed behind to contribute to it.

Although the motion refers to St Andrew's RC primary school in Gorebridge, we will all have examples that show how important eco-schools and green flag schools are in Scotland. It is the young who will inherit Scotland and this precious planet that is so at risk from the activities of previous generations.

Eco-Schools is one of five international programmes operated by the Foundation for Environmental Education and it is delivered in Scotland by Keep Scotland Beautiful. It is the largest sustainable schools programme in the world, with 19.5 million children, young people and educators engaged worldwide in 74 different countries.

The green flag award is a visible indication of a school's commitment to learning for sustainability; it is an internationally recognised accreditation for excellence in sustainable education.

The Scottish Government funds and promotes Eco-Schools Scotland as part of its education and sustainability strategy and is seen as a leader in the Eco-Schools initiative.

St Andrew's RC primary school previously earned the green flag award through the Eco-Schools programme. This year, it has established

an eco squad comprising students from the nursery up to primary 6 and primary 7, under the auspices of class teacher Mrs Valentine. The students are focusing on two key areas. The first is caring for the earth—for example, by using donated trees to regenerate existing woodland in the school grounds, creating a dedicated outdoor learning space. The second is supporting the less fortunate, which they are doing by collecting and cleaning crisp packets, which are then sent to a homeless charity, where they are repurposed into blankets for those who are in need. I have no idea how to repurpose a crisp packet into a blanket, but I will need to find out. I have not googled it; maybe the information is there.

Earlier this year, in partnership with the garden for life forum, nursery and school pupils aged three to 18 were invited to design a miniature, pocket-sized garden. Those provide food for people, they are good for wildlife and they reuse something. More than 130 entries from 18 local authority areas were submitted. They represented the work of whole classes and schools, they all demonstrated fantastic imagination and they were creatively linked to the 2025 theme, “our heritage, our future”.

The designers of the 32 winning entries have now been invited to build and grow their garden at their schools before filming or photographing it to be displayed as part of an online garden showcase in June, where people will be able to vote for their favourite garden. The winning designs will be turned into real mini-gardens.

Adding to the green flag award, which I mentioned, two Midlothian schools have been selected to enter the competition to design the perfect pocket garden—schools have to get selected to enter the competition; they cannot just go in it. Those schools are St David’s RC primary school in Dalkeith and St Andrew’s RC primary school in Gorebridge. The St Andrew’s design was called “Our heritage mining garden”, because Gorebridge has a huge mining history. St Andrew’s also won a certificate of recognition in the 2023 competition.

The competition links to Eco-Schools Scotland’s work on food and the environment, biodiversity, school grounds, climate action, health and wellbeing and the new heritage topic. Participation in the pocket garden competition can be part of their green flag application.

Winners will be invited to display their pocket garden in the online showcase—not in their pockets; they are not that small—so that people across Scotland can enjoy them and vote for their favourite three. Previous pocket gardens have been displayed at the “Gardening Scotland” fair in Edinburgh, where they have been visited by the BBC “Beechgrove Garden” team and the Cabinet

Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform. All winners will also be judged for three discretionary awards: interpretation of the themes, wildlife friendly and food for people.

The garden needs to be ready to be photographed in the week beginning 26 May 2025, when it should look at its best. It should be grown without using pesticides and fungicides, be peat free and use renewable materials. The gardens are truly pocket sized, with a rectangular footprint of 120cm by 100cm or, in old money—which I need to talk in—3 feet by 11 feet. That really is a pocket-sized garden. They can be any shape and any material can be reused to create them. It is really imaginative. I might have a go—although not in the competition, as that would be unfair. What a challenge it would be for us to try it.

I look forward to seeing the imaginative entries that engage children, not just to keep Scotland beautiful—which it is—but to contribute to the sustainability of the planet.

Good luck to St Andrew’s and St David’s. I hope that you will give them your votes.

17:08

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I wisnae intending to speak in this debate, but, on reading about the Eco-Schools programme, I thought that I would push my button. I thank Christine Grahame for bringing the debate to the chamber. She has set out very well the Eco-Schools sustainable schools programme and celebrated St Andrew’s RC primary school in Gorebridge, in her constituency.

I have had the opportunity to learn about the global Eco-Schools programme, and I will be pleased to highlight some schools in Dumfries and Galloway. Lockerbie academy is participating and Shawhead primary school is another example of a school that is involved in the programme.

Georgetown primary school won awards last year for its climate action project. It invited a proponent of the local slow fashion movement from Dumfries, Marie McKinnon, into the school to talk about fast fashion and about how everybody is into disposable clothing instead of promoting a more reusable type of clothing. There was a fashion show in the school, which spurred on the children to take action to be more sustainable in the clothes that they were choosing and wearing. That was one example that I learned about in preparation for this afternoon.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am sure that Emma Harper will not mind my joining her in celebrating the success of schools in Dumfries and Galloway, including the

nursery that my two go to at the Johnston school in Kirkcudbright.

Shawhead primary school won a special commendation for learning for sustainability. It went above and beyond in all the required categories when it came to eco-schools. That should be set out specifically.

Emma Harper: It is absolutely great that Finlay Carson is on his feet, celebrating the schools that are participating in the Eco-Schools programme—well done. We do have some common ground across the chamber in some of our debates.

There are seven simple steps in the framework for the programme. Step 1 is basically to create an eco-committee that the young people lead, with teacher support. Step 2 is to complete an environmental review, which helps everyone to know how eco-friendly their school is and where improvement can be made. Step 3 is the biggest part and is the creation of an action plan. That can be done over the whole year, with the aim of reducing the carbon footprint to make the school greener. The proposals include swapping toys, creating bug hotels, planting vegetables and switching lights off in places where they are not needed or where rooms are not occupied. Some of the actions can be quite simple to take forward.

Step 4 is to link the environmental work into the school curriculum across the year, so that it can be embedded as part of what we need to do to protect our planet. Step 5 involves others in protecting the planet through collaboration, with school events, stalls in the community and actions with family and friends.

Step 6 requires the eco-committee to monitor and evaluate its actions. That monitoring and evaluation helps pupils to understand and demonstrate the impact that has been made. That can be done before and after, using pictures, graphs or charts.

Step 7 is the final step, which is the eco-code. It involves creating a mission statement and letting the world know about the school's or the pupils' commitment to protecting their planet.

All of that good work can be uploaded into the eco-schools portal between 1 May and 31 July, so that a bid for a green flag award can be made. That is where the flag can be flown at the school, letting everyone know about the school's commitment to the planet.

I have learned a lot in preparation for the debate. I will pick up with the local schools that I have mentioned to learn more about their progress and to congratulate them on their efforts and their participation in the Eco-Schools project to protect our planet.

17:13

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to support and speak to the motion and to commend St Andrew's RC primary school in Gorebridge for its engagement in the Eco-Schools programme.

I also take this opportunity to commend Keep Scotland Beautiful for its work across the south of Scotland. From East Lothian to the Borders and into Dumfries and Galloway, Keep Scotland Beautiful has helped communities, businesses and councils to clean up our towns and villages and protect vital green spaces. Last year, the medium town trophy was won by blooming Haddington, and the large village trophy was won by Earlston in bloom in the Scottish Borders.

With regard to the motion before us, I had the real pleasure of attending St Andrew's several years ago, and I was impressed with the school and the children, one of whom, four-year-old Jude Davie, won my Christmas card competition that year. I visit a lot of schools, as does everyone in the chamber. When I am not visiting them, I enjoy their visits to Parliament, and, indeed, enjoy joshing with Christine Grahame when schools from our areas visit. When I visited the nursery at St Andrew's, I found it to be a happy and creative school, and I am thrilled to be part of today's debate and to learn more about its engagement with the Eco-Schools programme.

It is important that everybody remembers that Scotland is a beautiful place and that we need to do more to preserve and defend its ecology. Likewise, it is important that we collectively support the work of the Eco-Schools programme and Keep Scotland Beautiful, because it is important that such initiatives and projects go into our schools.

I was interested to learn that, as Christine Grahame has mentioned, 19.5 million children across 74 countries are engaged in the programme and to find out that Lockerbie academy was one of the first schools in the south of Scotland to secure eco-school status, which it did in 2014. Such initiatives are important in promoting training and mobilising young people and volunteers not only to learn more about the ecology of Scotland but to engage in projects such as litter picks and looking after local green spaces.

Like Christine Grahame, I will be off after this meeting to find out how one makes blankets out of crisp packets. Given the amount of crisps that I eat, I suspect that I could probably stitch several together.

Keep Scotland Beautiful is involved in a number of initiatives across the south of Scotland, including in prisons. For example, His Majesty's prison Dumfries has a wellbeing garden, which the

charity has rated as outstanding. The garden was established so that prisoners, particularly those who suffer from mental health or addiction issues, could come into outdoor space. That is exactly the type of innovative and transformative project that we would like to see right across the country, not only in our schools but in other organisations and institutions. It is vital that we recognise not just the contribution of the Eco-Schools programme but the work of Keep Scotland Beautiful.

The south of Scotland region, which I represent, is certainly beautiful, but it is important that we maintain it to ensure that it stays that way. It is only through such engagement that we can create understanding and provide young people with the right information, so that they can go on to support not just our local ecology but our beautiful green spaces, which take work to maintain. Keep Scotland Beautiful and the Eco-Schools programme continue to do amazing work on the ground, and it is imperative that the Government matches their efforts through its policies and funding.

Christine Grahame: I just wanted to let members know that I have now googled the question about blankets, as I perhaps should have done before the debate. The search result says that

“empty crisp packets can be repurposed into survival blankets by fusing them together using heat, creating a reflective layer that helps keep people warm”.

There you are, Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: They say that every day is a learning day. I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Education will approve of the fact that I have now learned something in the chamber.

The work of Keep Scotland Beautiful will unquestionably help to make Scotland a cleaner and greener place for everyone, but we all need to play our part. I am pleased to have been able to support Christine Grahame's motion by speaking in the debate, and I look forward to visiting St Andrew's school again, as well as the many other schools in the south of Scotland that are engaging in this important initiative.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Foysol Choudhury will be the final speaker in the open debate.

17:18

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing this members' business debate and giving us all a lesson on making crisp packets into blankets. I especially congratulate St Andrew's primary school on its commendation for learning for sustainability in the Eco-Schools programme. It is

a testament to its outstanding commitment to building a sustainable future and creating global citizens. I also recognise the work of the Eco-Schools team at St Andrew's primary school, and I am sure that, having received that commendation, they will be happy that their hard work has paid off.

I am lucky enough to represent a region that includes, alongside St Andrew's in Gorebridge, so many other schools that go above and beyond to protect our environment. Since the younger generation will bear the brunt of climate change, it is our responsibility to equip them with the knowledge and skills to protect and cherish the environment. I saw that in action a few weeks ago, when I joined my colleagues Sarah Boyack and Ash Regan to meet inspiring young people representing more than 30 schools at a Protect Our Future demonstration held outside the Parliament.

Those young people presented us with a paper chain with 6,000 handwritten messages from children across Scotland, demanding that we keep our promises on climate change and deliver for the younger generation. The paper chain is not only a symbol of unity in its demand, but a warning that, if we do not keep our promises on climate change, the chain will break, along with our young people's futures. I was humbled and moved by that meeting, but I was heartened to see that our young people are so well informed about the biggest issues that we face as a society. It makes me more confident about our future.

I have no doubt that the Eco-Schools programme, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, has played a large role in creating a generation of young people who understand the importance of the natural world. Since the programme's launch, more than 8,000 green flags have been awarded to Scottish schools. The programme has been expanded to include subjects such as food and global citizenship, and it is now running in schools in 79 countries.

Events are planned for the 30th anniversary, with the eco-schools celebration week being held in June. That will include the one planet picnic, in which schools around the globe will celebrate their achievements in promoting sustainability. It will act as a demonstration of the “act local, think global” mantra that is so important in tackling the climate emergency.

Before that, however, I hope that St Andrew's RC primary school in Gorebridge will be celebrating its well-deserved achievement in receiving this commendation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny

Gilruth, to respond to the debate. You have up to seven minutes, cabinet secretary.

17:21

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I thank Christine Grahame for lodging the motion, and I thank colleagues on all sides of the chamber for what has been a very positive debate. I did not know that I was going to learn about survival blankets made from crisp packets, so I put on record my thanks to Christine Grahame for that. I am sure that other members share that sentiment.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, I welcome the opportunity to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the international Eco-Schools programme and the special commendation for St Andrew's RC primary school for its work in the programme. I will begin by reflecting on the school's success in the programme, which we heard about from Ms Grahame and which is a testament to the commitment and hard work of all the school staff in creating engaging and meaningful learning opportunities for their young people.

Christine Grahame was right to say that the Eco-Schools programme is an investment in the next generation. It was good to hear about the work of the eco squad, directed by Mrs Valentine, and the outdoor learning space that they have created. The miniature, pocket-sized garden sounds like a fabulous initiative—although quite challenging, I would imagine. I am very much looking forward to the online garden showcase, and, as Ms Grahame stated, St Andrew's RC primary building on its success as an eco-school. It is a really imaginative project, as she rightly noted.

We heard from Emma Harper about Lockerbie academy—and about Georgetown primary school, too, I think. I see the member nodding, so that is correct.

It was fantastic to hear more about the slow fashion movement—I learned a little bit about that in my previous role as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development—and about the challenge that the movement presents to the fast fashion approach that we often see on the high street today.

We heard from Finlay Carson about the work of Shawhead primary school, also in Dumfries and Galloway, on learning for sustainability and about the really impressive work that those young people and their teachers have undertaken.

Emma Harper talked about what is involved in the process of becoming an eco-school. As members will have heard this evening, it is

challenging and requires real commitment from staff and young people alike.

Craig Hoy rightly mentioned the vital work of Keep Scotland Beautiful, and I repeat and commend his sentiment. I put on record that we could not run the Eco-Schools programme without Keep Scotland Beautiful. Mr Hoy also mentioned St Andrew's RC primary nursery and the happy and welcoming learning environment that it provides to the young people there. I think that he also said that a Christmas card winner had been selected from that nursery class—is that correct? I see him nodding. That kind of welcoming environment is always a testament to the efforts of the staff and support workers in our schools, and I again put on record my thanks to them for all that they do to support and teach our young people every day.

Craig Hoy: Is the cabinet secretary aware that, when schools or councils face cash pressures, it is often initiatives such as the Eco-Schools programme—in which councils provide, for example, free plants or access to their nurseries, by which I mean plant nurseries rather than educational nurseries—that are affected? There are sometimes financial constraints on councils that affect the roll-out of such schemes, so will the cabinet secretary continue, in Government, to advocate for the relatively small but important amounts of funding that allow those projects to be delivered?

Jenny Gilruth: I am more than happy to give the member an undertaking in that regard, and I recognise the point that he makes.

We also heard from the member about the broader celebrations that are planned in June—actually, it was Foysol Choudhury who made that point, I think. My apologies, Deputy Presiding Officer. I am sure that all MSPs will use June as an opportunity to get out and support schools in their constituencies and regions.

We have heard much from members about the Eco-Schools programme. However, as Christine Grahame's motion recognises, the contribution of the programme more broadly over the past 30 years has been phenomenal, and I would like to reflect on how far that work has come.

Eco-Schools was launched in the UK, Denmark and Germany back in 1994, with Scotland awarding our first green flag in 1995. As we have heard this evening, the programme has, in the years since, helped to articulate what climate education means, and it has supported teachers in translating that into their day-to-day practice in our schools.

In the years since 1994, pupils from all over Scotland have demonstrated a passion and an interest in the themes covered by the Eco-Schools

programme. Our schools continue to engage with a wide range of activities under the programme, including the green flag award itself; the climate-ready classrooms programme; the young reporters for the environment competition; and live lessons delivered via our Glow platform. Our schools are invited to take part in a further set of live lessons for natural Scotland week between 12 and 16 May, to mark the United Nations decade for ecosystem restoration and to explore what we can all do to help protect and restore our natural heritage.

Eco-Schools has grown and developed in Scotland alongside our curriculum for excellence.

Christine Grahame: My point is linked to curriculum for excellence. We have been talking about how important it is for young children to understand the environment and sustainability; there are children who will not engage in the classroom in the same way as others, but, once they get outside into a garden and planting things, they begin to engage with life around them and to express themselves, speak and become confident. The programme is, therefore, a winner all round.

Jenny Gilruth: Ms Grahame will not be surprised to hear that, as a fellow former teacher, I agree with that sentiment. We know about the importance of outdoor learning in increasing and improving attainment, and having our young people engage in that way is hugely important. I have observed that engagement myself in many schools across the country—it really supports an enriched learning environment.

I am conscious of the time, Deputy Presiding Officer.

In closing, I want to say that I am very proud that Scotland was one of the first nations to embed learning for sustainability as an entitlement for all learners, and I am pleased that Eco-Schools continues to engage our children and young people and to inspire them to take an interest in environmental and social issues and to deliver, through their own actions, positive change across their school community.

Once again, I pay tribute to the achievements of the pupils and staff at St Andrew's RC primary school and congratulate Keep Scotland Beautiful on the 30th anniversary of the Eco-Schools programme.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate, and I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 17:28.

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Official Report
Room T2.20
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: official.report@parliament.scot
Telephone: 0131 348 5447

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