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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. We begin with time for reflection, for which our leader is the Rev Gary Noonan, the minister of Houston and Killellan kirk in Renfrewshire.

The Rev Gary Noonan (Houston and Killellan Kirk, Renfrewshire): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for affording me the privilege of joining you for time for reflection. It is indeed a time for us to reflect, as last week we passed a year since the first Covid case in Scotland. This coming Sunday will mark a year since we last held a Sunday service in Houston kirk. As we closed our worship singing “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah”, little did we know what lay ahead.

In the Bible, Jesus said, “They will know you are my disciples if you love one another”—a theme that we are taking forward at Houston throughout Lent this year. It is summed up beautifully in the final section of the poem “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman, which was written for President Biden’s inauguration, in which she says:

“For there is always light,
if only we’re brave enough to see it.
If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

In the first few months of the pandemic, the light was visible, as our communities the length and breadth of the country rallied. In Houston, the church co-ordinated a response to collect food and prescriptions for the vulnerable and the isolating and to have phone buddies to keep in touch with those who were socially isolated and separated from their families. The whole community assisted—those of all faiths and none came together and, despite the dark times, there was light.

We organised food bank collections for the most vulnerable in our society, and in nine months we collected the equivalent of 25,000 meals. We adapted to an online platform for mental health support, held musical events that were dementia inclusive and were joined by nursing homes from across the area. There was light to see.

People commented to me that, as they stood out each Thursday evening to clap for the national health service and carers, they ended up chatting across the garden to neighbours who they had

previously only said hello to or passed the time of day with. They now invested time, and the community was growing. There was light to see.

However, in the past few months, whether it be because of lockdown fatigue or a return to old ways, society has again appeared to have become more polarised—people are either in a group or out, and there is no middle ground for disagreement, respectful dialogue or debate. This is a time like no other, and we as a society need to be united, to strive for something better and to rebuild stronger in compassion, equality and love. It comes down to all of us—faith leaders, politicians and society as a whole—to be brave enough to see the light but, more important, to be brave enough to be it.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Covid-19 Restrictions (Discussions with Police Scotland)

1. Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Police Scotland regarding the incidents at George Square and Glasgow city centre at the weekend, including what safeguards will be put in place to ensure that Covid-19 restrictions are followed and there is no repeat of such disgraceful behaviour. (S5T-02697)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): It is essential that people stick to the rules and stay at home if we are to continue to drive down infection numbers. Shameful scenes such as those that we witnessed over the weekend in Glasgow and beyond risk spreading the virus and delaying the removal and easing of restrictions, and they show no regard or respect at all for the millions of people across Scotland who have been sticking to the rules, who have not been able to meet up with friends and family, to fully celebrate birthdays or, in some cases, to attend funerals for their loved ones. The desecration of memorial benches in Glasgow's George Square is a particularly sickening sight, and I hope that those who were involved are thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

I have spoken to the chief constable and senior officers in Police Scotland on a number of occasions over the weekend and over last week, and I will continue to have a dialogue with Police Scotland and Rangers Football Club to understand why the events in question took place, what actions are now being taken to identify the people who were responsible and what more can be done to avoid a recurrence—as Sandra White rightly said we must—at upcoming events.

I note that the chief constable has asked the human rights lawyer John Scott QC, who is the independent chair of the independent advisory group, to look at the policing response at the weekend, and to help to inform lessons to be learned for upcoming events. I welcome that decisive action and the external review. In addition, the First Minister will meet the chief constable later today to discuss matters.

Sandra White: I heard from the chief constable about an hour ago. He said that he was passing on my request for a meeting to a sergeant. I am pleased that Police Scotland has taken on board what I and many others have been asking for. However, I would go further and ask for an

investigation into the operations on Saturday and Sunday, in particular.

The Rev Gary Noonan just summed up all that was going on in local communities, set against the scenes that we witnessed in Glasgow on Sunday, which were truly shocking. Questions have to be asked. Although the review is to go ahead on 12 March—Friday—I still call for a full independent investigation. I pose to the cabinet secretary, Police Scotland and Rangers Football Club the questions that have been put to me. Why did the police escort through the streets of Glasgow thousands of people who were openly breaking all the Covid regulations, openly drinking in the street, urinating in the street and causing mayhem on the streets of Glasgow and in George Square? Why was that part of a so-called operation? Why were those people escorted down to George Square? How can that be a safe operation?

The police have put out a press release to say that the purpose of the operation was to protect the public, but I can assure everyone—including the police—that there was no protection of the public. The public could not even walk in the streets for people being drunk and knocking them over. There were nurses from Glasgow royal infirmary who had to get a taxi home because they could not go out on the streets or on public transport.

Although I welcome what is happening, I want more to be done, and I hope that that point is raised at the meeting on Friday. I also wonder whether Rangers Football Club could be involved in that process, or could open up to its responsibilities in that respect. Does the cabinet secretary agree with me, and the many others who share my belief, that football clubs should be part of an investigation into what their responsibilities are to the general public in such situations?

Humza Yousaf: First and foremost, I say that Sandra White, as the local constituency member of the Scottish Parliament for the area that was affected around George Square, has every right to ask those questions of Police Scotland, of the Government, of course, and of Rangers Football Club.

I have spoken to the chief constable, who has said that if any elected member wishes to have a debrief or briefing in relation to the weekend's events, he will make sure that Police Scotland makes itself available to them.

If they wish to go directly to Police Scotland, they can do that. If they wish to come to me, I am happy to help to facilitate that conversation.

Sandra White asked a lot of questions—rightly so—about some of the operational decisions. She will know, of course, that those operational matters are for Police Scotland to address. It is the expert

when it comes to operational decisions, crowd management, crowd control and the crowd dynamics that are involved, and it has put out statements to explain the decisions that it took. However, I say again that it is right for Sandra White to ask further questions if she wishes, and I am happy to make those arrangements if she wants. Otherwise, she can go directly to Police Scotland on those operational matters.

She also mentioned Rangers Football Club, and I think that her suggestion is a good one. Just as Police Scotland has asked John Scott QC, as a human rights lawyer and expert, to take an independent look at the events of the weekend, I think that the suggestion that Sandra White makes is not a bad idea at all, and I will raise it with Rangers. I am due to speak to the club again in the very near future about whether it would subject itself to independent scrutiny in that regard.

I say to Sandra White again that she has every right to raise those questions and expect answers. What I would also say is that the police are part of our local communities and they will also have been at risk. Of course, they have been on the front line throughout the pandemic, helping to keep us safe. They have often had to go into house parties, putting their own health at risk, to ensure that we are kept safe. The events that took place in George Square and at Ibrox put local communities at risk—I absolutely accept what Sandra White says—but we should also bear in mind the police officers, who were also put at risk because of the scenes.

There will be an independent examination of the weekend's events by John Scott QC, and I look forward to hearing what he and his independent advisory group have to say about them. If further action is necessary in that respect, I am sure that Police Scotland will take that on board.

Sandra White: I completely understand what the cabinet secretary says about police officers. They are human beings as well, and they are a part of the community. However, what people cannot understand is the operational matter. I hope that the independent scrutiny will come up with some answers.

My other question is about a huge worry that I and others have. We have another huge football fixture coming up in Glasgow in two weeks' time, and people are obviously concerned about that. I am sure that I will speak to Police Scotland to see whether we have answers after Friday's meeting, but I ask the cabinet secretary whether the Scottish Government will liaise with Police Scotland and the football clubs that are involved to ensure that the scenes that we witnessed at the weekend do not happen again and are not replicated.

Humza Yousaf: My direct answer to Sandra White's question is yes. My office is reaching out to the two clubs that are involved in that fixture, to Police Scotland and to Glasgow City Council, and I hope to have that dialogue in the coming days. Nobody but nobody wants to see those scenes repeated in two weeks' time. In fact, it will be completely unacceptable if the scenes are replicated, and I will be making that very clear to the football clubs that are involved.

I have been dismayed by some social media posts that have been brought to my attention in which rival supporters groups have suggested that they will be coming out on 21 March, during that fixture. Frankly, if football clubs and supporters cannot get their act together, we will have to consider what our future options are. However, my answer to the question is yes: I will be taking that conversation forward in the coming days with Police Scotland, the two football clubs that are involved and Glasgow City Council.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I call James Dornan. [*Interruption.*] Mr Dornan is online, but it may be that we cannot bring him in. I am afraid that he has dropped off BlueJeans, so he will be unable to ask his question.

Before we move on to the next item of business, I will pause for a few moments to allow ministers to change seats.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister, on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, and I encourage members who wish to ask a question to press their buttons now.

14:15

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will update Parliament on some changes to the lockdown restrictions that are currently in place across most of Scotland. The changes relate to outdoor meetings and activities. I will also announce a change that I hope will be welcomed by Scotland's faith communities. Although the changes that I will set out are relatively minor, they are important for our wellbeing. They represent gradual but steady steps out of lockdown and back towards a life in which we can all interact much more freely with our loved ones. Next week, I will set out a firmer indicative timetable for reopening the economy, including shops, hospitality, hairdressers, gyms and parts of our tourism sector.

The ability to announce even limited changes at this stage is possible only because of the hard sacrifices that the majority of people across the country continue to make each and every day. At the outset, let me acknowledge, and be clear that I share, the anger and despair that the vast majority of people—including, I am sure, the majority of football fans—felt at the weekend towards crowds of supporters flagrantly breaching rules that the rest of us are following every day at great personal cost. The behaviour that we witnessed at the weekend was disgraceful and selfish.

It is natural that some of the anger that people feel is directed towards the Government and the police—I absolutely understand that. All of us must reflect on what more could have been done and what more we need to do to avoid any repeat in the future. However, those at fault are those who breached the rules.

How the police manage such situations is, of course, an operational matter—the Government cannot and should not direct policing operations. I will, though, be speaking to the chief constable later this afternoon to consider what further action might be necessary to avoid any repeat of the unacceptable scenes that we saw at the weekend. However, no one should doubt the deeply invidious situation that such behaviour puts the police in as they discharge their responsibility to protect public order and safety.

We will be having further discussions this week with the football authorities and certain football

clubs which, in my view, need to show much more leadership. Let me be clear that, in making these comments, I do not care about the colour of the shirts. I said some harsh things about Celtic's decisions at the start of this year and, as far as I am concerned, in this case, Rangers Football Club could have done more to help avoid the situation arising at the weekend. The fact is that elite sport is being allowed to continue just now so that fans—who are deprived, like all of us, of so much else in life right now—can continue to watch and support their teams. It would be deeply unfair if a minority spoil that for the majority, and I hope that that will not be the case.

Given the fragility of the situation that we face right now, we cannot simply turn a blind eye to what happened at the weekend, and we will not. We will report back in due course—and certainly ahead of the old firm match that is scheduled for 21 March—on the various discussions that are taking place this week.

Finally on this subject, I completely understand why people who were watching what unfolded at the weekend might wonder why they are bothering to do the right thing. The fact is that the vast majority of us are doing the right thing because we know that it really matters—it matters for our own health and the health of our loved ones. It is about saving lives, and it is working. As I will set out shortly, we are firmly on the right path. No matter how legitimately angry we feel, let us not allow the irresponsible behaviour of a minority to set us all back. Let us stick with it as we make our way, slowly but surely, back to normality.

Let me turn to the substance of today's statement. I will give an overview of the latest statistics and the state of the epidemic, and then I will provide the detail of the initial changes that we are proposing.

First, I will give today's statistics. The total number of positive cases that were reported yesterday was 466, which represents 3.3 per cent of all tests that were carried out and takes the total number of cases to 206,465. There are 614 people in hospital, which is 40 fewer than yesterday, and 50 people are receiving intensive care, which is nine fewer than yesterday.

However, I regret to report that, in the past 24 hours, a further 19 deaths have been registered of patients who first tested positive over the previous 28 days. The total number of deaths under that measurement is, therefore, now 7,441. Yet again, I send my deepest condolences to all those who have lost a loved one.

A week ago yesterday was the anniversary of the first confirmed Covid case in Scotland. This Saturday will be the anniversary of the first confirmed death in Scotland of someone with

Covid. In two weeks' time—on 23 March—we will reach the first anniversary of lockdown. The Scottish Government has been in contact with a number of organisations to discuss how we can best mark that day. On 22 March, I will meet representatives of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK.

Current plans for 23 March include a national silence. We are also discussing how communities can be supported to develop their own commemorative activities over the coming year, as part of longer-term plans for remembrance. I will set out more detail of all that over the next fortnight. In addition, I know that Parliament will wish to consider how it marks the occasion. I am sure that all of us will want to remember all those who have been lost over the past year and to offer our continued thoughts, solidarity and support to the bereaved.

The figures that I have just reported for new cases, people in hospital and, of course, deaths are still higher than we would want them to be, but they are not as high as they were just a few weeks ago, so it is worth reflecting on the positive trend that we are now seeing. Two weeks ago, we were recording an average of 815 new cases a day across the country. Last week, that number had fallen to 657 new cases a day and, this week, it has fallen further to an average of 490 new cases a day. The average test positivity rate is now just above 3 per cent, admissions to hospitals and intensive care units are also falling, and the number of deaths—although still heartbreakingly high—has almost halved since the third week of January.

We continue to make excellent progress with the vaccination programme. As of 8.30 this morning, 1,789,377 people in Scotland have received their first dose of the vaccine, which is an increase of 14,718 since yesterday. The number of vaccines being administered each day has fallen during the past week or so because of a dip in supply, which I have spoken about previously and which we have been expecting and planning for. However, from about the middle of this month onwards, we expect supplies to pick up again and for that to allow for a very significant acceleration in the vaccination programme. It is worth noting that some of the supplies will be of short-dated stock—in other words, they will be of vaccines that must be used very soon after they have been received.

At the moment, the vaccination programme is working through priority groups 6 and 7, which include 60 to 64-year-olds, unpaid carers and people with particular underlying health conditions. For example, unpaid carers who are not registered with the Scottish Social Services Council will be

able to self-register for vaccination from next Monday onwards.

However, I can confirm that we are now in a position to start scheduling appointments for people in groups 8 and 9, which include people who are 55 to 59 years old and people who are 50 to 54 years old. I should point out, of course, that many people in those age groups—30 per cent of 50 to 54-year-olds and 36 per cent of 55 to 59-year-olds—have already had the first dose due to their having an underlying health condition. However, by now scheduling appointments for those age groups generally, we can ensure that no vaccine goes to waste and that we meet our target of offering first doses to everyone on the initial Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation priority list—everyone over 50, all unpaid carers and all adults with an underlying health condition—by mid-April.

The good progress that we are making on vaccination is, of course, important context for today's statement. Almost 40 per cent of the entire adult population has now received a first dose of the vaccine.

There is already strong evidence that the vaccination programme has significantly reduced deaths in care homes, and studies are also showing that vaccination can—as well as reducing illness and death—significantly reduce transmission of the virus.

We therefore do not have absolute confidence yet, but we have increasing confidence that as more and more people acquire some protection through vaccination, we will be able to ease restrictions while still keeping the R number below 1.

In addition to vaccine protection, continued international travel restrictions and the work of test and protect will help us to keep the virus under control as we—I hope—return to much greater normality in our everyday lives.

The prospects are now very encouraging indeed. That said, getting the timing of it all right remains essential. If our easing of restrictions gets ahead of our progress on vaccination, the virus will run out of control again. That is what we must avoid and that is why, notwithstanding all the positive news, caution is still essential, at this stage. Case numbers, although they are much lower than they were at the start of the year, are still high, and although we are confident that the R number is currently below 1, it is probably not very far below 1.

We also know that the more transmissible variant of Covid that was identified before Christmas now accounts for almost 90 per cent of new cases in Scotland. We have no real experience of just how far and fast that variant will

spread as we start to emerge from lockdown. Indeed, it is possible that some of the very significant steps we are already taking to get children back to school could push the R number back above 1. If that happens, as we know all too well, case numbers will start to rise again.

Even though older people, who are more likely to die from the virus, now have stronger protection as a result of the vaccine, no vaccine will provide absolute protection for our most vulnerable citizens.

In addition, we know the virus can cause significant long-term harm to people of all ages. People in their 30s, 40s and 50s make up a significant proportion of those who are currently in hospital with Covid, and there are people who have never been in hospital who are still suffering from what is known as long Covid.

In addition, if we allow more people to get the virus, we also increase the risk of new variants emerging. We also need to show continued caution about the risk of new variants entering Scotland. A possible—although still unconfirmed—further case of the P1 Brazil variant has now been identified in Scotland. It involves an individual who travelled to Scotland from Rio de Janeiro via Paris, and arrived on 19 February. The individual followed the procedures for managed self-isolation, and we currently have no reason to believe that that case presents any risk to the wider community. However, we are, of course, continuing to undertake all necessary follow-up work.

The point that I am making is that even though we are heading firmly in the right direction—I strongly believe that we are—we cannot afford to take our foot off the brake too soon. We still need to keep the virus under control if our hopes for a much more normal summer are not to suffer a setback.

If we continue to prioritise children's education—as I believe we should and must—our scope to make further changes will be limited while we are still rolling out vaccination.

We intend to ease restrictions as soon as we safely can, and we will do so quicker than has previously been anticipated, if that proves to be possible. As I indicated, when I update Parliament next week, I will set out a firmer timeline for our exit from lockdown.

Today, however, I want to set out some changes that we believe can be made more immediately. In considering that, we have deliberately prioritised changes that might improve our general well-being and quality of life without having too big an impact on infection rates, and we have focused in particular on restoring a bit more normality for children.

The first set of changes relates to outdoor social interactions. We realise that meeting up—even outdoors in Scotland—can be hugely beneficial to our wellbeing. Therefore, we intend to relax the law from Friday, so that up to four adults from up to two households will be able to meet outdoors. In addition, we will make it clear in our guidance that that will be allowed for social and recreational purposes as well as for essential exercise.

Meeting will be possible in any outdoor space, including private gardens, but I ask people, please, to stick to the new rules. Gatherings must be a maximum of four people from two households, and people should go indoors only if that is essential in order to reach a back garden or to use the toilet.

For now, please stay as close to home as possible. We hope to be in a position to relax, at least to some extent, travel restrictions within Scotland in the weeks ahead, but our advice is that it would not be safe to do so just yet.

For young people aged 12 to 17, we want to be even more flexible to enable more interaction with friends, so for 12 to 17-year-olds outdoor meetings will also be limited to a maximum of four people, but the two-households limit will not apply. That means that four friends from four different families will be able to get together outdoors, which will, I hope, allow young people to see more of their friends than is currently the case.

We are also proposing some changes to the rules on outdoor exercise and activities. From Friday, outdoor non-contact sports and organised group exercise will be permitted for all adults in groups of up to 15 people. We will also ensure that there is some flexibility around the travel rules for young people, so that children are not prevented from taking part in sport because, for example, they belong to a club that is a bit outside their local authority area.

Those are minor changes—I know that—but they are important. They have been made possible by the hard sacrifices that the majority of people across the country have made. We will seek to build on them as quickly as possible, in the weeks ahead.

The other careful change that we feel able to make at this stage relates to places of worship. I can confirm that we intend, assuming that there is no deterioration in the situation with the virus between now and then, to allow communal worship to restart from Friday 26 March. That is in time for Passover, Easter, Ramadan and Vaisakhi. In addition, the limit on attendance at communal services will be increased from 20, which was the limit that was in place before lockdown, to 50—assuming, of course, that the place of worship is

spacious enough to accommodate that many people with 2m physical distancing.

I know that the restrictions on communal worship have been really difficult for many people, despite the exceptional efforts that have been made by faith groups to reach out to their communities. The change is, again, relatively minor, but it is proportionate. We believe that it can be achieved relatively safely and we hope that it will enable more people to draw strength, comfort and inspiration from acts of collective worship.

All of us, I think, can see that things are getting better just now. In recent weeks, we have seen a significant fall in new cases. Deaths and hospital admissions are—thankfully—now falling, and the vaccination programme is progressing not just well, but beyond our initial expectations.

All that is excellent news that provides strong grounds for hope, but that hope must be balanced by caution. Because we have been in lockdown, it is easy to overlook the fact that the virus that we are dealing with now is much more infectious than the one that we were dealing with in the autumn. We will be reminded of that very quickly, if we try to do too much too soon, and because we are prioritising reopening of schools, our scope for lifting other restrictions—certainly, in the next few weeks—is extremely limited.

That is why the changes that I have set out today are modest; however, they are also important. They will, I hope, help people's health and wellbeing by enabling group exercise and allowing for a bit more social interaction. They will also, I hope, let children see more of their friends, and let them exercise and play a bit more normally. They should also, I hope, provide some comfort for faith groups.

I expect that further more substantial changes will be possible in the weeks ahead. I will set out as much detail about that as I can in next week's statement. As I have said before, if the data allows us to relax more restrictions more quickly than we have previously indicated, we will not hesitate to do that.

I am well aware of just how difficult continued restrictions are and I know that they get harder, rather than easier, to bear as time goes on. I also know, because I feel this too, that the progress on vaccination makes us even more impatient to reach the end of this ordeal as quickly as possible. However, I am absolutely certain that easing restrictions too quickly would be a mistake that we would regret.

Therefore, I ask people to take advantage of the relaxations that I have set out today but, please, to continue to do so within the rules. We must still stay at home except for specific purposes, which

from Friday will include limited outdoor socialising and recreation on the bases that I have set out. We must not meet people from other households indoors yet—that is absolutely essential—and we should all follow the FACTS advice when we are out and about.

By doing that, we can continue to look after each other and protect the national health service, and we will all play our part in keeping case numbers down while the vaccinators continue to do their work, children get back to school and we all take tentative, but, I hope, very firm steps back to life as we once knew it. For the moment, please continue to stick with it: stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement, and I echo her condolences to the families of those who have lost their lives.

I agree with her about the scenes in Glasgow at the weekend. When so many people have done so much over such a prolonged period of time, to see a tiny minority risk those efforts jeopardises the progress that we have made. Let us be clear: Covid is in retreat, and that is down to the perseverance of the public and the success of the vaccine roll-out. Scenes such as those at the weekend risk what has been achieved by the actions of us all.

As we relax restrictions, the Scottish Conservatives have always urged the First Minister to ensure that children's return to school is an absolute priority. The First Minister has claimed that it is, and last week she brought forward plans to get pupils back into the classroom. She said then that the moves are

“important for ... wellbeing ... as well as for education.”—
[*Official Report*, 2 March 2021; c 13.]

Today, she has referred to them as “very significant steps”. Because of the importance that she gave to the issue last week, parents who have spent months trying to home school and watching their children struggle away from their friends and from face-to-face teaching were expecting a significant change.

It therefore came as a shock to many to discover that, when the letter came in, they were looking at something less than was billed. Xanthe in Edinburgh says that, for her family, it is half a day per week, which she has called “Clearly ridiculous” and a “token gesture”. Elaine in Aberdeen was “devastated” to be told that her son will have only two three-hour sessions this side of the Easter holiday. Alan in Fife says that his

daughter will get one day per week but, in return, will now get no other live teaching time online, which he brands “an absolute joke”.

Pupils and parents were promised a return to the classroom but, from the information that they are now being sent, it is clear that, for many, that will amount to only a few hours a week at best. Can the First Minister look those parents in the eye and say that that is the significant progress that she has claimed? Will she look again at the plans in order to increase the actual amount of teaching time that pupils get?

The First Minister: I will always look parents in the eye and try to explain the difficult challenges that we are trying to balance. I understand that few groups in society have found the situation more difficult than parents who have had to juggle childcare with working from home and all the other responsibilities that are part of everyday life. I understand how important the issue is.

Let me be clear: I set out clearly in Parliament last week that, from 15 March, all primary school children will be back to full-time education in schools, which is a significant change, and that we will seek to have some in-school learning for secondary school pupils in the period between now and Easter. It is the intention, assuming that there is no deterioration in the position, that we will have a full return after the Easter holidays.

However, instead of having some young people in secondary schools with no in-school contact at all, we have decided to try to give them that, even if it is fairly minimal, for the period between now and Easter in order to try to reacquaint them with school and their friends and to prioritise their wellbeing. I do not stand here and say that that is perfect, but we need to balance all the issues to get schools back in a way that does not set back the country's progress overall.

On the point about continuing to look at all of this, the Deputy First Minister continues to consider all the issues on an on-going basis with the partners in the education recovery group to ensure that we are striking the best balance and the right balance overall.

I repeat that the most important objective that we are seeking to fulfil right now is to get all young people back to school full time after the Easter holidays, in the way that we did last August. That is what we are aiming for. With secondary school, we want to prioritise in-school contact between now and Easter for those in the senior phase, to ensure that national qualifications are given the priority that they deserve, and we want all young people in secondary schools to have some contact back in school before the Easter holidays.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement and

join her in sending our condolences to all those who have lost a loved one.

The decision to allow more social interaction is welcome. Social interaction is important for people's mental health and wellbeing, which is why we also need to ensure that this is our last lockdown. That will rely on testing, contact tracing and a speedy vaccine programme.

Can the First Minister confirm that every contact of the patient with the so-called Brazilian variant, including every passenger on the flight, has been traced, notified and informed of the need to isolate?

The First Minister mentions the rate of vaccination, which has dropped dramatically. Can she confirm when she expects it to reach, and remain at, the 400,000 doses per week target? We are now at around half that level.

I share with the First Minister the sadness and anger at the scenes that we saw in Glasgow at the weekend, which emphasise the risk that Covid-19 poses to those who continue to work on the front line. Given that and the further phased return of schools next week, does the First Minister agree that, alongside the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, there should be vaccination prioritisation for front-line workers, including teachers, school staff and police officers?

The First Minister: We had three cases of the new variant previously identified, and all appropriate contact tracing in relation to them has been done. I set out some of the detail of that at the end of last week: there were a small number of passengers on the flight concerned who were not able to be traced, but there is no indication of any onward community transmission from those cases.

The case that I have mentioned today is not connected to those three cases, and all appropriate contact tracing is being done. From the manifest data provided for the flight in question, there were 22 passengers on board, plus the cabin crew. Some 11 passengers, including the indexed case, went into managed quarantine, and the remaining passengers were exempt from the need to quarantine. However, depending on the nature of their exemption, they are likely to have been required to self-isolate at home and to take tests on days 2 and 8. All appropriate steps have been taken to follow up appropriately. Negative test results for both days 2 and 8 were recorded for 13 individuals, and the national contact tracing centre is following up the other eight passengers. We will continue to ensure that everything appropriate is being done there.

The most important thing to stress at this stage is that there is no indication of onward community

transmission of that variant, and we need to work hard to continue to ensure that.

On vaccination, I have clearly and openly set out the issues around supply. We can only vaccinate as fast as we have supplies to vaccinate with. I flagged up in advance that we were expecting a dip in supply, which indeed materialised, and that is why there has been a dip in the daily vaccination rate over the past period. The figures for other parts of the United Kingdom reflect the same pattern.

We are now expecting those supplies to pick up again from the middle of March, which will allow us to work towards achieving that target of 400,000 vaccinations a week and the overall target of completing the JCVI priority list by mid-April. That comprises priority groups 1 to 9, which, to repeat, is the majority of the adult population: everybody over 50, all unpaid carers and all adults with an underlying health condition.

We will then move into the rest of the population. As we do that, we will follow JCVI advice. Its advice is that, both in terms of clinical risk and in terms of the ability to work through this as quickly as possible, we should continue to prioritise by age cohort. We will follow that advice, as we have always done with JCVI advice. Many teachers and people in other key professional groups will already have been vaccinated as part of the priority groups so far, and they will progressively be done as we work down the age groups.

If we were to depart from that JCVI advice, we would rightly stand accused of making political decisions in place of clinical decisions. I understand the calls that are being made but, in dealing with something so important and sensitive, I do not think that that would be the right thing to do.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The breach by Rangers fans at the weekend was the biggest gathering that the country has seen for months. The chief medical officer said yesterday that it could result in an increase of the spread of the virus, but the First Minister makes no direct reference to that in her statement today, and she is bringing forward the relaxation of the rules.

Does that mean that the First Minister is now confident that there will not be an increase in cases in Glasgow as a result of what happened at the weekend? Is she confident that there will not be an outbreak in Glasgow?

The First Minister: If I was to stand here and say yes, people would realise that I was not basing that on anything.

I said at the weekend that I was concerned that what happened in Glasgow could set back our progress.

I fervently hope that that will not be the case, but as we know, with this virus, it will be some time before we know that for sure. Our test and protect teams and those doing our contact tracing and taking all the other steps that we take will of course work hard to ensure that any cases that arise from that gathering, or gatherings, at the weekend are properly contained.

We have made the judgment—based on clinical advice, as all these judgments are—that, given the relatively minor nature of the changes that we are setting out today, and given that they are focused on outdoor activity, it would be wrong at this stage to hold them back because of the behaviour of an irresponsible minority. We monitor all that—we are still closely monitoring the impact of getting schools back, which is why we have to get schools back cautiously and in a phased way.

It all comes back to personal responsibility. Desperate though we all are to do much more that we value doing in life, if we all take care to do that within the rules, we can ensure that this journey out of lockdown takes no longer than it has to and that it carries on with a forward trajectory.

Let us make no mistake: having crowds of people risks the spread of the virus. I take no pleasure in saying this, but I say again that people who gather in George Square, or anywhere else, in big crowds are putting at risk not only their own health but that of their loved ones and the wider community.

I say again clearly that that behaviour was not just irresponsible but deeply selfish. When so many people across the country are having to make painful sacrifices—miss funerals of loved ones; not be able to get married; not see grandparents or grandkids for months—we all have to ensure that we act not just out of what we want to do, but out of what the whole country needs us all to do.

I appeal again to everybody: let us stick with this. We are so close to getting into a much better position; let us not mess it up through any of us not sticking to the rules now, for whatever reason or circumstance.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Like everyone else, my thoughts as we approach a grim anniversary are with those who have lost a loved one and those whose health still suffers.

I welcome the gradual easing of some of the rules on meeting outdoors. We all miss mass gatherings. People miss mass gatherings of all kinds, whether they be music events or gatherings at the cinema. Some people even miss party

conferences. I would like nothing better than to go to a beer festival. However, we do not do that. The organisations and businesses that run such events have all had to stop until it is safe to run them.

Why should a football club be any different? Let us be honest: I say seriously that that football club did nothing to prevent dangerous mass gatherings in its name that trashed the public realm, risked the safety of front-line workers and posed a public health threat. Surely it is not enough just to appeal to the good sense of people who have shown that they do not care. Why are we even contemplating letting that business carry on in the weeks ahead, when we know that it is likely to generate a repeat of the scenes that we saw at the weekend?

The First Minister: I was trying to work out whether the beer festival and the Green Party conference were distinct events or one and the same.

Patrick Harvie has made really important points. Everybody is missing something right now. Many of us are missing many different things, such as mass gatherings or just the simple ability to go and see loved ones. It is really hard and heart breaking, and it gets more so with every day that passes.

I understand why any football team winning the league, particularly after a long period of time, is a big occasion. I get that. However, people are asked to forgo all sorts of things right now, and there can be no exceptions if we are to get through the next phase as quickly and as safely as all of us want to.

I have made it very clear, as the Deputy First Minister did yesterday and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice did again today, that Rangers Football Club could have done more to help to avoid what happened happening. Similarly, I thought that Celtic Football Club should have made different decisions about certain things that it did earlier in the year.

I am not partisan. Half of Glasgow thinks that I am partisan in one direction and the other half thinks that I am partisan in the other direction. I am not at all partisan. I do not care about the colour of the shirt; I care about the safety of the citizens of Glasgow and people across Scotland.

I have had a three-page letter from Rangers that does not even reflect the fact that what happened at the weekend was deeply regrettable and that we must all reflect on how we can avoid that happening in the future. At no point, unless I missed it—in which case, it will be pointed out to me and I will stand corrected—did Rangers simply and unequivocally say to their fans, “Stay at home” or, when they were gathering, “Go home.” We must all take responsibility for those things. I take responsibility for reflecting on whether the

Government could have done more, and the chief constable will do the same with the police. We all have a responsibility to get the country through this.

On future fixtures, I said in my opening remarks that a variety of discussions will happen over the course of this week, including one between me and the chief constable today. We will report back on those in due course, and certainly before the scheduled old firm match on 21 March.

We have tried to keep football and elite sport generally going, not for the benefit of elite sportspeople but for the fans. Everyone is being deprived of so much, so people should have the ability to watch a football match on the television and cheer on their team. A minority cannot be allowed to act irresponsibly, so I hope that we do not have to spoil that for the majority. However, we will have to assure ourselves that there will be no repeat of the sort of scenes that we saw at the weekend, and, frankly, that is work in progress.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): We all welcome the phased return of pupils to school but, in her statement, the First Minister acknowledged that steps that are being taken to get pupils back might well lead to the R number being pushed above 1. Would that impact on the timetable for a return to full-time education? If so, would any changes be national, or could those be varied according to the R number in a health board or local authority area?

The First Minister: First, as I said, no change that we make as we come out of lockdown will have a neutral effect. As we ease restrictions, every change potentially increases the risk of transmission. We have to behave in a way that minimises that risk. That is why, when we had the first phase of school return, I said openly to parents not to use that as an excuse to interact more with other adults. If we limit the changes to their purpose, we can reduce that risk. Although it is possible that the changes that we are making now will take the R number above 1, it is not inevitable, and we will be working hard to avoid that happening.

If the virus starts to run out of control again, which I hope it will not, we would, of course, have to review the pace of coming out of lockdown. We will do that appropriately, whether that is at national level or local level, depending on the circumstances. It becomes much more difficult to accurately assess the R number on a regional basis for methodological reasons, so we want to focus on making the changes in a way that stops the R number going above 1.

The outdoor changes are the least risky, and we hope that they will not have that impact, if

everybody enjoys them but stays within the rules. That is the message: if we all stay within the rules, even as we come out of lockdown, we will increase our chances of doing that safely and sustainably, without suffering setbacks. However, with an infectious virus, there are no guarantees. We must all just stick with it and show the discipline that is required.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): The hospitality sector is one of the hardest-hit sectors in our economy. Will the First Minister listen to the Scottish hospitality and licensed leisure sector's proposals for reopening, and will she publish the evidence on the impact of restrictions in the sector on coronavirus transmission?

The First Minister: I will listen to the representations of all sectors. The hospitality sector has been the hardest-hit sector, and it makes, has made and will continue to make representations on how it can reopen in a way that is safe but which allows businesses to trade more normally. We will listen to that. However, we have to ensure that any changes that we make do not risk increasing transmission to the point at which it sets us all back, and that is not an easy balance to strike.

I go back to the debates that we had before Christmas and before we went back into lockdown. The evidence can be made to sound really complicated, but it is not. The virus spreads when people come together, which is why it spreads in places where people come together most and are more likely to interact without social distancing, or in places where ventilation is not great. Unfortunately, that includes a lot of hospitality premises. We want to get hospitality open safely as quickly as possible, just as we want the rest of the economy to do that.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In my constituency, specialist luxury food and drink shops rely on the passing tourist trade not just to thrive but to survive. Such trade all but vanished during lockdown. North Ayrshire Council has denied grants that are vital to the survival of such businesses and has said that Scottish Government guidance deems specialist food and drink retailers to be essential and therefore not required to close. However, other local authorities have taken a completely different view of the guidance. Will the First Minister clarify whether specialist luxury food and drink shops are essential? Can they close and therefore access the vital grants that they need to survive?

The First Minister: All the restrictions are really challenging for businesses. The legislation allows for shops that sell food and drink to be open, but does not specify the types of food and drink, and it may be that some specialist shops are not experiencing the same footfall as they

experienced before Covid. The local authority discretionary fund, which the Scottish Government is supporting through £120 million of funding, was set up to help local authorities to respond to local economic pressures in their areas. I encourage businesses in that category to contact their local authority about that.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Two concerns have been raised with me in recent days. The first is that 60-year-olds in my constituency have not been called forward for vaccination appointments, but 50-year-olds have. That is in the same local authority and health board area.

Secondly, and worryingly, a large number of people have missed their vaccination appointments. In one local centre, 70 people missed them in one day. That seems slightly strange, given the high uptake rate.

Last year, there were issues with the flu vaccination programme and people being notified too late. In some areas, people were notified after the date of the appointment. Will the First Minister investigate the extent to which that is an issue with the vaccination programme, and will she ensure that people are notified in adequate time?

The First Minister: If Jackie Baillie wants to send me examples, I will look into that. I gave an open invitation to people to email me directly about vaccination issues, and I assure her that many people have done so and that that option remains open. However, the most important source of help and advice in such situations is the helpline, which I encourage people to use.

On people aged 50 and over being called before people aged 60 and over, I point out that, if somebody in the 50 to 55-year-old age group is being called right now, that is likely to be because they have an underlying health condition, so they will have the same priority as people in the 60 to 64-year-old age group. Both groups are in progress of being called for vaccination.

Nobody will be missed; everybody will be reached. By mid-April, everybody over the age of 50, which, unfortunately, includes me—I still struggle to come to terms with that—will have been vaccinated, as will every adult with an underlying health condition. That is the vast majority of the adult population. We will then get to the rest of the adult population as quickly as possible.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have been contacted by residents of Motherwell and Wishaw who have had concerns about the lack of public transport to the Ravenscraig mass vaccination centre. I raised that issue with the health board a couple of weeks ago. What support has been provided by NHS

Lanarkshire to facilitate transport and support people who have difficulty in accessing that centre?

The First Minister: I have had a number of emails on that in the past few days, and we have picked up the issue with NHS Lanarkshire. The board is expanding its communications plan over the coming days to ensure that Lanarkshire residents are aware of the rebooking options that are available to them, and it is working with Strathclyde partnership for transport on improving transport connections to Ravenscraig. We recognise that not all vaccination slots will be suitable, which is why it is important that there is an option to reschedule an appointment to a location that is closer to home or for a different time, if that is more convenient.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Further to earlier exchanges on schools, will the First Minister provide clear confirmation that, to facilitate her promise of a meaningful full-time return for all school pupils after Easter, the guidance on social distancing in classrooms will be altered?

The First Minister: In order to get all young people back to school, we have to make sure that the restrictions are proportionate. That includes social distancing. We continue to take advice on those issues from our expert advisory sub-group.

People should remember that we got schools successfully back full time in August and that it was not school return that sent us back into a deteriorating position and lockdown. We know that we can get schools back successfully, and that is what we are focused on doing again.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): It is welcome that the dates for easing some restrictions have been brought forward. I particularly welcome the return of congregational worship in time for religious festivals such as holy week. If the data continues to go in the right direction, could even more dates be brought forward? For instance, could gyms reopen sooner than anticipated in level 4? I know that my constituents would greatly value that. We would all like more things to go back to normal as soon as possible—if it is safe for them to do so, of course.

The First Minister: In general, yes. As the data allows and as our confidence increases that we can ease up without risking greater transmission—the vaccine roll-out has a big part to play in that—we will accelerate exit from lockdown if we can. What we have announced today is an acceleration beyond what we anticipated just a couple of weeks ago.

I do not want to give people false assurances. We will set out next week a firmer indicative

timetable for further moves out of lockdown, which will include the reopening of the economy. Gyms, hairdressers, shops and hospitality will be included in that. I recognise the importance of gyms to people's physical and mental health, and that is reflected in the opening up of outdoor group exercise for adults today.

All those things really matter, and we want to get them done as quickly as possible, but, as I keep saying, we will all regret it if we decide to run before we can walk and end up having to go backwards. Frustrating and difficult though it is, we must keep with the slow, careful and cautious but steady pathway forward. I think that we will find that we get to the end destination a lot more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): NHS Lothian and the City of Edinburgh Council area, in particular, continue to have among the lowest rates of vaccination in the country, at 33.4 per cent and 30.1 per cent, respectively, in comparison to the 40 per cent figure that the First Minister cited in her statement. It is several weeks since I first raised the issue. What steps is the First Minister taking to identify that continuing lag in Edinburgh and the Lothians? Does she have any insights into the matter? It is of great importance to my constituents and the citizens of Edinburgh.

The First Minister: When I give average figures in the chamber, by definition some health boards will be above those and some will be below. All health boards are progressing with vaccination better and more quickly than we would have dared hope for back at the start of the year. It is really important to give that context.

I will ask NHS Lothian to engage with the member—I am sure that he is already in touch with it—to set out whether it is dealing with any particular issues. However, all health boards are moving forward well and quickly, and all are working to the same targets of having offered the first dose of the vaccine to everybody in the JCVI priority groups by mid-April and then having given first doses to the whole adult population by the end of July. Both of those target dates are earlier than we anticipated at the start of the year—it is really important to keep hold of that context.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): My Cowdenbeath constituents—indeed, people across Scotland—will be keen to better understand what may lie ahead in the months to come. Will the First Minister provide some information at least as to what the new criteria will be for the strategic framework levels approach, and will she advise as to the planned frequency of review of the levels decisions?

The First Minister: I will say more about that next week. I do not want to get ahead of the decisions that we will take that will inform the statement that I make next week. When I made a statement two or three weeks ago, I set out the intention to realign some of the indicators that we were using previously to inform decision making, so as to be more in line with the current World Health Organization guidance. That will ensure that, as we open up, we have confidence that we are continuing to suppress the virus.

We will review all this on an on-going basis—probably three weekly rather than weekly—and, although we will have the ability to apply different levels of restriction to different areas of the country, should that be appropriate, so that we are not forced into a one-size-fits-all approach, it is my hope that we can start to move down levels of restriction as a country and that we can make progress overall.

That is why it is really important that we continue to stick to the guidance and the rules right now, so that that progress enables the whole country, all being well, to start to come out of lockdown together.

As we look further ahead, if we have outbreaks and localised flare-ups that we need to control, the levels system allows us to do that in a much more targeted way than a one-size-fits-all approach for the whole country could do.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): This is a critical time for hospices. Charity shops are shut and fundraising events have been cancelled. However, only £10 million of the £24 million that the UK Government has made available has been passed on to hospices, despite promises that all funding would be passed on. When will the full funding allocation be passed on to hospices?

The First Minister: All the funding that has been made available for hospices will be passed on to hospices. The balance of that will be confirmed soon. The reason for the delay is that we have found it challenging to obtain clarity as to the final consequential figure for hospices. The Department of Health and Social Care shared with officials only at the end of February information that indicated that it is now estimated that £24 million has been provided for hospices, but we have still not had final confirmation of that from the UK Treasury.

Let me be very clear to the hospice sector: every single penny of consequential funding that comes because of hospice funding decisions elsewhere will be passed on to hospices in Scotland.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I recently met the Scottish Wedding Industry Alliance. The wedding industry is particularly

important in Dumfries and Galloway. Although the sector is grateful for the support that it has received from the Scottish Government, it is asking for guidance on whether it can safely operate this summer. Many providers already have bookings, but guidance from the Competition and Markets Authority means that the cost of cancellation falls on the venue. The alliance also points out that weddings with 20 people or fewer are not viable. Can the Government offer guidance? If it is not safe to reopen, is more support likely to be available?

The First Minister: I hope that it will be safe to reopen. As with anything else, we have a difficult balance to strike between economic viability and public safety, and public safety obviously has to take priority. We want marriage ceremonies and wedding receptions with more guests to happen as soon as possible, and we will facilitate that in line with the public health advice that is available to us. In the meantime, we will continue to work closely with the Scottish Wedding Industry Alliance on when restrictions on ceremonies and receptions can be relaxed.

We introduced a £25 million fund for the weddings sector. The fund, which closed at the end of February, provided grants of up to £25,000 to businesses and self-employed people who operate in the sector. We will set out more detail on future business support later this month.

Our focus now is—as far and as quickly as we possibly can—to get businesses trading again, but that requires all of us to continue to play our part in suppressing the virus.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I have been contacted by a constituent whose parents are in a care home in Orkney. She and her brother have had weekly indoor visits and have been told that outdoor visits for up to six people from two households will start this month. When she asked whether her daughter and granddaughter can visit, she was told that they cannot, as they are from a third household. She said:

“My parents feel imprisoned ... All they want is to see their grandchildren before passing away and they are losing the will to live because of these rules.”

In a community with such low prevalence of Covid, why can visits such as my constituent requests not be permitted? When does the First Minister expect further relaxation of the rules so that care home residents in Orkney, who are desperate to see their families, can have that contact?

The First Minister: Nobody—absolutely nobody—wants to keep families apart for any longer than is necessary, and we certainly do not want to do that for no reason. If Liam McArthur wants to send me details of his constituents, I am

happy to ask the local health board to respond directly on the particular circumstances that he mentions. I understand absolutely the stress, anxiety and distress that is caused in these situations.

The one point that I would make—it is a general point—is that it has always been the case under the very difficult restrictions that apply to care home visiting that end-of-life visiting has been allowed, as has certain other kinds of visiting in exceptional circumstances, which can include distress on the part of residents. Therefore, there may already be a conversation that should be had with the local health board and, indeed, the care home provider about whether that can be facilitated.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Last week, the Western Isles reached a significant milestone, with more than half the adult population having had their first vaccination. NHS Western Isles staff and all who have helped them have done a fantastic job. However, we are in the midst of two significant outbreaks locally. All bus services were suspended on Lewis and Harris on Saturday and there was some disruption to the Stornoway to Ullapool ferry due to a positive test.

What steps are being taken to ensure the safety of key transport workers in similar situations in the country?

The First Minister: There are and should continue to be a range of mitigations in place on public transport, and it is important that those are robustly applied and monitored.

On vaccination, once we have offered vaccination to priority groups 1 to 9, we will continue to follow JCVI advice by inviting adults under 50 to come forward in age cohorts. That approach is supported by evidence that the risk of hospitalisation and admission to critical care with Covid increases with age, so those at the highest risk of hospitalisation outside cohorts 1 to 9 will be those in the 40 to 49-year-old age groups.

The other point that it is important to make is that that is also the approach to vaccination that will enable us to vaccinate everybody most quickly. Logistically, it would take longer to do that if we were to take an approach that involved identifying people in different professions and occupations, as opposed to identifying people on the basis of age. We will get through the whole adult population most quickly if we do it methodically by age cohort, and that will also deliver the biggest impact on illness, hospitalisations and death.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I have had concerns raised with me that vaccination teams in Dumfries and Galloway have been asked to slow down in order to let other areas of

Scotland catch up. Can the First Minister confirm whether the Scottish Government approved that request, and can she explain why vaccination rates could vary so significantly as to require that?

The First Minister: I am certainly not aware of that and I would be astonished if that were the case. I know that there are political divisions between different parties, but what possible interest do I or does anybody else in the Scottish Government have in slowing down vaccination in any part of the country? That really does not make any sense.

There will have been a slowing of the rate in the past couple of weeks. If Oliver Mundell has been listening, he will know that that has been because supplies have dipped. That slowdown has happened across the country—in fact, it has happened across the whole of the UK. As supply increases again, from the middle of this month onwards, the daily rate of vaccination will increase as well.

As I said a moment ago to, I think, Daniel Johnson, there will be variations, and they will sometimes be geographical. Of course, there are parts of the country that were hit by severe weather a few weeks ago. There will be reasons why some parts of the country are slightly above average and others are slightly below average. However, all parts of the country are ahead of where we would have hoped in our wildest dreams to be at this stage. The vaccination programme is going really well in all parts of the country, and we should be thankful to vaccinators across the length and breadth of Scotland for that.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Finance's recent announcement that hospitality businesses will pay no rates for 12 months, while the UK Government committed only to three months. Can the First Minister confirm that the SNP Government will honour that commitment to those hospitality and tourism businesses, so that they will pay no rates for 12 months?

The First Minister: Yes, I can confirm that—assuming, of course, that the Parliament votes for the budget later this afternoon. The budget will ensure that retail, hospitality, leisure and aviation businesses in Scotland will pay no rates during 2021-22. That will save ratepayers an estimated £719 million, and it responds to the key request that was made by the business community.

In addition, we have the lowest poundage in the UK, including an unprecedented reduction in the poundage mid-revaluation, which returns it to pre-Covid levels and will save Scottish businesses more than £120 million in comparison with our previously published plans.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Further to the question that was asked by Joan McAlpine, MSPs heard on Friday that, in a survey, 20 per cent of wedding venue owners said that they have had suicidal thoughts at the situation that they face. The industry outlined that it has real concerns about the thousands of cancellations that there have been in the past few weeks but that the industry could bounce back quickly if it gets the right help.

In relation to the First Minister's discussions with the industry about a recovery plan, could that focus specifically on saving those venues from going bust? If we do not do that, the many couples who have cancelled their weddings will not be able to re-book. That would be an important step for the industry.

The First Minister: That will be a focus of on-going support in different sectors for as long as it is needed and I will make sure that the point is fed into discussions that are on-going with the wedding sector.

However, the most important thing that we are trying to do is get businesses back trading, which includes weddings and wedding receptions. It may be that there are still some limitations on numbers for a period, but we want to try to get back to normality there as quickly as possible, just as we do everywhere else, for the benefit of the wedding sector but also for all those people across the country who want to get married and have not been able to do so because of Covid.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Long Covid appears to be an emerging and growing problem. Can the First Minister tell us how many cases there are in Scotland, what measures the Scottish Government has put in place to deal with long Covid in hospitals and in the community, and whether additional financial resources will be made available to health boards and local authorities, if required, to support those unfortunate enough to have contracted long Covid?

The First Minister: I can check whether we have an estimated number for that, but I cannot definitively answer right now how many people have long Covid. That is partly because we do not yet fully understand what it is, how it manifests and how long long Covid turns out to be.

As well as supporting health boards to make sure that services are available for people who present with symptoms that appear to be indicative of long Covid, the key thing that the Scottish Government is doing is investing in a lot of research work to better understand what long Covid is, how it affects patients and what kind of specialisms might be required in the longer term to deal with it. That is an extensive programme of

work that I expect we will be committed to for some time to come.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): West Lothian is consistently behind in vaccination rates and has been from the beginning of the programme. What additional resources are being put in to try to increase the levels of vaccination in the area?

The First Minister: All health boards have access to the same resources to get on with vaccination. I repeat the answer that I have given before: I am not aware of particular issues in West Lothian. I will happily ask the health secretary to look into that, but all health boards are progressing well with vaccination, and the progress of the vaccination programme is beyond what we anticipated earlier this year. There is a lot of focus from Government, health boards, local authorities and vaccination teams across the country to make sure that that progress continues.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes that item of business. There will be a short pause before we move on.

Climate Change Plan

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-24300, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the climate change plan. I call her to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

15:20

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): As convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, I welcome the opportunity to highlight the committee's recent report on the updated climate change plan and to move the motion on behalf of the four committees that jointly considered the plan. That collaborative scrutiny and the need for immediate action across a broad range of cabinet secretary portfolios and committee remits demonstrate the cross-cutting and integrated nature of effective climate policy action and scrutiny. That approach must continue if we are to realise our ambitions.

The scrutiny process has been informed by the invaluable contributions of experts, stakeholders and communities from across Scotland and has been underpinned by our committee's work on a green recovery. I thank everyone who contributed to our inquiry.

The debate represents an important opportunity to reflect on the strengths of the updated plan and to highlight improvements that are needed to turn it into a credible and ambitious blueprint for Scotland's future. Our unanimously agreed report contains several action-focused recommendations, and we expect the Scottish Government to progress them, together with the other committees' recommendations, to deliver a final plan that we can all have confidence in.

Sir David Attenborough recently told a virtual gathering of the United Nations Security Council that climate change is the

"biggest threat ... modern humans have ever faced."

How we respond now will determine the world that our children and our grandchildren inherit.

Parliament recognised the urgency of the situation in passing legislation that set new and ambitious targets, and it is clear that we need to increase and accelerate our action in the near term to meet them. Doing so offers clear potential for innovation, jobs, the economy, the environment and the wellbeing of the people of Scotland and beyond. We want Scotland to be at the forefront in exploring, developing and investing in those opportunities and in the technology that will help us to reach our ambitious targets. That is why the

updated plan must set out the foundation and pathways for increased action across society.

The committee recognises that we have challenging targets and that the plan update has been prepared in challenging times. There is significant support for the scale of the proposed emissions reductions and for the overall ambition that the updated plan sets out.

In particular, we welcome the strengthened focus on cross-sectoral working and the inclusion of the co-ordinated approach, which our committee has for many years called for. However, we heard from our correspondents that detail on how to reach the ambition was lacking, and concerns were raised about the achievability of the plan as set out.

Major action and transformational change across all sectors and all parts of society are urgently required to reflect the nature of the climate emergency, meet our Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 ambition and capture the immediate opportunities of a green recovery. We need to tackle the implementation gap that arises when solutions have been identified but not so far applied. We must capture and lock in positive behaviours and build resilience through valuing nature more.

To underpin all that, we must focus on people, innovation, skills and jobs. The pandemic has shown that we can act boldly and quickly in the face of a crisis. As David Attenborough said, climate change is the biggest crisis that faces humanity today and our response must reflect that.

I will move on to our recommendations, including those on the modelling and evidence used; the balance of effort across sectors; sectoral plans and governance arrangements; and behaviour change.

The committee has called on the Scottish Government to

"Demonstrate how the policies and proposals will deliver the envelopes that are presented for each sector. Understanding the relative emissions abatement significance of the policies and proposals is key to supporting implementation of the plan, by enabling potential risks and deficiencies to be identified and corrected."

We have also called for

"greater clarity on the timescales associated with the policy and proposal commitments in the plan to develop, consult on, research or explore particular measures".

The timescales should

"reflect the urgent nature of the climate emergency and the immediate opportunities to progress a green recovery."

We would like a review to be carried out of the assumptions that underpin the plan and, in particular, of the

“abatement attributed to Negative Emission Technologies”—

or NETs. Given the uncertainties that are associated with that, we have called on the Scottish Government to set out an alternative plan

“for how equivalent abatement could be achieved.”

We have asked for

“greater detail about how the policies and proposals across all sectors reflect the opportunities and implications associated with just transition and green recovery”,

taking into account regional considerations.

We have also recommended that the final updated plan

“must take a more integrated approach to cutting emissions across agriculture and land use ... recognising that both depend on the management of a single resource and that these sectors are expected to become more closely aligned in policy and practice.”

Our report makes clear and detailed recommendations across a range of other areas, including waste and the circular economy, nature-based solutions and blue carbon.

The committee recognises that we are debating an updated plan. Time for scrutiny has been tight, and updates will never be as comprehensive or detailed as a complete new plan.

I would now like to look forward to the fourth climate change plan. Stakeholders and the Parliament need ample time to consider the detail in a new climate change plan, so the committee calls on the Government to lay the next full climate change plan in Parliament by the end of 2023. That will ensure that there is sufficient time for full stakeholder and parliamentary consideration before finalisation and publication of the fourth climate change plan in 2024.

This will be the last debate to be led by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee in the current parliamentary session, and it is fair to say that our report on the climate change plan update is the culmination of a very heavy work schedule in this session. It has been a privilege to convene a committee that deals with such vital work. I would like to pay tribute to the extremely hard work of the committee clerks and our Scottish Parliament information centre research colleagues. Two long-serving members of the committee are retiring and making their last speeches today—Stewart Stevenson and Angus MacDonald—so I record my best wishes and thanks to them, and to all the members who have served with such dedication on the committee during the session.

It is sad that this afternoon’s debate might potentially have been the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform’s last debate as well. She is unable to be here, but I

wish her a speedy recovery and thank her for the constructive way in which she has worked with our committee, and for her many years of public service—not least in her stewardship in protecting the environment and tackling climate change.

Our committee members and the cabinet secretary know that there is no precedent in human history for the speed and scale of the change that is needed to tackle climate change and reduce harmful emissions. The changes that have been highlighted by the four parliamentary committees that have come together today will help to ensure that the final updated climate change plan provides an effective response to the current challenges. Our recommendations should help to provide a springboard for the swift action that is needed to tackle climate change and to deliver a truly green recovery for Scotland—a recovery in which no one is left behind. It is only by committing to significant action today that we can build a better Scotland for tomorrow.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the reports of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, the Local Government and Communities Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee on the Scottish Government document, *Securing a green recovery on a path to net zero: climate change plan 2018—2032*.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain to speak on behalf of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee.

15:28

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I am pleased to contribute to the debate.

The committee took evidence on the climate change plan update during January and February of this year, and the committee’s call for written evidence produced a good level of responses. I am grateful to everyone who contributed to the scrutiny process.

On 4 March, we wrote to the Scottish ministers to set out a series of specific recommendations for improvement of the plan in the areas that are covered by the committee’s remit. Our work has been particularly important, given that the transport and agriculture sectors are the highest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland.

The objective of reducing transport emissions by 41 per cent between 2020 and 2032 is certainly ambitious, especially given that such emissions have not fallen during the past decade. Indeed,

many stakeholders expressed doubt that that objective was achievable.

To address those concerns, the committee has called on the Scottish Government to introduce enhanced monitoring, increased interim targets and much greater clarity regarding the alignment of specific transport policy measures with the timescale for achieving the reduction in transport emissions.

Probably the most significant transport-related element of the CCPU is the target to reduce car kilometres by 20 per cent by 2030. The UK Climate Change Committee told us that, even in its most ambitious assessment, it could not identify a set of policy measures that would achieve that level of reduction. Furthermore, the committee has emphasised the particular challenges that are faced in remote and rural areas of Scotland in reducing car kilometres, given the limited availability of public transport and the slow roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure in those areas. Policy measures in the forthcoming route map for meeting that target will need to be extremely ambitious and realistic in addressing those specific challenges.

On electric vehicles, I note that in order for the planned phase-out of new petrol and diesel cars and vans to be achieved, it is critical that we address the current grid capacity constraints. The committee also urges the Scottish Government to set out a timescale for the complete phase-out of hybrid vehicles.

We have heard evidence about the huge opportunity to reduce carbon emissions from freight transport by shifting from road to rail. We are therefore disappointed by the lack of emphasis in the plan on addressing freight transport and harnessing that opportunity.

The increasing need to encourage active travel must be a key future priority, although I note that certain previous targets on active travel have been missed by significant amounts. We must ensure that the growth in active travel during the Covid-19 pandemic is embedded in the long-term psyche of the people of Scotland.

Agricultural stakeholders have highlighted the lack of urgency in the timetable for bringing forward a new rural policy for Scotland and rolling out regional land use partnerships. For planned reductions in carbon emissions from the agriculture sector to be achieved, those timescales must be significantly accelerated.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest as a farmer. Does Edward Mountain agree that there is huge willingness across Scotland to meet those challenges in the transport and agriculture sectors? Does he also agree, however, that there is a huge need for knowledge transfer from those

who know how to make that work to those who will have to make it work? The gap in provision that exists in that regard needs to be filled.

Edward Mountain: I thank Mr Scott for that intervention and for his timely reminder that, as a farmer, I should also declare my interest. I want to see farming move forward. Mr Scott is entirely right. Farmers need to be supported through an appropriately funded expansion of the Farm Advisory Service. In particular, we need to look at how we can quickly and significantly increase the take-up of carbon audits.

The UK Climate Change Committee gave notable praise to the targets and accompanying action plan for forestry. Our committee concluded that, to maximise the environmental benefits of planting new woodlands, a 50:50 split between native and commercial species must be sustained in the long term. Beyond the current target of planting 18,000 hectares of new woodland annually by 2025, there is scope to achieve a longer-term target of 24,000 hectares per year, and the Scottish Government should develop a workable plan to achieve that goal.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I wonder what England is doing. I note that Scotland planted 80 per cent of the total and England planted only 20 per cent.

Edward Mountain: Mr Lyle's intervention would have been an important intervention if we were in the United Kingdom Parliament. We are in the Scottish Parliament, and I will concentrate on the Scottish climate change plan.

I turn to food. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of taking a whole-food-system approach to cutting emissions in the agriculture sector. The delayed good food nation bill would have provided an important framework for such an integrated approach, and the bill now needs to be brought forward urgently, and no later than the end of 2021.

That was a brief summary of the key recommendations of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, and I hope that the Scottish Government will give careful consideration to them all.

I will finish on this subject. The convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee said that she was losing members of her committee. I will be losing Angus MacDonald and Stewart Stevenson, but I will also be sad to see Maureen Watt, Richard Lyle and John Finnie go, as well as Peter Chapman. It would be remiss of me not to say that I am losing more members than the convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call James Dornan to speak on behalf of the Local Government and Communities Committee.

15:36

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to talk on behalf of the Local Government and Communities Committee about the climate change plan update.

Initially, we agreed to focus on the buildings chapter in the updated plan, which centres around planning and building. Our scrutiny also looked at how local government plays a role in helping to achieve the net zero target.

I would like to take this opportunity to give my thanks to the committee's clerking team and those who gave us written and oral evidence. I also pay tribute to the work of the fellow committees that scrutinised the updated plan, whom we are hearing from today. I hope that I have not forgotten any committee members who are leaving and whom I have forgotten to wish well for the future.

The committee took evidence before the Scottish Government published its draft heat in buildings strategy in February. The strategy sheds light on some of the issues that are raised by the updated plan. I note that the on-going pandemic contributed to the delay in its publication.

Although it is recognised as challenging, the breadth of ambition that is set out in the proposals is one of the update's main strengths. The proposals were well received and supported by our witnesses. However, we heard that the updated plan lacked detail. Stakeholders and the public need to understand the stepping stones that are required to guide them towards the outcomes.

Bringing down heat emissions from buildings is a challenging task, and the public play a vital role in tackling it. Clear, effective communication will help to drive the behavioural change that we need to see home by home. The Committee welcomes the Government's commitment to implement a public engagement strategy for heat decarbonisation. We believe that people should feel informed and empowered, and that they can be part of the solution.

The update states the Scottish Government will introduce

"a standard requiring all new homes consented from 2024 to use zero emission heating".

However, we heard of the existence of a time lag between when new regulations are introduced and when they start to have effect on the ground. We have asked the Scottish Government to respond to views that we heard that the date of

implementation of the standard should be brought forward to 2022.

We understand that a high percentage of modern buildings are failing to meet the minimum building standards regulations and that the current design life of a new home build is approximately 60 years. Past generations built homes to last 100 or 200 years. We heard a proposal for a buildings MOT for new builds, with emissions monitored at least every five years. The committee asks the Scottish Government to clarify what other opportunities are available to tighten up building standards and ensure that we build durable buildings.

We understand that the updated plan does not consider embodied energy, which is the total carbon footprint involved in construction or refurbishment, adding up the impact of labour, cement, steel, wood or other materials used, and all related transport impacts measured in carbon. The committee would be interested to know whether the updated plan takes account of embodied energy costs.

Witnesses agreed that reducing the carbon footprint of existing homes is one of the biggest challenges under the plan. Scotland has a diverse range of homes and much of it is older housing stock.

Houses in rural areas bring particular challenges. We heard that rural buildings are often seen as too difficult, too expensive, too hard or too complicated. With that challenge comes the need for increased financial support, and we therefore welcome proposals to extend financial support in rural areas. We ask for more detail on how home owners will be incentivised and persuaded that improvements are in their interests. The committee also believes that more detail is needed on the practicalities of rolling out improvements across Scotland's diverse housing stock.

We heard evidence of improvements to homes that, in fact, made living conditions worse. We recognise that introducing improvements is a developing discipline. However, witnesses welcomed the emphasis on training and upskilling in the updated plan. The committee believes that sharing good practice is essential to progress in that area.

Scotland has about 800,000 tenement buildings, and we have noted that the Scottish Government is committed to those tenements reaching a good level of energy efficiency. However, we believe that the law on common repairs in tenements must be reformed to help to expedite interventions that will improve energy efficiency.

We were disappointed to note that the 255-page plan has only one page that is expressly dedicated to planning. We were told that the plan

“misses the point about the role of place”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee, 27 January 2021; c 23.*]

and that how people travel between and use buildings accounts for a larger amount of greenhouse gas emissions than is accounted for by the buildings themselves. The committee therefore supports calls for a national policy focus on place, wellbeing and the delivery of related policy goals.

We heard that the current planning system must be adapted so that it becomes more reactive and a mechanism for flexible dialogue between people, developers and the Government. We recommend that local authorities must be supported to provide effective public engagement in planning.

As the nation moves towards being a net zero society, the crucial role of local government in co-ordinating communities and public life must be recognised. We heard that there is a need to upskill staff across all local authorities. Meeting that challenge will require not only funding but increased organisational capacity. We have asked for a local government training strategy to upskill the workforce.

We welcome the commitment to working with local authorities to design solutions that are tailored to their circumstances. However, we also ask the Government to consider increasing the flexibility of funding so that each local authority can meet the unique needs of their area in relation to decarbonisation.

I look forward to hearing ministers and cabinet secretaries respond to the points that have been raised by all committees, and I hope that many of the challenges will be addressed in the next parliamentary session.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Willie Coffey to speak on behalf of the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee.

15:42

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I am pleased to speak on behalf of my committee. We considered three aspects of the climate change plan update: electricity, industry and negative emissions technologies, which were mentioned earlier. I will highlight a handful of points under each of those headings.

First, I will say something about an earlier piece of work by the committee. Last summer, we reported on the findings of our energy inquiry, and the idea of the energy quadrilemma warrants repeating in this debate. We were told that it is crucial to strike a balance between a quartet of potentially competing factors: climate change, security of supply, affordability and public

acceptability. That basically means that we should be asking ourselves where our energy comes from, how we use it, how responsible we are and what we consume.

The aim, of course, is to reduce carbon emissions and to choose the best available options to achieve that. Scotland has almost halved its greenhouse gas emissions in 30 years, which is pretty good going. Now, we just need to do that again in the next 11 years. That comes with challenges, but it brings opportunities, too.

The challenges relating to electricity take the form of planning, grid connection and charging. However, we also have a number of comparative advantages. We have the workforce in oil and gas and in renewables. We have natural assets to generate wind, hydroelectric, wave and tidal power. We also have policy momentum, with the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—taking place in Glasgow later in the year.

A key point from our evidence was the importance of alignment; without it, we will reduce the chances of renewable energy contributing to a green recovery. A year ago, three of our committee members visited Orkney for our energy inquiry and witnessed the integration of generation, use and storage in the form of the ReFLEX project.

We would like to see a tool for monitoring in the annual energy statement. We suggest that that statement should be a stand-alone document that can show progress made in a meaningful, prominent and accessible way for policy makers, parliamentarians and the public.

When we came to speak with industry, it was disappointing not to hear directly from Ineos, as the company is such a significant player in the sector. That was not to be, but we heard on its behalf from the Chemical Industries Association. We were told about the high operational costs of decarbonising, and the witnesses were blunt about the risks of carbon leakage—that does not mean leakage in the technical sense; it means the potential economic loss if businesses and jobs move elsewhere. We were reminded that that is the economics of it. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Government prioritise that aspect of its policy around incentive, support and competitiveness and that it continue to work in partnership with the industry. We also encourage our successor committee, in the next session, to focus on industrial decarbonisation.

The third and final strand of our work was on negative emissions technologies. Those are technologies that can permanently remove carbon from the atmosphere, and it is fair to say that expectations on that front are ambitious. Chris

Stark reckoned that what is set out by the Scottish Government is entirely feasible, subject to significant investment and political and commercial will. He said that developments would have to happen at scale and that a Scottish site would need to be established by 2029.

We were told that Scotland has the geology, skills and infrastructure that make us well placed to lead. However, there was evidence from some people who voiced concern about what is seen as the lack of an alternative strategy.

The minister, Paul Wheelhouse, must balance the risks and rewards between Government, industry and consumers. He spoke of a place-based approach.

A number of witnesses said that the cost of decarbonisation should be spread fairly across society, and Mr Wheelhouse stressed the importance of partnership working. He praised initiatives such as the Grangemouth future industry board, the Scottish industrial decarbonisation partnership and the north-east carbon capture usage and storage initiative—or NECCUS to its friends.

Our committee welcomes the placing of importance on those partnerships, as business and community buy-in must be an essential part of our plans. We would like to see a little more detail on the 2032 target for gross emissions, so we recommend that the Scottish Government prepare and publish an industrial road map that will take us there.

Those were a few of our findings. I hope that they chime with the findings of the other committees. I look forward to hearing more and to hearing from the Government in winding up the debate.

15:48

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson): I, too, am glad to speak in this important debate on the climate change plan update. I thank the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee for sponsoring today's debate; I thank all the committees that have been involved in the scrutiny process; and I thank the conveners for their four important speeches this afternoon.

As Gillian Martin alluded, the cabinet secretary is unfortunately unable to be here, having been unwell recently. Do not worry—for clarity, she does not have Covid. More than anyone, Roseanna will be annoyed that she has had to miss Parliament, not only because this might well have been her final debate and speeches before her retirement, but because she has championed the climate change plan update for the past few

years. Her commitment to delivering on our ambitious targets is second to none. Therefore, although she cannot be here today, I think that the whole chamber will acknowledge the contribution that she has made to getting us this far.

Scotland has made great progress in reducing our emissions. The Climate Change Committee recently highlighted that we have

“decarbonised more quickly than the rest of the UK and faster than any G20 economy since 2008.”

In 2019, we enshrined world-leading targets in law, including net zero emissions by 2045, and we committed to updating the 2018 climate change plan. None of us could have imagined, back then, the circumstances in which the update would be published.

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on lives and livelihoods across Scotland, as we know. However, there are brighter times ahead, and, out of the pandemic, we must secure a green recovery and a just transition to net zero, because the global climate emergency has not gone away—if anything, it has become an even more pressing issue. That reminds me of something that I heard when I was in China in 2003, when the first SARS pandemic hit: the virus is the greatest concern to humankind, except for humankind itself. That epitomises the situation that we are now in with regard to our focus on the climate emergency as well as the pandemic.

The plan update that we are considering today, which includes 100 new policies, sets an ambitious path to meeting Scotland's targets up to 2032. In line with the requirements of section 36 of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, the policy package was designed to make up for the excess emissions that arose when we missed the 2017 and 2018 annual targets. The plan update was signed by all cabinet secretaries—the whole Cabinet—reflecting the cross-governmental approach that was recommended by the ECCLR Committee. Furthermore, our new co-ordinated approach chapter accounts for the interlinkages between sectors.

Given the complexities involved, the plan update commits to learning by doing, as was recommended by stakeholders. It refreshes the monitoring framework in the 2018 plan, and annual reporting to Parliament on progress will begin in May. We have included an additional chapter for the negative emissions technologies sector, which reflects our recognition, in line with the advice of the CCC, that those technologies will be essential.

Most important, our new and boosted policies and proposals will reduce emissions across all sectors. Indeed, while giving evidence at committee, Chris Stark of the CCC said that the

plan update is “really impressive” in breadth and noted that there is no UK equivalent.

The transition to net zero will require that many transformational shifts take place in the next decade. Therefore, the plan update commits us to significant immediate action. For example, our farmer-led groups will secure uptake of low-emissions farming measures. We are rapidly implementing the beef sector group’s recommendations, and the groups on arable, dairy, hill, upland and crofting are aiming to report in the spring.

Last month, we announced our regional land use partnership pilot regions, to optimise land use in a fair and inclusive way. We have also increased our ambition with regard to nature-based solutions, with targets to restore 20,000 hectares of peatland per annum and to increase new woodland creation by 50 per cent by 2025.

Furthermore, we will reduce car kilometres by 20 per cent by 2030. We will seek to publish a strategy on that later this year. We will also ensure that, by 2030, half of our homes have transitioned to low and zero-carbon heating systems. The recent heat in buildings strategy lays out our delivery plans in more detail. In the waste sector, we will reduce food waste by 33 per cent by 2025.

The commitments in the plan update are backed up by record levels of funding, including £1.9 billion that was announced in the budget. That includes the first £165 million of our low carbon fund, with £14 million for the green jobs fund, £25 million for bus priority infrastructure and £15 million for zero-emissions buses. We also recently published our infrastructure investment plan, which supports an inclusive net zero carbon economy and details more than £26 billion of major projects and large programmes.

Of course, the publication of the plan update comes at a timely moment for climate action worldwide. Ahead of COP26 in Glasgow, we have the opportunity to showcase Scotland’s world-leading approach to tackling climate change, and we will use COP26 to drive tangible international climate action.

As we transition to net zero, there will undoubtedly be uncertainties relating to technological advances, the limits of devolution and the need to ensure a just transition, but we are confident that the plan update provides a credible pathway to meeting our targets. It sends out a clear statement of intent and provides greater certainty for all parts of society to contribute further to mitigating climate change.

I thank the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee for its report and recommendations. Alongside that, I thank the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, the

Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee and the Local Government and Communities Committee for their reports. That progress is invaluable. The Scottish Government will consider the advice and respond in due course, bearing in mind that there is an urgent need to finalise the plan update so that we can focus on the implementation of its policies and deliver our targets, including a reduction of 75 per cent in emissions by 2030. We therefore plan to finalise the current plan update before the recess.

We will then look for opportunities to integrate additional policies into our overall package in due course. That will include any new policies in response to our full consideration of the committee recommendations, as well as the outcome of our review of the impact of technical updates to the measurement of emissions from wetlands. Ministers will make a statement in June, following the publication of the next set of greenhouse gas emissions statistics, and we will look for other opportunities to keep Parliament informed of our approach.

I hope that what I have said is useful in setting out the Scottish Government’s position and approach. We look forward to continuing to work with fellow MSPs and others, and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

15:57

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I offer Roseanna Cunningham good wishes from the Conservatives for a speedy recovery. Given that this would have been her last debate, I, too, would like to pay tribute to her. As everybody knows, we come from extremely different political stables, and we have been adversaries in Perthshire for quite some time. She is a formidable politician who has given great service at Westminster and Holyrood. I wish her a very happy retirement. [*Applause.*]

I think that we all accept that, during the pandemic, it has been all too easy to forget about the enormity of the challenge that we face in tackling climate change. The scale of that challenge, together with the worryingly short timescales have focused the minds of several committees in the Parliament in recent months. They are also why the report from the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee is fairly blunt in its analysis of the work that will have to be done in the next parliamentary session.

Chris Stark, who has been mentioned and who is definitely one of the most respected advisers on climate change, has described the Scottish Government’s ambitions as being

“on the fringes of credibility”.—[*Official Report, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee*, 2 February 2021; c 43.]

I agree with Chris Stark on that point, but that is not to say that the Scottish Government’s ambitions are wrong—far from it. However, there are serious question marks over the deliverability of certain key targets, most especially given some of the Scottish National Party’s recent record.

In the debate, we will concentrate on the question mark over deliverability. There are key issues that need to be addressed if, when it comes to COP26 in a few months’ time, Scotland will be able to demonstrate that she is a world leader in addressing climate change. The strong message coming from many of the witnesses and that is highlighted by the ECCLR Committee report is that much more has to be done to drive the sort of holistic policy approach that the minister described. Too much of the climate change debate has been taking place in silos, which is perhaps understandable.

I will provide just three examples of that. First, we know that there have been significant differences in progress to net zero in the eight sectors that are covered in the plan. For example, we have been doing well in the water industry and in relation to domestic heat in buildings, but much less so with transport.

Has enough been done to ascertain why certain sectors have been making more progress than others? Probably not—although I accept the cabinet secretary’s recent remarks that some of the difference was down to the different pace of technological change. That is a fair comment, but it is not the whole story. If we accept that green transport is a key priority—I have heard the cabinet secretary say that many times, particularly in relation to buses—I question why the Scottish National Party would decide to cut £33 million out of this year’s rail infrastructure budget. That does not make sense to me.

Secondly, we heard quite a lot of criticism at committee about the absence of a universal approach to regional land partnerships—something that has consistently been raised by NFU Scotland, which felt that there was too disjointed an approach to agriculture and forestry and questioned why the regional land partnerships policy had to be on a pilot basis only, when it is clear that there has been much success elsewhere with delivering substantial improvements in biodiversity and financial economies of scale.

Thirdly, concerns have been raised about the ability to link urban and rural policy. Several witnesses felt that the climate change plan did not reflect the needs of different regions sufficiently

well, and we need to address that as soon as possible.

Without any question, priority must be placed on the introduction of the circular economy bill, which was promised by the SNP as a flagship piece of legislation. That bill is critical to the climate change plan, so it was disappointing that it had to be delayed. I am sure that my colleague Maurice Golden will say a bit more about that in his summing-up speech.

I turn now to what I see as some of the more difficult and pressing challenges that we face—challenges with which the ECCLR Committee has been wrestling over recent weeks. First, there is the issue of behaviour change and of how easy it will be to deliver that change with encouragement and incentives, rather than by more punitive measures. We all know that consumer behaviour must change if we are to hit more climate change targets. We may already have done some of what is necessary to reduce the use of plastic, to improve the heating in our homes, to ensure that we are buying greener cars and to address some problems with landfill, but there is an awful lot more to be done.

This is where things get difficult. To what extent, for example, should we be taxing consumers in order to effect the changes that we want to see? To what extent should Government dictate the expectations on consumer behaviour? To what extent should economic policy become more statist in its approach, should there be continuing conflicts between the private and public sectors?

Those are all very complex issues, raising questions about tax revenues, procurement and indeed the role of government in society—and we cannot run away from them. The committee has touched on most of those issues, but the Parliament will have to take that forward in the next session.

Secondly, there is the issue of striking a balance, and nowhere is that more important than in our approach to nature. We should acknowledge the huge progress that has been made in many respects, and I pay tribute again to the cabinet secretary for her efforts, particularly with peatlands, but there are some worrying features of the debate.

I put on record my deep-seated concern at the way in which a small minority of so-called environmentalists have attacked many people whose lifeblood is the countryside. The recent attacks on gamekeepers, gillies and stalkers for doing their job in maintaining and enhancing our countryside have been reprehensible, as have been the comments from a small minority who clearly ignore our responsibility to outlaw raptor crime. The approaches of those small but

nonetheless vocal minorities are born out of prejudice and ignorance, and I deplore the lack of reasoned debate, as they often flout the available evidence about the activities that they undertake, most especially regarding those who have done so much to improve biodiversity.

The same is true for the stewardship of our beauty spots. Scotland is so rich in its natural assets and, if there has been any silver lining within the very dark Covid cloud, it is that many people want to enjoy them. That comes with responsibility, however, and it means much tougher action to weed out the fly-tippers, litter louts and antisocial campers.

The scale of the climate change challenge that we face is immense. I sometimes wonder if we in this Parliament have been devoting enough time to debating climate change policy in the chamber. I appreciate that the pandemic has made similar demands on debating time, but I look at some of the debates that we have had and I wonder whether we have got our priorities right. A debate about which flags we fly outside the building would surely have been one that we could have done without.

I hope that, in the next session, the Parliament will be able to prioritise climate change far more than has been the case in this session.

16:04

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I start by wishing the cabinet secretary well, as others have already, in every sense of the word. It is indeed unfortunate that she cannot be here to take part in today's debate—it possibly being her last—and I pay Scottish Labour's respects to her long-standing contribution to this brief. I also wish Sarah Boyack well in her new post as our spokesperson for climate change, environment and land reform. In my view, her acumen and experience on all those fundamentally significant issues will serve Scotland well. Today, she will focus on the role of local government, leadership and funding. Richard Leonard will tackle the issue of just transition, jobs and probably—I hope—how vital the skills strategy is.

We must not miss the opportunities, as we slowly move out of Covid. We are in a declared climate emergency and in a nature emergency that is inextricably linked to it. There is an urgent need for rapid, clearly planned action across all sectors to meet the 2030 targets fairly, but the Scottish Government is simply not clear enough on the detail of many of its policies.

I and other members come to the issue from both committee and party perspectives—indeed, some have already—but I will start by focusing on the global imperative. Today the ECCLR

Committee, of which I am a member, took evidence from a Scottish Government team that is working on Scotland's involvement in the Glasgow summit, COP26, and I want to make some brief comments about that opportunity and stress how fundamentally important the framing is. These are our collective deliberations about the climate change plan, but I have to say that some of Scottish Labour's amendments and those of others, in relation to the global south and our responsibility as a developed nation to pay our fair share, strengthened the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019. There is an expectation in the act about how to reference

“the regard to ... the climate justice principle”

and, vitally,

“proposals and policies for supporting, including by the sharing of expertise and technology, action in developing countries to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and adapt to the effects of climate change.”

I am a member of the ECCLR Committee, and one of our comments states that

“While the Committee recognises that the climate change plan update is an update to the 2018 CCP, and therefore is not legally bound to incorporate the requirements as set out in the 2019 Act, the Committee expected the Scottish Government would seek to reflect those provisions, as far as it was possible to do so. The Committee is concerned that the draft CCPu does not include a number of those actions identified in the 2019 Act.”

I hope that the minister will take note of that today and that the final updated plan will express those concerns.

I turn to our recommendations on blue carbon. In her letter to the cabinet secretary on 4 March, on publication of our report, our convener Gillian Martin pointed out that

“The Committee notes that the plan is also being prepared in the run up to COP26 in November, when international emissions targets will be reviewed.”

Prior to that conference, I strongly ask that the Scottish Government push the case with the UK Government for the inclusion of blue carbon in the inventory, as per the committee's recommendation 187, which states that

“It would appear to the Committee that acting on the basis of the precautionary principle, taking a proactive approach to blue carbon and including it as part of the final CCPu would ensure that Scotland makes early advances and secures multiple benefits in terms of carbon storage, securing biodiversity and supporting adaptation and resilience, in many areas through relatively simple, low cost actions.”

I hope that the minister and the cabinet secretary will take that on board. The cabinet secretary has shown robust leadership in the development of peatland action and I hope that that will be the

case with blue carbon as well—we do not have to wait.

I have a brief comment on peat to please pass to the cabinet secretary. Our recommendation 162

“provides further detail on the mechanisms that will be used to phase out the use of horticultural peat and on the assessment of how existing sites for peat extraction will impact on the land use, land use change and forestry envelope and emphasises a presumption against extensions to existing sites.”

I ask the Scottish Government to explore incineration and energy from waste with great care, as highlighted by the committee. Our recommendation 129 is that the Scottish Government

“reviews and coordinates the planning and procurement of incineration capacity to avoid ‘lock-in’”.

I stress that, at its most simple, it is a case of no more capacity, no more demand.

In a more positive vein, I turn to the circular economy, which is so important to the future of jobs in Scotland and the climate change plan. The committee’s recommendation 128 is that the Scottish Government

“includes a re-commitment to a Circular Economy Bill ... to set out a framework for a transition to a circular economy”.

Chris Stark, whom I greatly respect, suggested that, although the Scottish ministers have responded to the principles that the Climate Change Committee set out, and to its recommendations, it does not go far enough. The response needs to be framed to the economic crisis that we are facing as we come out of the pandemic, to ensure that we achieve a green recovery.

I simply add that evidence of the global threat is stark. Let us do all that we can here in Scotland to help to keep the temperature increase below 1.5°C and lead by example in the run-up to COP26. A really robust climate change plan update with route maps in all sectors, underpinned by a just transition, could do just that.

16:11

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I offer my good wishes to all members for whom this is their final parliamentary debate. I share the disappointment that the cabinet secretary cannot be with us to participate this afternoon. She has not only shown a commitment to tackling climate change, but, as Liz Smith reminded us, has always been approachable and collaborative in her approach.

Although I learned the hard way the risks of taking an intervention from Stewart Stevenson—I have not entirely forgiven him for redirecting one of Orkney’s lifeline ferries to Norway—I feel

strangely privileged to be here for his final contribution. I look forward to the remarkable word count of which I am sure he will apprise us later this afternoon.

I also thank all four committees for their diligence in robustly scrutinising the updated plan. The reports capture a vast amount of knowledge, expertise and experience from a wide range of witnesses, to whom I also offer thanks. As a result, today’s debate can only really aspire to be a whistle-stop tour, but I hope that the reports provide reassurance that this Parliament recognises the importance, urgency and scale of the challenge at hand. As the Local Government and Communities Committee observed, the word “challenge” hardly seems sufficient.

I found myself in agreement with the ECCLR Committee’s welcome for the updated plan’s greater emphasis on the role of nature-based solutions, which the Scottish Liberal Democrats strongly support. For all the innovative technologies that we must and will invest in, a diverse ecosystem offers the surest means of storing carbon and reducing emissions. Moreover, the potential for green job creation through restoration and management work is significant. RSPB Scotland estimates that around 8,500 full-time equivalent jobs could be created, so it is an opportunity that cannot be passed up.

The ECCLR Committee warned that 1 million hectares of peatland are degraded in some form or other. The committee goes on to express concern, quite rightly, that

“historically, the Scottish Government has had greater success in reaching tree planting targets than reaching peatland restoration targets.”

I am sure that Mr Lyle will update us on the United Kingdom Government’s performance but, for obvious reasons, that needs to change.

The lack of multiyear funding is perhaps a more recognised and well-established problem. In the face of a climate emergency, we cannot miss targets and opportunities through an inability to plan, a lack of certainty and an overabundance of bureaucracy.

I associate myself with the important points that were made by Local Government and Communities Committee colleagues about linking work to eradicate fuel poverty with efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of housing and buildings. That theme was picked up during the recent passage of the Heat Networks (Scotland) Bill. Orkney is one of seven local authorities with significantly higher rates of fuel poverty and extreme fuel poverty that are well beyond the national average. Despite the Government declaring energy efficiency a national priority before the last election, we seem no closer to

addressing that persistent scar on so many of our communities.

I am pleased that the committee underlined that retrofitting existing housing to reduce overall emissions will be one of the biggest challenges. That will be difficult in Orkney and other rural and island areas; for different reasons, it will be difficult in our cities. There are 800,000 tenement households in Scotland, and co-ordinating work to reduce emissions in such housing stock will be a logistical nightmare. It will require clear communication from the Government and accessible support services to help people make informed choices about the options that are available and how best to act.

Unfortunately, as the Energy Saving Trust observed:

“there is low general awareness amongst the population of the need to improve the energy efficiency of their homes and to switch away from conventional heating as well as very low awareness of how people can take action.”

Without improving public awareness, the ambitions in the plan are at risk of being a pipe dream. Sam Foster told the committee that 95 per cent of modern buildings

“fail to satisfy the minimum building standards regulations in ... energy efficiency.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee, 27 January 2021; c 6.*]

If that statistic is anywhere close to accurate, that is truly alarming.

The need for coherent, co-ordinated and focused change was a theme throughout each committee’s work. It was perhaps exemplified during the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee’s visit to Orkney, where members saw first hand the value of taking a whole-system approach. I have spoken before about the impressive, forward-thinking ReFLEX project that is under way in Orkney and that I am now a member of. ReFLEX will match what we can sustainably produce with what consumers need. I whole-heartedly agree with the committee’s call, and that of Willie Coffey, for the Government to deliver on the lessons from the project.

I referred earlier to the opportunities for job creation, for which we see potential in many aspects of the fight against climate change. It will take time to build and adapt our workforce to meet the challenging demands, but people are raring to go, and they are looking for opportunities and the right signals and support from Government. The oil and gas sector is brimful of people with invaluable knowledge, skills and expertise, and many of them recognise the need to transition to sustainable alternatives. Indeed, Friends of the Earth found that 81 per cent of them said that they would consider switching to another sector.

However, as the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee heard in evidence, the experience of just transition has not been much felt on the ground to date. Job losses at key sites mean that

“the experience to date demonstrates that promises of green jobs and positive outcomes are easily broken without the concrete policy action to deliver”.

That shows the importance of having a climate change plan that can turn fine words into meaningful action. For every area and sector, we need a route map that is costed, funded and realistic; we do not need another list of excuses as to why work went elsewhere. We cannot start soon enough.

I welcome today’s debate, thank the committees for their hard work and hope to be in a position to continue contributing to efforts to turn these aspirations into actions.

16:17

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join other members in wishing Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, all the very best. I hope that she makes a speedy recovery and that she is able to join us again for the final days of this parliamentary session.

I thank all those who have given evidence throughout the inquiries on the climate change plan update during what have been challenging times. I thank the clerks to the ECCLR committee and SPICe staff for their support to me and my colleagues over the past five years.

There will not be a single legislature or Government anywhere in the world that can say that it has done enough to tackle the climate emergency. It is our moral duty to go faster and further, especially for the sake of those who will suffer the most and who have contributed the least to causing the crisis.

In that context, the Parliament was right to set an ambitious target of a cut in emissions of at least 75 per cent by 2030, because the next nine years will make or break the climate. However, any idea that we can reach the target by simply creating a more energy-efficient version of 2020 is misguided. Halving emissions over the past 30 years was the start, but halving them again in the next nine years will require a total change of mindset. It will require a system change to tackle climate change and to make choices easier, whether that is to leave the car at home, scrap a gas boiler or reduce meat consumption.

The updated plan ducks many of those challenges, because it is just an update and a stopgap. It does not fully answer the question that

the Parliament asked the Government about how it could achieve the 2030 target. The additional effort that is demanded by that target is simply divvied out to all sectors evenly—except for farming and industry, which are largely let off.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform admitted in committee that the update is not designed to be “encyclopaedic”; for the sake of the planet, at this point, it needs to be. That is why I attempted to amend the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets (Scotland) Bill to require a full plan to be produced early on. However, we will now have to wait until 2023 for the real deal—it is hoped—to emerge.

The only area in which the plan takes a leap of faith—and it is a huge one—is on technologies that could extend the life of the oil and gas sector in its current form. Negative emissions technologies, especially carbon capture and storage, which is so costly and uncertain, are relied on almost unquestioningly in the plan. The Government has put all its chips on CCS to deliver a cut of nearly a quarter of Scotland’s emissions by 2030—even waste incinerators are planned to have CCS bolted on—but that is a fantasy. It is not a just transition, because there is simply no transition. It is business as usual for the sector that has been licensed to nearly quadruple oil and gas extraction in the North Sea. That move is as incompatible with the Paris agreement today as it will be with the Glasgow agreement in November.

The reality is illustrated by Mossmorran, Scotland’s third-largest emitter. The operators have no plans for CCS. The plant creaks along and the promise of a just transition board to plan for the future with the community has been repeatedly sidelined. Even the cross-party meeting that the First Minister promised me in October last year has been kicked into the long grass.

Every time that there is delay, we let down the workers and the communities of the future, because we risk deferring collapse rather than planning now for a transition that is just and leaves no one behind. There has to be a plan B on those negative emissions technologies that is not written by the oil and gas sector.

The good news is that we are sitting on the European jackpot of renewable wind and tidal resources. Technologies from heat pumps to pumped storage are cost effective, well understood and deployable now. Green hydrogen will have a strong role to play in heavy industry and transport. There is a need to double down on the progress that Scotland has made with onshore wind, and to accelerate the roll-out of offshore wind and tidal, while treating energy efficiency as the national infrastructure priority of this decade.

On transport, as in so many areas, there is a need for clearer implementation plans that show the reduction in emissions and which are linked to policies and budgets. It is welcome that the Scottish Government is now planning for traffic reduction rather than growth, but that will be impossible to achieve, given that the infrastructure investment plan aims to spend three times more on high-carbon transport than on low-carbon transport. It is far better not to build an unnecessary road in the first place than to spend decades wondering what to do with the traffic growth that it has generated.

For those reasons, the decision by Stirling Council last week to drop the Viewforth link road was the right one. Every new road capacity project, right up to the A96, now needs to be re-evaluated in the light of the climate emergency. Budgets must be climate-proofed, because the Parliament cannot tell at the moment what the long-term impacts will be of that capital spend. Some areas, such as farm subsidies, are locking in the harmful ways of the past, when they should be delivering the solutions to the climate and nature emergencies.

I hope that this session’s final debate on climate change leaves the right questions, lessons and demands for the next Government and Parliament, because our futures depend on it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): We move to the open debate. I call Stewart Stevenson. This will be Mr Stevenson’s final speech in the chamber. [*Applause.*]

16:24

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is always as well to get the applause in first, because members might not be so enthusiastic at the end of my speech.

As I prepare for my departure from this place, I am wondering what issue I will wish to remain engaged with after I leave the Parliament.

However, before I do that I want to single out the *Official Report* team for so masterfully converting some of my more obscure contributions into something that approximates readable English, and for being persuaded to accept the majority of my suggested changes to their drafts—especially when they accepted a new word that Bruce Crawford and I created: “cumsnuggered”, which is an adjective that means “overwhelmed by information”. Not all of my previous 852 speeches have been of equal intelligibility, and the people in the OR are the all-but-invisible heroes of our institution. I give them my very heartfelt thanks. [*Applause.*]

Clearly, as I have been campaigning for our country's independence since I joined the SNP in November 1961, I will remain engaged in that issue. However, independence is not an end in itself; it is about our having the power to serve wider purposes.

We are not entirely powerless on climate change, but we are allowed to be at the top table of decision makers only occasionally, and at the whim of different ministers of the UK. Let me hasten to say, however, that the signs for COP26 are good in that regard. I was privileged to lead the UK team from time to time during international conferences including COP14, COP15 and COP17. Colleagues have not always been so fortunate.

The update of our climate change plan, which is the subject of today's debate, is another example of our shared determination to leave a world that is fit for purpose for those who will live after us. Of course, the update is not the last word on the subject. The full plan must arrive in relatively early course and will need to describe the means to the end that I believe we all share in wanting. It must also provide the resources for public agencies' contributions to delivering that end.

Two foci are particularly important. The first is a just transition for people who currently work in industries that contribute to global warming. That is very important for the area that I represent: oil and gas employ perhaps 20 per cent of the people who work there. We have the skills and determination to be part of the vanguard when it comes to new energy. We are already travelling that road, as renewable energy has increased in importance. Government policy must support private enterprise to create the new jobs that will supplant the old.

Secondly, we must play our part in delivering climate justice. We created the aridity, heat, flooding and storms that affect many people who cannot afford to fix the problem. I am thinking of farmers in Africa in particular. There is also a gender issue in that regard, because many of the worst-affected farmers are female.

Finally, let me leave this place by recognising, as members would expect of me, the varied contributions of members who, like me, plan to leave the Parliament, and of one who plans to stay. In doing so, I acknowledge that no single person or party has a monopoly on wisdom. My list is a fairly random one that recognises that everyone who shares our belief in democracy—which is, in essence, an understanding that we may be dismissed from or denied office by the decisions of the people whom we represent—has the opportunity to make a contribution of value.

When I look at the Tory seats, I greatly miss Alex Johnstone and Alex Fergusson, who departed before their time. They were great friends of mine and great friends of the Parliament. One of my cousins was a Conservative councillor—yes; it is time for admissions. Dr Sandy Paterson was his name, and being a general practitioner was his game.

On the Labour seats to my right, Mary Fee has been radical in her ideas while being moderate and engaging in her expression of them. I served under her on the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing and I admired how she conducted herself in her role as convener. Her colleague David Stewart has distinguished himself on the subject of road safety to very good effect. I cannot imagine that there has been an occasion on which I have disagreed with anything that he said on the subject. I thank them both. My niece, Morag, who is a music teacher, is chair of her local Labour Party in Kent.

John Finnie, in the Green seats, has been a reasoned and reasonable voice for green issues, and I have rarely disagreed with him on matters of principle.

Among Liberal Democrat members is one who no one expects. I am sorry: it is not Liam McArthur, but Mike Rumbles. He has contributed much in his time here, and he is a man of focus and principle, and one whose frustration I felt when I gave him a one-word answer to an exceptionally lengthy question on funding for the Aberdeen western peripheral route that he asked me when I was a minister. Ministers have licence to misbehave occasionally, but I recall that John Swinney, who was sitting beside me, muttered, "Never do that again, Stewart." My great uncle, Sir Alexander Stewart Stevenson, was a Liberal Lord Provost of Edinburgh, and has six streets named after him. He was responsible for the erection of the statues to William Wallace and Robert the Bruce that we pass between as we go into Edinburgh castle, but he had rather more substantial achievements.

As a genealogist of some 60 years' standing, I have frequently referred to my relatives. Why should today be any different? My father's cousin, Lord James Stevenson was, like me, a politician. He was a cross-bencher in the House of Lords, appointed by Ramsay MacDonald as a reward for delivering the empire exhibition in 1924—which, incidentally, provided England with its national football stadium at Wembley. They only got it because of the actions of a Scotsman from Kilmarnock. I can reveal that his coat of arms is supported by squirrels rampant and that, beneath the shield, is the motto: "Carry on". Is this the end of my family connection to elected politics? No; we shall carry on.

Of course, I leave a very different Parliament from the one that I joined in 2001. I have just looked at my statistics and I will, by the end of this session, have attended 110 virtual committee meetings. That is how much things have changed.

It is now time for me to leave, Presiding Officer, and for another MSP and me to come out together, as it were. I hand my political baton to my cousin—a person with whom I share 11 centimorgans of DNA. She is already a Government minister and a respected and energetic local member of Parliament. So, I say, “Good luck in the election, minister.” With a final ping of my galluses, which I know she admires so much, I now hand my share of family responsibility for political service to a fellow admirer of such luridness: my cousin, Jenny Gilruth.

16:33

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It seems to be a little unfair to have to follow that, Presiding Officer.

I add my best wishes to all those who are retiring from Parliament—especially Stewart Stevenson, after that fantastic speech. When I made my maiden speech, he noted with, I think, some regret that he thought that I had beaten his record for the quickest maiden speech after being sworn in. However, it is always safe to say that we learn something from Stewart Stevenson when he speaks, although not always in relation to the subject that is being debated. I noted his mention of Alex Fergusson and Alex Johnstone, who are two people whom we all miss. He once suggested that I had the stature of Alex Johnstone; I am not sure whether he meant politically or otherwise.

I had better move on to the subject of the debate. First, I remind members of my entry in the register of members’ interests in relation to my being a partner in a farming business. I also want to give my thanks to the committees and their teams—in particular, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, for bringing forward the debate, and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, on which I sit, for its work around the climate change plan.

This is a year when, like no other, Scotland’s commitments around climate change will have a global stage. The United Kingdom will host the COP26 summit in Glasgow in just under 10 months. That will provide a space for real global work on climate change commitments, and will bring the world together to tackle one of the most pressing issues of our time. Sadly, it will take place against the backdrop of a coronavirus pandemic that has dominated virtually every part of our politics for the past year.

The coming months and years must be a time for recovery from the pandemic and its unprecedented effect on the global economy, and we must, as I am sure we all believe, address the promises of a green recovery head on. In doing so, we should be looking not only to improve the areas of the economy that will have to be rebuilt, but to start making real progress in areas in which existing climate change reduction work has not made the impact that it must make.

The agricultural sector has been forthright in calling for a real future plan for rural Scotland—something that has been kicked down the road. Like most in our sector, I appreciate the need to change and to build a carefully managed transition to a lower-carbon rural economy. That transition will recognise that change cannot come overnight without serious consequences, but, equally, we should not hide behind transition to justify painfully slow progress.

The Government must also recognise that efforts to transition are completely undermined by what the ECCLR Committee has cited as detail being “substantially lacking” on how targets will be met, and by a future policy direction that is all but blank. That creates a credibility gap between targets and achievement, and it does not take long to realise that the Scottish Government has form here: legally binding emissions targets have been breached, recycling pledges are on course to be broken, targets for a low level of renewable heat use have been missed dramatically and standards for clean air in the cities have been ignored. Add to all that cuts in the budget to programmes that are designed to improve the sustainability of farming and the rural economy, and the result is an incredibly disappointing inability to grasp the issue.

The climate change plan update is at least welcome, but the Scottish Government cannot pretend that it contains a viable route map to the transformational change that is required. In this year, when the spotlight is on Scotland, can we really trust that what the Scottish Government continually calls its “ambitious” targets will be met under the current Administration?

My region, the Highlands and Islands, faces many challenges in meeting those ambitions. For example, we have greater reliance on cars and a greater focus on agriculture. Infrastructure—from rail to mains gas—touches far fewer of the population than it does in other parts of Scotland. In many ways, the impacts of climate change will fall most heavily on regions such as mine. When I see such enthusiasm around my region—from the great renewables projects on the islands to the man in Lochaber wanting to change to an electric car but finding that the infrastructure is missing—it is frustrating that the Scottish Government simply

has not considered how many of those issues must be addressed.

Sadly, Scotland still has a Government that constantly promises big but delivers small. It has, in the past, served up a policy agenda that takes the low-hanging fruit while some of the biggest contributors to carbon emissions in our society are barely touched. It is a Government that seems to be more interested in setting targets than in meeting them, and it is a Government that continually tells us that its priorities lie elsewhere, while devoting endless time to its core issue. That is to try to break up the United Kingdom, which has, through our integrated network, worked together and supported, to the tune of billions of pounds, the decarbonisation of our electricity sector, which is one of the biggest achievements that Scotland has made in reducing emissions.

The ambition and drive for change exists in Parliament. Ministers, however, must start being serious about how the targets that the Parliament has voted for might become reality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Angus MacDonald. This is Mr MacDonald's final speech to the chamber.

16:38

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate, as I serve on the ECCLR and REC Committees. This is my final speech, so I hope, with the Presiding Officer's indulgence, to sign off with a few words of thanks and farewell. I, too, send my best wishes to the cabinet secretary.

Since the four committee reports on the CCPU were published, it has been heartening to see the warm welcome that they have received, with Fergus Boden of Friends of the Earth Scotland describing the ECCLR report as "excellent", and WWF Scotland broadly agreeing with the ECCLR Committee findings.

Although it is fair to say that the committee findings and recommendations are tough, or "blunt", as Liz Smith put it, it is also fair to say that Scotland's net zero climate targets that are already in place show genuine global leadership in the run-up to the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow in November.

There was clearly a bit of crossover between committee reports, and one example of that was industrial decarbonisation and NETs. ECCLR's sister committee, the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, covered that issue in some detail, as we heard from Willie Coffey, but that aspect was also covered by ECCLR and, as I have a constituency interest representing the

industrial complex in Grangemouth, I am keen to touch on that in detail.

We know that emissions from the industry sector have fallen by 45 per cent since 1990 and that much of that drop comes from the disappearance of some major polluting industries. We also know that the draft CCPU aims for a 43 per cent reduction in industrial emissions between 2018 and 2032, which is considerably more than the 21 per cent reduction that was set out in the 2018 climate change plan.

A number of funds have been announced to support decarbonisation, as the minister said, but it was clear from the evidence that we took that the Scottish Government needs to better engage with the sector to capture all the potential benefits. Chris Stark of the CCC warned in his evidence that, with regard to negative emissions technologies and industrial decarbonisation, there is potential only for two decarbonised industrial clusters in the UK so, if Grangemouth wanted to benefit from funding and investment, it would have to

"lean in ... to capture the lion's share of ... support."—
[*Official Report, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee*, 2 February 2021; c 61.]

It is vital for the Scottish Government to work along with industry and Falkirk Council to ensure that the town of Grangemouth is recognised as a decarbonised industrial cluster. If Grangemouth is to benefit from UK Government funding and investment, it needs to lean in to capture the lion's share of support and beat off the very real challenge from Teesside in England, which is the main internal UK competition. Our committee considers that Scotland has a significant advantage in engineering expertise and geological storage for CCS, but it has the very real competition from Teesside, which we ignore at our peril.

Our committee explored with the cabinet secretary how Scotland can capture the economic and just transition benefits. We asked how important it is that Grangemouth sits at the heart of a low-carbon industrial transformation for Scotland and what is being done to support that. The cabinet secretary confirmed that the Acorn project should be seen as an anchor to enable the early establishment of CCS in Scotland and said that she considered Grangemouth to be a strategic industrial site that must be harnessed in the energy transition and can act as a critical catalyst hub.

I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary acknowledge that a commitment will be required beyond the next parliamentary session and that private sector investment is necessary, alongside Scottish Government and UK Government intervention. However, it would be wrong not to

highlight the concerns that a number of environmental non-governmental organisations raised about the CCPU's overreliance on NETs.

There is much to cover, but I am conscious of the time and, as this is my final speech in the Parliament, I am keen to say a few words of farewell. Many members will know that I am heading off to the land of my roots in the Outer Hebrides. It will be 29 years this year since I was first elected to the former Falkirk District Council, so it will be quite a wrench to leave elected politics in Falkirk district.

For most of my life, I have been torn between two parts of Scotland—Falkirk district and the Western Isles—and it is probably fair to say that I sacrificed a completely different life in the Hebrides for a life serving the people of Grangemouth initially and the whole of Falkirk East latterly. That has been my choice, and it has been an honour and a privilege to represent my electorate at two councils and the Parliament.

The islands of the Hebrides have a habit of calling their sons and daughters back home, and I have succumbed to that call. My genes go back 1,000 years in the Hebrides, so I guess that it was only a matter of time before I succumbed to the call to go home. I will never forget the absolute honour and privilege that it has been to serve the people of Falkirk East in Parliament for the past 10 years and the good people of Grangemouth on the council before that. Every day that I walked into the Holyrood chamber or the council chamber, it was never a chore—it was always an honour and a privilege. I have never forgotten the people of the old Inchyra ward in Grangemouth who put me on that path way back in 1992.

Massive thanks go to the members of the wonderful team in my constituency office—they do not call themselves team awesome for nothing. They are my office manager of nine years, Diane; my caseworker, Lorraine; my press officer, Iain; and the new addition to the team, Kirstin. I also thank all the other team members who moved on to pastures new over the years.

At this point, I would like to give a special mention to all the committee clerks I have worked with and, of course, the SPICe team, whose members are second to none. I also want to thank each and every committee convener, past and present, I have worked with over the years, who have been excellent conveners—you all know who you are.

Of course, this job cannot be done properly without the support of family, so I say a massive thank you to my long-suffering wife Linda. I am also grateful for the unstinting support over the years of my mother, who sadly passed away this time last year.

I have been pleased to have been associated with and worked behind the scenes on many positive policies and pieces of legislation, not least my favourite bills—the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill—the effective ban on fracking and, of course, the deposit return scheme, which I have been banging on about to anyone who would listen since I first saw it operating in Norway in 1985.

So, there is much to be proud of, and as I head off into the Hebridean sunset, I will watch with interest from afar as the Parliament continues to grow and becomes fully independent in the not-too-distant future.

Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Mr MacDonald.

I say to members that, obviously, when people are making their last speech, I am relaxed about the time—that is only fair. However, the same does not go for the rest of you. You must keep to six minutes, as we have no time in hand.

I call Emma Harper, to be followed by Richard Leonard. You must not take that personally; it is just a fact.

16:46

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I do not take anything that you say personally—it is always wonderful advice.

I welcome the Scottish Government's update to the climate change plan for the period 2018 to 2032, and I, too, wish Roseanna Cunningham the very best of health.

I very much enjoyed being a member of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee at the beginning of the parliamentary session, along with colleagues Angus MacDonald and Stewart Stevenson, and I enjoyed their final speeches this afternoon. Now, as a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I would like to point to that committee's scrutiny of the role that transport and agriculture play in relation to climate change. Finding ways to tackle climate change crosses many committee remits and many ministerial portfolios, as we have heard. Climate change is also an issue on which I have been engaging locally in my own work and as a member of the REC Committee.

The climate change plan update sets out bold actions that, together, chart a pathway to our new emissions reduction targets to 2032. It sets out plans for a green recovery from the Covid pandemic and includes a number of actions, from expanding walking and cycling paths, which will promote active travel, to steps such as supporting

businesses to continue to support people to work from home, which is having an impact on emissions. It would be good to find out the extent to which emissions have been reduced by people working from home during the pandemic and through health professionals using digital technology to do appointments, which also reduces car journeys.

Our journey to meeting the emissions reduction targets will not be easy, and it will need to be a truly national endeavour, to which businesses, communities and individuals contribute fully. The plan update therefore gives clear signals on where we are going, what the Scottish Government is doing to enable us to get there and how others can contribute.

Across Dumfries and Galloway in my South Scotland region, South of Scotland Enterprise has been pivotal in supporting businesses and communities to recover from Covid-19. In addition, it is supporting the region to meet climate change targets and to adopt green policies to mitigate the impact of climate change. During consideration of the South of Scotland Enterprise Bill, I lodged amendment 25, which revised the language of the bill to incorporate terminology that is used in current environmental legislation, thereby providing better alignment with the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and with our Government's climate change plan.

Since it commenced its work last year, SOSE has provided direct financial and practical support schemes to mitigate the impact of climate change, such as a grant of £1.9 million over five years to the UNESCO-designated Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere. One aim of the biosphere is to conserve and sustainably enhance our south-west natural environment, while encouraging sustainable development, outdoor access, hiking, mountain biking and other pursuits, which are important in supporting better health as well as acting as mitigating measures in addressing climate change.

I would like the minister to be aware that many constituents are hoping that the biosphere will be expanded to include Stranraer and the Rhins of Galloway, which could contribute to sustainable economic growth through tourism and a green recovery for the south-west. Many constituents are also still interested in the potential of a Galloway national park, which obviously involves climate change issues.

Scotland has the most ambitious climate change legislation in the world, and the climate change plan update sets out the policies that will be introduced, boosted or accelerated to help us to meet the targets and support our green recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The update makes a number of significant announcements on

steps to meet Scotland's climate change targets, including a truly world-leading new target to reduce kilometres travelled by car by 20 per cent by 2030. That target, which other members have mentioned, demonstrates our level of ambition in seeking to meet Scotland's statutory targets.

I am aware of the RECC Committee's work, which its convener spoke about earlier, regarding evidence on achievement of that 20 per cent reduction. Investing £120 million in zero-emission buses, driving forward a decarbonised future for Scotland's bus fleet, supporting Scottish supply chains and a new £180 million emerging energy technologies fund are all good goals—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And there, on those good goals, you must conclude. Speeches should be four minutes.

Emma Harper: I apologise, Presiding Officer. That was not my understanding.

In conclusion, I welcome the Scottish Government's—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, no, Ms Harper. "Conclude" means that—no wee extra bits.

I call Richard Leonard, to be followed by Clare Adamson, who will be the last speaker in the open debate.

16:51

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): As the committee reports make clear, and as witness after witness has attested to this Parliament, the Scottish Government's climate change plan lacks clarity, lacks transparency, lacks detail, lacks evidence and lacks a plan B.

In the cabinet secretary's absence—I am sorry that she is not here and I wish her well—I will quote her. In her defence, she told the ECCLR Committee that the Scottish Government's climate change plan is not intended to be "encyclopaedic". People are not expecting a 32-volume encyclopaedia, but they are looking for a simple, honest and clear working plan that is credible, intelligible and persuasive.

In the absence of that, it is as if promises are made by the SNP Government to the people with the full and certain knowledge that they will not be kept. It is as if there is no intention that a law that enshrines targets, which was passed by this Parliament less than two years ago, will ever be implemented, let alone enforced, while the SNP is in office. It is as if these most serious questions of the future of work, the survival of the planet, and international and intergenerational equity—these questions of life and death itself—can be set aside.

In its inquiry, the ECCLR Committee heard of a significant implementation gap, and nowhere is that gap greater than in the Government's lamentable record on jobs. It is no use the First Minister announcing on 1 September a

"national mission to help create new jobs, good jobs and green jobs"

if, on 3 December, the jobs and communities around the BiFab yards are abandoned. That was the latest chapter in a decade of failure that the Scottish Trades Union Congress has rightly characterised as

"broken promises and offshored jobs".

Last year, as Scottish Labour leader, I commissioned a report on green jobs. It showed how we could recover jobs, retrain workers and rebuild businesses by investing in green transport, renewable energy and energy efficiency, social and affordable housing, a Scottish conservation corps, a national care service, recycling and waste management, and an active industrial and manufacturing strategy.

All the evidence that is before us today, though, is that the current Government relies too much on market mechanisms and technical fixes and far too little on the role of the active state, which is precisely what we need as we recover from Covid.

We need a vision of a different kind of society and a different kind of economy, and for me that means a fundamental change in the relations of power: the decentralisation of industry; the localisation of economics; the promotion of self-management and self-sufficiency, and of co-operation; the humanisation of work; land reform; the creation of an active non-bureaucratic state; and popular democratic planning, involving businesses, workers and their trade unions, with full employment at its heart. I tell members that those changes are not only visionary; they are urgent. They are not only radical; they are realistic. Most important of all, they are not only necessary; they are possible.

16:55

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I, too, congratulate those who have made their final speeches in the chamber today, which have been very moving indeed. I send my best wishes to the cabinet secretary, who I had hoped would be taking part today.

I have been a bit reflective, which is maybe partly to do with the wonderful speeches that we have heard from people who are leaving. As we near the end of the parliamentary session and pay tribute to those who are retiring or leaving to do other things, I have been thinking about climate change and our knowledge of it.

Climate variation has been known about since the 1700s. By the 1950s and 60s, we were aware that the behaviour of humans, fossil fuels and aerosols were playing a part in that. In the 1990s, when aerosol pollution had decreased, carbon dioxide levels were showing that, through the greenhouse effect, greenhouse gases were making global warming a real threat to the global future.

Gillian Martin mentioned David Attenborough and his extensive career and activism. He has informed us all of the impending global crisis over many decades.

As we moved from the 1990s into the new century, Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" was a seminal moment.

More recently, Greta Thunberg has captured the imagination of and fostered activism in our young people, who get it and do not accept it, and whose behaviour change gives an opportunity to change all our behaviour.

I thank Willie Coffey, Gillian Martin, Edward Mountain and—I am missing someone—James Dornan for their representations of their committees' work in the area. The committees have been very diligent in their reports and in their hard work.

We are all reminded that Scotland has the most ambitious climate change legislation in the world. We have the net zero emissions target for 2045 and the interim target of a 75 per cent reduction by 2030, which was brought forward by Claudia Beamish, whom I have to commend for her dedication to the environment throughout her parliamentary career in this session. The legislation is world leading, bold, ambitious and groundbreaking.

The committees' hard work has strengthened the climate change plan, which will see the legislation implemented. The legislation was recognised by the United Nations climate action summit in New York in 2019, when the executive secretary, Patricia Espinosa, said:

"Congratulations, Scotland, for demonstrating bold leadership on #ClimateAction ... This is an inspiring example of the level of ambition we need globally to achieve the #ParisAgreement."

We look forward to welcoming COP26 to our country later this year.

I absolutely believe that the climate change legislation and plan are probably the most important achievements of this session of the Parliament. They could not have been achieved without the leadership and work of Roseanna Cunningham. We will look back on this moment as one when Scotland took the lead, and we will continue to take the lead in this area.

I commend all our young people for their activism, for not letting this go and for reminding us, each and every day, how important this is for our future and the future of everyone across the world.

16:59

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is great for me to speak in today's debate as the new environment, climate change and land reform spokesperson for Scottish Labour. I thank my colleague Claudia Beamish for her excellent contribution to the debate and for her work in the run-up to COP26.

This has been an excellent debate. The four committees have made important recommendations, and there have been some excellent and passionate speeches. I hope that the Scottish Government will listen to the debate. We need to meet our climate change targets; it is not enough just to have good targets. The criticism from the committees is powerful. There is cross-party support across the Parliament for more radical action to tackle our climate emergency, and members have made an incredibly powerful case for wide-ranging and cross-cutting measures.

The Local Government and Communities Committee concluded that decarbonising our existing housing stock is a key challenge in the update and has to link into tackling fuel poverty. The draft heat in buildings strategy is an important step, but there are different challenges across Scotland. For example, Councillor Heddle from Orkney Islands Council argued that there has not been support for heat pumps to date, which is a practical solution for rural communities that needs to be supported; whereas, in urban areas and cities, councils will need support to meet the challenge of heat networks because of the complexity and the risk taking that will be required.

In Edinburgh, for example, we are now seeing the second phase of our Edinburgh Community Solar Co-operative, which is a community-led co-op that uses our schools to create electricity and generate resources, which are reinvested locally. However, it took the best part of a decade for the co-op to be established, and we do not have that time now, so we need community projects across the country to be supported with knowledge from our councils. If we are phasing out gas boilers in new homes in three years, the work needs to start now. We need more support to incentivise existing home owners, especially those in tenements, as Liam McArthur said.

Councils are critical in protecting us from impacts of climate change that are already happening, such as flooding, and in relation to the need for new green infrastructure to support

adaptation measures. At our committee, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and witnesses from individual councils were clear that they need to be properly resourced and empowered to meet their climate change ambitions, with investment beyond national programmes. They worry that current levels of funding are not sufficient to meet the challenges and targets that are set out in the plan update. In his introductory comments, the minister mentioned pots of money, but long-term revenue and capital funding will enable councils to plan ahead. We need a holistic approach across the country, so we need to change our thinking on how funding is delivered.

In our committee evidence session, the Royal Town Planning Institute made the point that we need to put planning centre stage in reducing emissions and giving people attractive low-carbon connections between our homes, our schools, our workplaces and our shops. One of the lessons of the pandemic is that there is an appetite for safer walking and cycling across age groups. If we are to deliver the aspirations of 20-minute neighbourhoods, which everybody loves, we will need joined-up planning, investment in new active travel networks, much more affordable and accessible bus and rail services, and investment in low-carbon vehicles. That point was made effectively by Emma Harper and Edward Mountain earlier in the debate.

The call for detail and action is echoed across the reports. Although the update is only an update—it is not meant to be a full plan—the Scottish Government needs to listen and turn the targets into clear action plans. Scottish Labour has been clear in calling for bolder and clearer action from the Scottish Government to tackle the climate emergency. That action needs to be tied into the nature emergency, too. We need to think about how we rebuild our economy after Covid-19 and about the opportunities to join up different policy initiatives, so that we tackle the inequalities that the pandemic has exposed in our society.

Claudia Beamish was right to highlight the skills that are needed to give us an effective green recovery, so we should ensure that we do not miss out support for those who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment over the next few months as a result of the current crisis.

Procurement will be critical. In Scotland, we spend £11 billion of public money on procurement every year. That money needs to be leveraged to ensure that we purchase climate-friendly goods and that, when there is no Scottish supplier, we help existing companies to diversify or create new supply chains. That work needs to link into the real living wage and to recognise trade unions. We

need to reduce our carbon footprint right across the procurement sector.

As Richard Leonard said, we also need private sector companies to source low-carbon materials and prioritise manufacturing in Scotland.

There has been a huge missed opportunity in renewables across the country, but renewables will repower during the next few years. New constructions need to involve turbines and heat pumps that are built in Scotland. That is not only to help in our recovery from Covid, but to help us transition to a low-carbon economy. That means a just transition and—as Richard Leonard said—trade unions need to be involved in that transition and in tackling inequalities.

As Claudia Beamish—as well as almost everybody else—noted, we are in the run up to COP26, at which our climate targets will be broadcast as being world leading. They are world leading, but we have to showcase the steps that we are taking to implement them, because the progress that we have made thus far is not fast enough.

It is a shame that Roseanna Cunningham is not able to join us today, but I am sure that she will read the *Official Report*. I hope that when she leaves as minister, she leaves in her outbox the recommendations that the four committees have made, and that she in turn makes them to the next Parliament. We need to act on them urgently if we are going to tackle the climate emergency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Maurice Golden to close for the Conservatives. You have six minutes, Mr Golden.

17:06

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): I always keep to time, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well, you have said it now. We will keep an eye on the clock.

Maurice Golden: We will wait and see. I will use some of my time to pay tribute to Angus MacDonald. We set up the Nordic countries cross-party group together and I enjoyed working with him. I wish him well as he heads off into his Hebridean sunset.

Stewart Stevenson gave a typically entertaining and enlightening speech—his 852nd speech, if I heard correctly. He has attended 110 virtual committee meetings. I do not know how many I have been to, but I know that Stewart would keep things on track.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I worked my notice period at Zero Waste Scotland almost five years ago, so it seems strange to keep referring to it.

I also wish the cabinet secretary well in her retirement. I am sorry that she cannot be here today. We might not always agree—she refers to me as a waste geek—but I can honestly say that I have looked forward to our debates and questions. I wish her all the best.

Jamie Halcro Johnston outlined the challenges that are faced in rural areas because of a lack of infrastructure—from rail to mains gas to electric vehicle charging points.

Liam McArthur highlighted the need to improve the energy efficiency of homes in both rural and urban areas.

My colleague Liz Smith hinted that I would have something to say about the circular economy; she knows me well. In fact, I have spent the past five years in the Parliament making the case for the circular economy, and for good reason. It is the mechanism by which we make climate gains permanent, the economy more sustainable and the lives of our citizens fairer.

Amid the misery of the pandemic, it at least gives us an opportunity to build back better. The committee report contains a number of important recommendations on that front, such as bringing forward the next iteration of Scotland's economic strategy and prioritising a review of the circular economic strategy with a view to embedding it in the economic strategy. On that ground, there are also recommendations to expand the Zero Waste Scotland circular economy investment fund and invest in skills and training. Those are both practical measures that I welcome to spur on a green recovery and help reach net zero.

Both goals would be helped by a circular economy bill to set out the framework for transition to a low-carbon economy. That is a view that the committee shares. I hope that we see that bill early during the next parliamentary term.

Much of that work could be set in motion in time for the UK Government bringing COP26 to Scotland, as many speakers have mentioned. That would show assembled world leaders that Scotland can do more than just set targets. Although I have always welcomed the SNP showing ambition to tackle climate change, the fact remains that it often fails to deliver, such as in the case of its failed 2021 landfill ban. The SNP is burning waste as a stopgap measure until the ban hopefully materialises in 2025. The committee warns about the possibility of a reliance on incineration becoming embedded post 2025. That concern is well founded, given that the SNP is increasing incineration capacity by 400 per cent, turning Scotland into the ashtray of Europe.

I am delighted at the Labour U-turn on energy from waste, announced today, and the fact that Labour is adopting the Scottish Conservative's

position of a moratorium that we announced in 2016-17. Only the Greens and the Scottish Conservatives voted for my amendment earlier in the parliamentary session, so I am delighted by that Labour U-turn.

Moreover, the landfill ban is not the only target to be missed. Targets for emissions, renewable heat and recycling are all either set to be missed or set to fail. Of those, recycling is particularly bad. Not only is the current recycling rate of 44.9 per cent far short of the 70 per cent target set for 2025, but the rate is going backwards. Scotland now recycles less than it did in 2016.

Making matters worse, the SNP is now shipping 3 tonnes of waste a minute out of Scotland. It is clear that there should be increased action further up the waste hierarchy with better support for re-use and repair. I agree with the committee that more details are needed on that and on enhanced producer responsibility, all of which was outlined in my 2017 climate change paper. The committee outlined the lack of detail that permeates the climate change plan, warning that

“concerns have been raised over the credibility and achievability of the”

updated plan.

It will be the task of the next Parliament to start and sustain a green recovery, taking steps such as better use of public procurement, establishing a centre for circular economy excellence, launching renewable energy bonds and building an electric arc furnace and a new plastic recycling plant to create green jobs, retain waste-stream resources and build supply chain resilience. I hope that the next Parliament will treat the report's recommendations with the urgency that they deserve and start building the circular economy that Scotland needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well done! You made it within the time. I knew you would.

17:12

Ben Macpherson: I thank colleagues for an important and interesting debate and for the opportunity to outline the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to meet our emissions reduction targets and to respond to some of the points that were raised. I welcome Sarah Boyack to her position and commend Claudia Beamish's speech, in which she made some important points. Mark Ruskell also raised important points—I will come to some of them shortly—as did Liam McArthur.

I pay particular tribute to Angus MacDonald on the occasion of his last speech and to Stewart Stevenson, who was a mentor to me and many of the new intake in 2016. We are incredibly grateful

for that and he has our admiration for everything that he has achieved, particularly the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, which is behind much of the progress that we have made up to this point.

The path ahead may present many uncertainties—the pandemic, technological advances, the limits of devolution and the need to ensure a just transition—but our destination is clear. That has come through today. We have a bright future before us, in a society and economy that prioritises the environment and the wellbeing of its people. That is the vision.

We will reduce our emissions in a way that is fair and just to all, involving people and communities so that everyone can benefit from the widespread and positive changes that lie ahead. By 2032, through the actions outlined in the climate change plan update, we will witness a profound transformation of our energy system, with 100 per cent of Scotland's electricity demand met by renewable sources, the creation of secure and well paid-jobs and the export of surplus renewable electricity.

Furthermore, Scotland will benefit from the development of new and pioneering infrastructure used for carbon capture and storage, hydrogen and green hydrogen production, which Mark Ruskell rightly highlighted, and tidal and wave energy development and production in due course.

Mark Ruskell: Will the minister give way?

Ben Macpherson: Those technologies will help to ensure that we have a managed transition for Scotland's industrial sector.

One of the important points that Mark Ruskell raised—he might have wanted to come in on it there—was about our learning-by-doing approach, which will be most important with negative emissions technologies. We are confident that it will be technologically possible to deliver large-scale installations by 2030. As Chris Stark, from our statutory adviser the Climate Change Committee noted, we know that the technologies will work; the question is how they will work in reality in Scotland.

Mark Ruskell: What happens if negative emissions technologies do not work?

Ben Macpherson: I was just coming on to that. Arguments have been made about a plan B. It has been suggested, including by Richard Leonard, that we should have a plan B, but our process, designed by the Parliament, ensures regular monitoring and reporting and means that should the need arise for a plan B, one will be produced at the appropriate time. However, we should not

plan for technological failure now; we should pursue technological achievement.

The transformation will not be limited to our energy system. In the coming decades, there will be a step change in the way that we travel. Our landmark investment in public transport and active travel will support more sustainable transport choices. The £1.6 billion of investment in heat in buildings will make homes better insulated, including tenement housing—I note the points that have been raised on that. The investment will also remove fuel poverty, increase energy efficiency and improve the housing stock in our urban and rural environments.

One of the key recommendations of our stakeholders has, understandably, been to prioritise nature-based solutions. We have heeded that call, with boosted investments in forestry of £150 million over five years and a further £250 million in peatland restoration. By 2032, 21 per cent of our land will be covered by forest and more than 250,000 hectares of peatland will have been restored.

The agriculture sector, which many members have referred to, will support those and other changes in land use through further integration of woodlands and peatland on farms, while continuing with the important role of food production. Farmers and crofters will adopt low-emission technologies and practices, supported with the skills and tools that they need to produce more sustainably.

By the end of the period that is covered by the plan update, we will be well on the way towards a full circular economy that is designed to reduce waste and to reuse and repair materials. We are embedding circular economy principles into the green recovery and prioritising areas where there are the biggest opportunities, such as construction, agriculture and food and drink. Reduction targets are giving clear signals of intent to businesses, public bodies and individuals.

Maurice Golden: The minister mentions the circular economy. Can he give his view on the use of bio-stabilisation as a treatment technique prior to landfill, as opposed to energy from waste?

Ben Macpherson: I do not have appropriate time capacity to come back on that point to Mr Golden now, but I give him an undertaking to write to him in due course.

As has been clear today—[*Interruption.*] I am afraid that I do not have time to take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is coming into his last minute.

Ben Macpherson: As was said throughout the various evidence sessions, a truly cross-

Government, co-ordinated approach will be vital if we are to achieve the shared vision. The plan update goes further than any of its predecessors has done in acknowledging, including through our climate skills action plan, which is published alongside the climate plan, that climate action must be embedded in our work across Government. Looking ahead, we will continue to build on that whole-Government approach and ensure that tackling climate change continues to be a core priority for the entirety of the Scottish Government.

The climate change plan update is truly world leading, in the targets that it contains and the actions that it commits to. We are confident that it provides a credible route map towards emission reduction targets and gives clear signals of intent to business, public bodies and individuals. The plan update demonstrates the pioneering approach to climate change for which Scotland is renowned, and its application is timely as we look to COP26.

In my opening speech, I outlined plans to finalise the climate change plan update. The global climate emergency requires immediate action and we want to turn our focus to implementation. I outlined additional plans to take into account the further recommendations that we have recently received and opportunities to build on our current policies in due course.

I thank members for the debate, and I look forward to our continuing to work together.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the deputy convener, Finlay Carson, to close for the ECCLR Committee.

17:19

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): As deputy convener of the ECCLR Committee, I welcome the opportunity to close the debate on the committee's recent report on the updated climate change plan. I thank the associated committees for their work and those committees' conveners for their contributions to the debate. I echo the comments of other members about the huge amount of work that has been carried out by the committee clerks, SPICE and stakeholders.

Given that this will be the last committee debate for some of us, I recognise the constructive and mostly consensual outcomes that have been delivered by the ECCLR Committee over the past five years, not only in relation to climate change but across its portfolio. I wish retiring members well, and I must mention that I particularly enjoyed the drams and banter with Angus MacDonald at the end of the day on our field trips.

I pass on my good wishes for a speedy recovery to our ever-present—until now—cabinet secretary, Roseanna Cunningham. As others have done, I recognise her considerable contribution to addressing the climate emergency. We should perhaps add a middle name to make her Roseanna “Peat” Cunningham, in honour of her commendable success in persuading the finance secretary to invest record levels of funding in peatland restoration. I sincerely wish her well in her retirement.

The report is of importance not only to our committee but across the majority of cabinet secretary and committee remits. We need to move forward with clear and decisive actions, which need to be set out in the final plan—a plan that every sector, community and individual can trust to deliver the outcomes that we so desperately need if we are to reverse the threat that climate change brings to our very existence. It needs to be a climate change plan like no other. In the words of Jim Skea, co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,

“The message is that, frankly, the scale of the changes that would be needed in the emissions pathways has no precedent in human history. There is no precedent for the rate of emissions reductions and the changes in social and technical systems that would be required”.—[*Official Report, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee*, 23 October 2018; c 6.]

That message is stark but, in response, the Parliament put in place a legislative framework with hugely ambitious targets, which can deliver significant emissions pathway changes. We need to act now and go further and faster. Indeed, the Scottish Government plans to finalise the update before the recess. While swift action to finalise the updated plan is welcome, the committee seeks assurance that its recommendations will be taken into account in the final updated plan.

Liz Smith mentioned that Chris Stark of the CCC described some of the Scottish Government’s ambitions as being

“on the fringes of credibility”.—[*Official Report, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee*, 2 February 2021; c 43.]

I agree that much of the evidence that the committee took suggested that that might well be the case. The Scottish Government is not wrong in having highly ambitious targets, but it needs to address many of the concerns that we have heard about regarding their delivery.

The minister touched on some of the issues set out in our report. One topic of importance was the negative emissions policies. I ask the minister whether the estimates of the negative emissions efforts are there simply to balance the books in the light of other policies not reaching the targets. We do not know that, and we need further information

on how the figures on negative emissions policies have been arrived at.

Concerns were raised about the need for clarity regarding the modelling and baseline information that underpins how emission envelopes have been determined, and we still question whether the TIMES model is fit for purpose. We need to know how policies and proposals deliver the envelopes that are presented for each sector, as well as the rationale for agriculture and industry being protected from the attribution of additional abatement. That would allow Parliament to scrutinise progress and ensure that all sectors are well positioned for net zero opportunities in the future and are not disadvantaged.

The topic of land use appeared regularly throughout our evidence sessions. The basis of our recommendation 56 is that we must appreciate that land is a finite resource. The final CCP must take an integrated approach to agriculture and land use, land use change and forestry, recognising the role of farmers and other land managers in delivering emissions reductions in both emissions envelopes.

To achieve that, we must have an accelerated roll-out of regional land use partnerships, including the available tools and resources—which include knowledge transfer, as John Scott said—ensuring that agriculture can continue to play its role in leading the way towards low-carbon land management while, at the same time, benefiting from the innovation and cost savings that it will inevitably bring.

There are considerable opportunities for nature-based solutions such as woodland creation, peatland restoration and the management of invasive non-native species to form part of a green recovery package.

As the report says:

“The Committee recommends the Scottish Government’s economic recovery plans explicitly include support for nature-based solutions to recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic”

and

“considers there is a significant opportunity in redesigning Pillar 1 agricultural payments to be consistent with the objectives of supporting a green, just and resilient recovery, and reward existing good practice.”

However, there was recognition that the Scottish Government must come forward with those plans far quicker than it has done up to now.

“The Committee supports the inclusion of natural assets and natural capital in the Scottish Government’s definition of infrastructure”

leading to

“a fundamental rethink of how decisions are made on capital allocation.”

We recommend that

“the Scottish Government fully incorporate natural capital and an understanding of natural assets into the ‘investment decision framework’ being developed in advance of 2025.”

There is much work to be done, but we should take comfort in the fact that there is cross-party determination to achieve the ambitious targets that the Parliament set. The legacy of the ECCLR Committee’s report will set out the hugely important role of the committee. The existing ECCLR Committee or a new, bespoke climate committee will take on the responsibility of addressing the climate change emergency in the next session of Parliament. It has a target of laying the draft fourth CCP in Parliament no later than the end of 2023, to ensure sufficient time for consultation with stakeholders and in Parliament on the draft plan, and it will take those views into account and finalise the plan by the end of 2024.

Our children and our children’s children are putting their trust in us to deliver—we cannot fail them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the climate change plan.

Edward Mountain: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I wonder whether you could help me. How can I correct the *Official Report*? I mentioned that six people on the RECC Committee are standing down but failed to mention Mike Rumbles, which was an error on my behalf. I would like to get the record corrected.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is not a point of order, but your point has been made, and I am sure that Mr Rumbles will be eternally grateful.

We will now have a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill: Stage 3

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill. In dealing with the amendments, members should have with them the bill as amended, the marshalled list and the grouping of amendments. If there is a division this afternoon, I will suspend proceedings for five minutes to call members to the chamber and allow all members to access the voting app. I encourage any member who wishes to speak on any of the amendments to press their request-to-speak button as soon as I call the first group.

Section 4—Overall cash authorisations

The Presiding Officer: All the amendments are in one group, on Scottish Administration: allocation of resources. Amendment 1, in the name of the cabinet secretary, is grouped with amendments 2 to 7. I call Kate Forbes to move amendment 1 and speak to all the amendments in the group.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): I am pleased to advise that all seven amendments that I am moving today relate to a successful, cross-party approach that reflects agreement with both the Scottish Greens and the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

Amendment 1 increases the overall cash authorisation for the Scottish Administration by £142 million, which reflects the respective portfolio amendments in this group.

Amendment 2 increases the education and skills authorisation by £69.75 million of resource, which comprises £49.75 million for the phased roll-out of free school meals and £20 million for a pupil equity fund premium for next year.

Amendment 3 increases the transport infrastructure and connectivity authorisation by £42.25 million—£17.25 million of resource for additional funding to extend the concessionary fares scheme beyond the under-19s to the under-22s, and £25 million of capital, which comprises £15 million for active travel and £10 million for energy efficiency.

Amendment 4 increases the environment, climate change and land reform authorisation by £10 million of capital for a nature restoration fund.

Amendment 5 increases the rural economy and tourism authorisation by £5 million of capital for agri-environment support.

Amendment 6 increases the economy, fair work and culture authorisation by £15 million for skills and training specifically in the north-east.

17:30

Amendment 7 increases the overall total amount of resources for the Scottish Administration by £142 million. That includes £102 million of resource and £40 million of capital. Again, that reflects the respective portfolio amendments in this group.

I move amendment 1.

The Presiding Officer: I do not believe that any other member wishes to speak on the amendments; I think that members are saving their comments for the debate.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Schedule 1—The Scottish Administration

Amendments 2 to 7 moved—[Kate Forbes]—and agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: As members will be aware, at this point in the proceedings, I am required under standing orders to decide whether, in my view, any provision of the bill relates to a protected subject matter—that is, whether it modifies the electoral system and franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. In my view, the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill does no such thing, so it does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is stage 3 consideration of the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button. I call Kate Forbes to speak to and move motion S5M-24318.

17:31

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): It is essential that we come together as a Parliament today to agree next year's budget and deliver the certainty and stability that Scotland and its people, businesses and communities deserve. Throughout this budget process, I have worked with all parties in the chamber to build consensus and to deliver a budget that supports Scotland's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

I thank the Finance and Constitution Committee for its stage 1 report on the budget, which I responded to on 2 March. In particular, I recognise the outstanding contribution of Bruce Crawford, as both a committee convener and a member of this Parliament. I am sure that all members across the chamber will join me today to offer him our grateful thanks for all his service to this Parliament and our best wishes for the future. [*Applause.*]

The committee's report recognises that the budget has been published in a period of continued economic and fiscal uncertainty. In a year like no other, the passage of the budget bill will have a profound effect on our economy and public services. Since I introduced the budget bill on 28 January, I have engaged with members openly and transparently on the funding that is available and the budget challenges that we face. I thank all parties for their constructive contributions to those discussions. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has reached agreements with the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, which will secure the passage of this vital budget.

In addition to delivering on the spending measures that I have previously outlined to Parliament, as part of the agreement with the Scottish Greens, next year's budget will deliver an additional £49.7 million for the phased roll-out of free school meals. That includes, from July 2021, the provision of free school meal holiday support to all children and young people who are currently eligible for free school meals on the basis of low income and, by August 2022, the universal provision of free school meals for all children in primary schools.

Further recognition of the remarkable contribution of public sector workers during the pandemic has also been agreed, with revisions to

the 2021-22 public sector pay policy. That will increase the cash underpin from £750 to £800 for those earning up to £25,000, matching the cash cap for high earners. For those who earn more than £25,000 and up to £40,000, the pay rise will increase from 1 to 2 per cent.

I am also committing to fund a greater extension to the concessionary travel scheme, ensuring free travel for those aged up to 21, which goes beyond the previous plan to extend the scheme to the under 19s. It will include 21-year-olds and will cost an additional £17 million next year. We will work to deliver that as quickly as we can in the coming months, subject to the necessary legislative and operational processes, the continued impact of Covid and engagement with key delivery partners.

To further help lower-income households, we will make a targeted pandemic support payment of £130 to households that are in receipt of council tax reduction, and two £100 payments to families with children who qualify for free school meals. That means that low-income families receiving reduced council tax bills and qualifying for free school meals will receive support payments worth £330.

As part of my agreement with the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I have agreed that the Scottish Government will further support education recovery efforts for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with a £20 million pupil equity fund premium next year.

In recognition of the twin impacts of the pandemic and the downturn in the oil and gas sector, I will provide £15 million of financial support for retraining and reskilling to support the economic recovery in the north-east of Scotland, based on the principles of a just transition.

I will provide certainty to local government for next year's budget by baselining the £90 million that was provided this year to support a national council tax freeze. That is in addition to the earlier commitments that I made to the Lib Dems to provide an additional £120 million for mental health services and £60 million in education recovery next year.

In the light of calls for a replacement for the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion in Edinburgh, we have asked NHS Lothian to carry out a review of its eye care services and to reconsider how they should be delivered. I commit to working with the board to implement its recommendations and to protect specialised eye services for the city and the wider region.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Having had several cross-party briefings, we all understand that the issue is that the Scottish Government withdrew funding of £45 million for the building. Is the Scottish Government making a commitment to

reinstate capital funding for a new eye pavilion in Edinburgh?

Kate Forbes: I have just said that we have asked NHS Lothian to carry out a review and that we will work with the board to implement its recommendations. The process is appropriate and, from a funding perspective, I have committed to protect specialised eye services. I will not pre-empt the outcome of the review or the recommendations.

Understandably, I have focused today on the efforts that I have made to secure the passage of the budget bill. The changes are significant and they will help to secure our recovery from Covid-19. They build on the firm foundations of a budget that already delivers a £11.6 billion settlement for local government, which is fair and affordable. The settlement will allow councils to freeze council tax next year, while still providing funding for vital day-to-day services.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned local government. This afternoon, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities said that the cost of meeting the Scottish Government's pay policy for local government workers will be £300 million. What additional resource has the cabinet secretary found to support local councils, which are now facing that challenge?

Kate Forbes: Murdo Fraser knows that local councils are the employers and that it would not be appropriate for the Scottish Government to interfere in negotiations between trade unions, the workforce and local government.

I have just outlined the settlement that we have provided to local government, which is a greater than 3 per cent increase in the core settlement, alongside additional funding to help with Covid pressures—£275 million was announced on 16 February, and there is an additional £259 million for next year.

We will keep all that under review. I have regularly said—I will say it again—that I do not necessarily think that this is the final budget update for next year; there will probably be more updates in the light of the uncertainties that we are living through. Therefore, we will revisit some elements over the coming months.

The budget allows for record funding of £16 billion for our national health service, which is an increase of more than £800 million to the core budget. That funding will support recovery and includes an investment in excess of £1.2 billion in mental health, underpinning our continued approach to improving mental health services.

The budget allows for 100 per cent rates relief for the retail, hospitality, leisure, aviation and

newspaper industries for the whole of next year, which has been widely called for and is vital to those sectors. All parties in the chamber agreed to implement that, yet the same policy is not being implemented south of the border.

Our budget will deliver the lowest poundage rate available anywhere in the United Kingdom—saving ratepayers more than £120 million compared with previously published plans. We have a tax policy that delivers on our commitment to a fair and progressive tax system. We have ambitious use of our new welfare powers so that we can help to tackle child poverty—including significant investment in our game-changing Scottish child payment. We have almost £1.9 billion for the Scottish Funding Council, in order to fund our university and college sector. There is £1.3 billion for the Scottish Police Authority, including money for the elimination of the deficit in the police budget. There is an investment of more than £1.6 billion across bus and rail services, ensuring that we keep public transport open and supporting our recovery. There is £1.1 billion of total investment in employability and skills support.

On a final point of substance, I acknowledge the Labour Party's focus on pay for social care workers during our budget discussions. Of course, our public pay policy continues our action to address low pay, with a further cash underpinning and continuing adherence to the increased real living wage. Although that policy is not directly applicable to the social care workforce, it nonetheless sets a benchmark. I am clear that social care workers should have fair levels of pay for all that they do, and am equally clear that I will promise only what can be afforded.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Kate Forbes: Yes, I will take an intervention if I have time.

Daniel Johnson: Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that a 2 per cent rise for a care worker represents only 20p per hour? Does she really think that that is adequate compensation for the work that they have been doing throughout the pandemic?

Kate Forbes: I do not think that Daniel Johnson's characterisation captures the facts. I will come on to those now.

I have been clear that social care workers should have fair levels of pay. With the limited and non-recurring funding that has flowed from the UK budget, I have not been able to accede to Labour's position of an initial £12 per hour leading to £15 per hour. An immediate increase to £12 per hour would provide a 26 per cent uplift in pay from the 2021-22 real living wage of £9.50 per hour, at an estimated cost of around £470 million. Moving

to £15 per hour would equate to an increase of 58 per cent and an annual salary of more than £29,000, and would cost more than £2 billion if the impact on the wider agenda for change workforce was taken into account.

However, I believe in the importance of recognising the efforts of our social care workers. We have recognised those efforts already with a £500 thank you, and have promised to pay the real living wage. That does not, however, mean that that is my final word on the matter.

My position is that we will respect the process and the outcome of collective bargaining. We will look to build on the progress that has been made by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport in recent months. We will duly consider the work of the fair work in social care implementation group, which is set to report in May with recommendations on key areas for the social care workforce, including pay and terms and conditions. Finally, I will be very open to discussions on social care pay with any and all interested voices—talking of which, I will take an intervention from Jackie Baillie.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): If the group recommends in May that there should be a substantial pay increase, from where is the cabinet secretary going to get the recurring funding that she says is not available right now?

Kate Forbes: That is a challenge with which I have to contend. I have been open and transparent with all parties when it comes to the funding that is available. There has been much talk about additional funding for the Scottish Government, but that is non-recurring Covid consequential funding, which may not be guaranteed in future years. I have committed here and now to implementing the outcome of collective bargaining, and it will be one of my headaches to figure out how such things are funded. That is the nature of being in government: we have to ensure that what we commit to is affordable.

The ground that I have covered demonstrates how the budget provides stability and certainty for taxpayers and delivers for our economy. These times are truly unprecedented and require an unprecedented response. The budget delivers that. With cross-party support for it tonight, its passage will help to put Scotland on the road to recover.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) Bill be passed.

17:44

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I start by thanking the Cabinet Secretary for

Finance for the constructive engagement that we have had throughout the budget process. Although we were not in the end able to reach agreement, I put on record my thanks to her for her willingness to discuss Scottish Conservatives' very reasonable budget asks—even though I regret that, in the end, she was not able to meet them.

As the deputy convener of the Finance and Constitution Committee, I join the finance secretary in paying tribute to my friend Bruce Crawford, who I think is making his final speech in the chamber this afternoon. Bruce has served as convener of the committee for the past five years and has led the committee, as we would expect, with the grace and wisdom that reflect his service to the Parliament over many years. I am sure that all members wish him a very happy retirement in a few weeks' time.

When we had the stage 1 debate on the budget some weeks ago, I reminded members that this budget would be the largest in the history of devolution. At that point, in revenue terms it was up 11 per cent on the budget for the previous year, and it gave the finance secretary an unprecedented level of resource to allocate. Of course, that is down to the broad shoulders of the British Government, which is supporting individuals, businesses and public services in Scotland at these times of unprecedented difficulty.

Since that debate, even more money has been forthcoming. Following the announcements in the UK budget just last week, an extra £1.1 billion is coming to the Scottish Government from the British Treasury. We know that, when the finance secretary did her original budget calculations, she assumed a £500 million uplift, so the UK budget has left her with even more cash than she anticipated.

That money is needed. It is needed to support people who are suffering from the consequences of Covid. It is needed to support the many businesses throughout the country that are struggling to survive, thanks to the Covid restrictions. In every previous debate on finance in the chamber, I have raised the need to support businesses that are struggling. I make no apology for doing so again, because we continue to hear daily from people who are falling through the net of business support. We need a renewed focus on providing funding, particularly for the category of businesses that are not legally obliged to close but which have experienced a substantial fall in trade as a result of restrictions elsewhere in the economy.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does Mr Fraser accept that his colleagues announcing the budget on 3 March was not

exactly helpful and made it very difficult for the Government to plan ahead?

Murdo Fraser: Unlike Mr Mason, I have confidence in the finance secretary's ability to cope with late announcements on money. As we see from the budget that has been put together and we are debating today, the late announcements do not seem to have been a handicap. Mr Mason might not have noticed that we have had a global pandemic, which has had an impact on the ability of Governments everywhere in the world to plan their finances.

Our major ask in the budget was more funding for local government. According to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the core funding increase that is being delivered this year amounts to just 0.9 per cent and leaves a gap of around £350 million, which councils need to stand still—that would not provide additional services; it would simply preserve current services.

The 0.9 per cent increase goes only halfway towards funding the Scottish Government's previous pay policy of a 1 per cent increase for people who earn up to £80,000, but we now know that, as a result of the deals that the finance secretary has done, the Government's public pay policy has changed. The policy is now to deliver a 2 per cent increase for those who earn up to £40,000. No thought seems to have been given to the impact that that will have on council budgets. If councils are to match that pay policy for local government workers, as local government workers will expect them to do, they will wonder where the money will come from. COSLA estimates that the change in pay policy will cost councils £300 million in the coming year. However, in the revised budget that has been announced this afternoon, the finance secretary has not produced an extra penny to support local government.

Once again, councils are the whipping boy of a Scottish National Party budget. While the Scottish Government budget increases by an unprecedented amount, councils are seeing their resources squeezed and will have to cut local services as a result. The Scottish Conservatives want fair funding for councils, and this budget does not deliver that.

We should perhaps not be surprised that the Greens are backing a budget that damages councils, because they have form for that. Indeed, we should not be surprised that the Greens are backing an SNP budget, because, as surely as night follows day, the Greens go the SNP way. However, I am disappointed in the Liberal Democrats. I thought that they would have more sense than to vote for an SNP budget that is damaging councils.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: I look forward to Willie Rennie explaining to the Conservative voters of North East Fife why he is voting for an SNP budget that will damage local services. I will give way to him.

Willie Rennie: Would Murdo Fraser agree that the difference between him and me is that, when the finance secretary comes forward with policies that we argued for, we feel duty bound to back those proposals, but when she backs proposals that he came forward with, such as 100 per cent business rates relief, he does not vote for them? Is he not being a little bit disingenuous?

Murdo Fraser: I look forward to Mr Rennie deploying that argument on the doorsteps in North East Fife to all my Conservative friends. We will see how he gets on in the next few weeks.

It was good to see some progress being made on the introduction of free school meals for all primary pupils, although it is being done over two years when it should have been introduced over one. Again, that was a key budget ask of ours that was not delivered.

Yesterday, at the Finance and Constitution Committee, I raised the issue of land and buildings transaction tax. The finance secretary is insisting that the threshold for LBTT payments, which was temporarily raised to £250,000, must return to £145,000 next month, despite the fact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has extended an uplift for the equivalent tax in England, as, indeed, has the Government in Wales, and that the block grant adjustment would provide additional resources to extend that tax cut if she wanted to do so. That means that, from April, house purchasers in Scotland will be hit with a higher tax bill than those elsewhere.

Yet, as we know, revenue from LBTT in the period from September amounted to £39 million more than was generated in the same period last year. That means that reducing the tax burden delivered a higher revenue. That is perhaps an illustration of the Laffer curve that Mr McKee is always so glad for me to explain to him. I hope even now that the finance secretary can think again about that issue, because she might find that she is depriving herself of tax revenue and that, by extending the increase in the threshold, she might take in more tax, as we have demonstrated over the past few months.

The Minister for Trade, Innovation and Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: No—I am in my last minute.

For the reasons that I have outlined, this is not a budget that we can support. Despite having at its

disposal unprecedented resources coming from the British Government, the SNP has not delivered on key policies to improve Scotland for all its residents and, in particular, the budget will once again damage local services, because councils will be struggling to balance their budgets while the Scottish Government sits on piles of cash. For all of those reasons, we will oppose the budget at decision time tonight.

17:53

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I begin by adding my tribute to Bruce Crawford. I have to admit that my tenure and his on the Finance and Constitution Committee will overlap only briefly. Nonetheless, I recognise the contribution that he has made to Parliament. He is a parliamentarian who has widespread admiration across this chamber, so I wish him well with his retirement.

We must ensure that we recover and rebuild from this pandemic. That is the imperative for this budget and it is how it should be judged. The budget lines that it prioritises will determine whether we have the capacity to undo the damage that has been done. Additional funds being spent on the right things will ensure that we build resilience as we learn to cope with the virus. Spending funds on the wrong things will mean that we will continue to struggle and will fail to cope with the virus as it continues to linger.

This budget and the coming parliamentary session must be focused on recovery from a virus that has shattered our public services, communities and economy. However, as the emergence of new variants makes clear, this virus is persistent. It will not end with the vaccination programme. The vaccination programme will merely stabilise the situation and give us the ability to cope with the virus. Therefore, in that context, we must focus not only on recovery but on building resilience.

On-going infection control and social distancing will have a profound effect on our ability to deliver healthcare and education, disrupting businesses that rely on contact with customers and continuing to place a strain on social interactions. Therefore, we need strategic measures and bold steps to build and secure that recovery and resilience. We need to move beyond the week-to-week measures that are necessitated by crisis and learn to cope.

On the Labour benches, we are clear that improving the pay of social care workers would have been such a move. Currently, the median pay for social care workers across the UK is around £10 an hour. The critical and vital work that they do, caring for the most vulnerable in our society, has been undervalued and underpaid for

far too long. The pandemic has simply underlined and magnified that. That is why Labour has made the call for social care workers to gain an immediate increase of £12 an hour, with a plan to implement £15 an hour, to recognise their work and to build a care system that is skilled, effective and resilient.

I am only a week into my post as finance spokesperson for Scottish Labour, so I thank the cabinet secretary for already having a number of meetings with me in the previous days.

Our priority going into the budget was to correct a key structural failing that has been exposed by the pandemic: the inadequate pay of social care workers. I know that the cabinet secretary agrees with that sentiment and agrees that those workers have been at the forefront of the response, and I know that she accepts that good social care is preventative spend that can save money and remove pressure on our health service, because ensuring that vulnerable people are healthy at home is better for everyone than fighting to treat them and get them well again in hospital. She knows those things, but the Government has made different choices.

Make no mistake: increasing pay for social care workers would be a financial challenge. I accept that, but the cabinet secretary has the financial headroom to deliver it. As confirmed at the Finance and Constitution Committee yesterday, the budget has an additional £1.3 billion of recurring funds in it, but other things have seemingly been prioritised. The recent UK budget delivered another £1.2 billion, albeit in non-recurring funds, but that has been allocated to other things, and more than £1 billion in Covid money carried over from the previous financial year has been prioritised for other issues.

The direct cost of increasing pay for social care workers across the public, voluntary and private sectors would be around £480 million, which is a large sum, but in the context of those additional funds, realistic and deliverable. Four hundred and eighty million pounds would transform the pay of such critical workers in such a critical service. Compare £480 million to the £100 million that the deal with the Green Party secured, which amounts to nearly 1 per cent above inflation and does not necessarily carry through to NHS or local authority workers. I say bluntly that social care workers deserve more than the 20p per hour that this budget seems to imply they are worth.

There are of course elements of the budget that I commend. I welcome the commitment of £45 million to replace the eye pavilion in Edinburgh, but we need to see the detail and I am worried by the caveated words from the cabinet secretary in response to Sarah Boyack. Waiting times were concerning before Covid and are now at very

serious levels. The budget needs to step up so that we no longer need to make the choice between treating the virus and treating cancer. Money to reduce class sizes and extend free school meals is welcome, but £60 million against the £1 billion that is spent every year on schools will struggle to counteract the gaps in our children's knowledge, and we are yet to see the progress on free school meals that was promised by previous budgets, before we rush to welcome the latest announcement.

Local government has carried the burden of much of the economic response to Covid but, despite the sums promised in this budget, there remains a Covid funding gap that is estimated to be £518 million on top of the real-terms cuts that local government has experienced since 2013 of £937 million.

Our economy is shattered. The simple fact is that many consumer-facing businesses will struggle to survive; despite pledges, guidance remains unclear. Funds remain slow in being delivered to the businesses that need them. I have heard first hand from bed and breakfast owners in my constituency that they have had to cash in their pensions because their applications to the discretionary fund have been declined. Despite Scottish Government promises, many funds remain underclaimed. The budget should have been about spending better as well as spending more.

Those are the choices that have been made by the Government and those priorities are supported by the Greens and Liberal Democrats. Those concessions improve the budget, which is why we voted for those amendments, but I fear that they are not the bold strategic steps that are needed to transform social care or deliver the recovery and resilience that is required. For those reasons, Scottish Labour cannot support the budget at decision time. I do not state that with pleasure or relish.

The pandemic means that no one wants the squabbling over the budget that old politics would expect, but I also strongly feel that challenging times require Opposition parties to challenge the Government. The budget will undoubtedly pass, but I ask those who support it whether the budget meets the challenge of building recovery and resilience.

I sincerely hope that the budget does not hold back money for gimmicks or flourishes for the SNP in the coming election. If it does, we will look at how what is being spent measures up to what could have been paid for—the additional pay for social care workers, which they deserve. Care workers will certainly compare their pay packets with the budget to see whether their true worth is being valued.

18:00

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Daniel Johnson is right that no one wants to see squabbling during a global pandemic. Our quiet work has secured a reprioritisation of £300 million towards mental health support, the education bounce-back plan, the economy and jobs, support for the north-east on the just transition, and the environment.

The public expect us to work together because these are exceptional times. We are in the middle of a global pandemic in which thousands of people have lost their lives, thousands more have lost their jobs and people live with restrictions every day. We need to put recovery first and have a needle-sharp focus on it, which we have sought to do. We have done that over the past year by working with the Government whenever we could. Members know me—I am Mr Consensual. The only thing that makes me have doubts is Jackie Baillie silently giving me the scolding look across the chamber that I know many others have experienced recently, too.

We have tried to make a difference in the budget. It is not perfect, but we are pleased and proud that we have increased the mental health budget by £120 million to £1.2 billion. We got steps in the right direction on the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion, which we will watch closely. There is £60 million for the bounce-back plan in education, plus £20 million for the pupil equity fund premium. There is £5 million for agri-environment schemes. We were pleased that the finance secretary accepted the Conservatives' proposal on 100 per cent rates relief for businesses, which is a step in the right direction. The support for bed and breakfasts and self-catering accommodation is another step in the right direction. For councils, there is £90 million next year to protect services in future years and avoid massive council tax increases.

All those things are good. I am particularly pleased about the support fund for skills and retraining in the north-east, which I might call the Mike Rumbles fund. That will help with the just transition from oil and gas and represents another important set of proposals. We argued for all those things.

Another thing that I agree with Daniel Johnson on is social care workers' pay. We need to make a substantial change; we cannot accept simply superficial changes to change the name to national care service and expect everything to be resolved. We need to pay such workers more.

The past year has shown that the social care sector is not robust and strong enough. The sector's high staff turnover alone should tell us that we need substantial changes. We must all

work together to re-engineer the budget substantially so that we can pay those people more. They have sacrificed their lives in the past year. We must make a difference in the next parliamentary session to get a decent rate of pay for them.

I thank the finance secretary for her co-operative approach. She is no-nonsense—she likes to be straight, honest and up front on her proposals, and I appreciated her approach. As a result, we have a better budget. We have avoided the squabbling, got the budget going through and put money in people's pockets when they need it. The last thing that people wanted from the Parliament was for us to continue to argue while people struggle in their daily lives.

There is £300 million extra for priorities that Liberal Democrats set out. We can support that.

18:04

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for her engagement in the budget process. I welcome Daniel Johnson to his portfolio; I think that this is his first finance debate in the role.

Oh, go on—here is one last tribute to Bruce Crawford, our outgoing Finance and Constitution Committee convener. I think that we will all miss him—he has managed to achieve a collegiate atmosphere on the committee, despite my occasional efforts to amend all those committee reports.

My favourite memory will be the look of joy on his face when I shared with him a bottle of Glasgow Mega Death hot sauce. If his speech in this debate is to be his final speech, I ask him to use the opportunity to spice up the debate a bit—don't hold back, convener.

The Scottish Greens went into the budget process wanting to put forward three key priorities. First, we wanted it to be recognised that the Scottish Government's pay policy, as published, needed to go further. Secondly, we wanted to make sure that the economic impact on some of the most vulnerable households in Scotland was recognised and to support household incomes for those people. Thirdly, we wanted to sow the seeds for a green recovery.

I think that we have managed to achieve a significant package on each of those key priorities. In relation to a green recovery, investment is increasing in active travel, energy efficiency, agri-environment schemes and more, but the policy also connects with policies such as the expansion of free bus travel, which will be of immediate benefit to those who gain access to it. Not just young people aged 19 and under but young

people aged 21 and under will get that practical and financial benefit. As we continue to expand that policy, it will help to normalise public transport use in Scotland and to continue the shift away from car use and to public transport that we need to see.

On free school meals, we never thought that the Scottish Government needed to wait until the next election to make promises, even though it is in only a couple of months' time, and then leave it to the Parliament in the next session to decide what to do. We thought that action should have been taken in the current session, and I am pleased that we now have a clear timetable for rolling out free school meals on a universal basis at primary level. Greens will continue to advocate for further progress there.

The pandemic support payments to households that are in receipt of council tax reduction and families whose children currently qualify for free school meals will make a significant difference, and anti-poverty organisations have welcomed that. It is not just a case of providing universal access to those payments; it is also a case of ensuring that they are targeted at those households that need them the most. That will make a difference to those who have suffered most severely from the economic impact of the pandemic.

On public sector pay, we were very clear that we wanted a solution that would go further for people at the lowest end of the income scale. We never thought that it was justified that any high earner should get a bigger increase in their salary as a result of the pay settlement than the lowest earners. Progress has been made for the lowest earners. We wanted there to be a progressive approach throughout the income scale, and we have managed to ensure that people who earn up to £40,000 will get 2 per cent.

However, we are absolutely convinced, as others have made clear, that that needs to be a benchmark—a baseline—for the sectoral negotiations that must take place. Those who have made the case for further progress on health and social care, for example, make a very strong—indeed, an unanswerable—case, but the negotiation and the collective bargaining process need to continue. [*Interruption.*]

I am afraid that I do not have time; I am in my final few seconds.

We have advanced the baseline, and we will continue to make progress.

My final point is that, in the next session, we will face very deep questions, on which cross-party consensus will be required, regardless of the parliamentary arithmetic. We will have to think deeply about Scotland's entire tax base. We will

have to make decisions that will have lasting repercussions. They must be decisions that lead us towards a more equal and more sustainable society. Those are challenges that the Parliament will have to grapple with and make decisions on in the next session, and it will need to do that on the basis of some degree of consensus, regardless of the parliamentary arithmetic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): We move to the open debate and a speech from Bruce Crawford. I need hardly mention that this is Mr Crawford's final speech.

18:09

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I will begin my speech with a contribution on the budget for 2021-22. However, as this will be my final speech in a debate at Holyrood, I would also like to take some time to say a few thank yous, as well as make some remarks reflecting on my time as a member of the Parliament of Scotland.

On the budget, I congratulate Kate Forbes, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, for putting together a well-constructed budget for recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Kate Forbes entered the challenge of her post in the most difficult of circumstances, but she has acquitted herself with great aplomb and has grown into a finance secretary of very real stature.

When I compare the approach to the budget of Kate Forbes and the Scottish Government with that of the main Opposition in the shape of the Conservatives, the contrast really could not be starker. It simply beggars belief that, despite the fact that we are now only three weeks away from a new budget year, and in the midst of the greatest crisis since the second world war, the Tories cannot bring themselves to vote for a budget at this time. I believe that the Conservatives' stance of opposition for opposition's sake throughout the current session of Parliament because of their dislike of the SNP will come to be their electoral undoing.

In my final speech, there are some things that I must say. To be frank, I have been extremely disappointed by some of the commentary that I have seen, particularly on social media, in which MSP colleagues have made spiteful and sometimes nasty comments about fellow MSPs. Many on the receiving end have been my friends for decades, and I can tell members that I find such comments hurtful and distressing. I genuinely hoped that the pandemic would usher in a kinder and more considered type of politics. I can only hope that, after the coming election, the reset button will be pressed and a greater degree of respect will be found—much as Patrick Harvie suggested—both between MSPs and between the

political parties, in order that the job of politics can be done as the citizens of Scotland expect from their elected representatives.

Some of my friends at Holyrood will be aware that I seriously considered standing down at the previous election, but my good friend John Swinney persuaded me not to do so. He is a man whom we are extremely fortunate to have as our Deputy First Minister and education secretary. On reflection, and despite the very challenging circumstances of the pandemic, I am glad that I made the decision to continue for a further parliamentary session.

Although the circumstances are certainly not ones that any of us would have chosen for their last year at Holyrood, I am pleased to have been able to utilise my experience as an elected representative of 33 years—first as a councillor and then as an MSP—to provide assistance and support to a great many individuals, businesses and organisations in the Stirling constituency who have needed my help over the past 12 months.

There are so many people that I would like to say thank you to. I will start with a huge thank you to the many wonderful constituents with whom I have been in contact over the years. I thank the amazing staff in my constituency office, who have supported me marvellously for two decades. I thank the officials and staff at Holyrood, who have always shown me the greatest respect and have provided me with support whenever it was required. I thank many MSP colleagues throughout the chamber for the comradeship that they have shown. I thank the officials and members of the Scottish Government for their commitment and effort on behalf of the people of Scotland.

In concluding my thanks, let me mention and give particular thanks to the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who has been my personal friend for over 20 years. No other First Minister in history has had to endure the pressure that she has been subjected to while holding the office. Her leadership during the pandemic has been truly outstanding, and I publicly and sincerely thank her for all the sacrifices that she has made on behalf of the nation.

In reflecting on my time as an MSP, I will begin with the wonderful opening day of this Parliament, in 1999. The memory of the reconvening of Scotland's Parliament after a period of more than 300 years is one that I will cherish for evermore. So, too, will I cherish the memory of winning the Stirling constituency, being part of the first-ever SNP Government and, as a result, being in a position to do my bit to ensure that the minority Government stayed the course and delivered for the people of Scotland.

It has been an honour and the privilege of my life to be a member of this Parliament for the Stirling constituency, as well as to serve in Government and to be the convener of a number of parliamentary committees, particularly the Finance and Constitution Committee in the current session. For me, it has always been about service, improving the lot of the people of Scotland and, ultimately, the people of this nation taking full responsibility for their own destiny.

With those comments, Presiding Officer, I sign off my final contribution to a debate at Holyrood by wishing everyone all the very best. I sincerely hope that all of you and your families have as safe and peaceful a future as is possible. [*Applause.*]

18:15

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I put on record my best wishes to Bruce Crawford for the future.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important budget debate, which, once again, takes place against the backdrop of an immensely difficult 12 months.

Although there are measures in this year's budget that the Scottish Conservatives welcome, it represents a failed opportunity to place Scotland's economic recovery at the forefront of our priorities. The bottom line is that, despite an unprecedented level of support from the UK Government, the budget lacks the bold action that Scotland needs if we are to emerge stronger from these severe economic headwinds, which we are not alone as a nation in facing.

The chamber will not need reminding that, as the Scottish Fiscal Commission has warned, Scotland's economy will not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024 at the earliest. That highlights the scale of the monumental challenge before us all. As members on the Conservative benches have already spoken to, we had some clear asks of the Government—asks that would have placed Scotland in prime position to meet that challenge head on.

From my perspective, the aspect of this year's budget that is most disappointing is that it fails to deliver the necessary and vital support to Scotland's cash-strapped councils, which are facing the economic brunt of the Covid-19 pandemic. With Scotland's councils facing a combined budget shortfall of an eye-watering £511 million, worsened by consistent spending cuts to core funding by the SNP Government over several years, they deserve unprecedented financial support to respond to the pandemic. COSLA has consistently reiterated its concerns in that regard and has identified serious shortcomings in this year's budget.

It is grossly unfair that, as the Scottish Government's own budget is going to dramatically increase because of support from the UK Government, the core funding increase to local government will amount to less than 1 per cent. The persistent underfunding of Scotland's local councils by this Government is simply no longer acceptable. They provide so many of the local services that Scots rely on, from the disposal of our waste to the upkeep of our leisure facilities, which could be placed at serious risk if they are not funded properly.

Murdo Fraser spoke of how Scotland's councils have been the whipping boys of the SNP budget. If this budget is passed, it will demonstrate that they most certainly are. To right that wrong, the Scottish Conservatives have called for the introduction of a fair funding deal. That would award our local authorities with a set proportion of the Scottish Government's budget each year, which would mirror the relationship that the Scottish Government has with the UK Government. The new framework would provide our councils with the financial certainty that they need to ensure the provision of key local services, some of which I have mentioned.

Local councils know their residents best. They can play a leading role in both rebuilding our communities and empowering them to meet the diverse range of economic challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. However, the blunt truth is that, having been short changed for years, they cannot do it on the cheap.

We, on the Conservative benches, have it made clear that we want to back Scotland's local councils to the hilt, and we will make that argument loud and clear as we approach the elections in May. In the meantime, we cannot vote for this budget, because, among other reasons, it does not go far enough towards providing Scotland's councils with the level of support that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind open debate speakers that their speeches should be four minutes, please.

18:19

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I congratulate the cabinet secretary on reaching agreement with two other parties this year.

It is good that the UK Government is continuing to borrow into 2021-22, so that both it and we can continue to deal with Covid and, I hope, help the economy to recover. I accept that it may not yet be the time to raise taxes, because we want people who have spare cash to be out there spending it as soon as possible in order to keep businesses and jobs going.

On the other hand, I do not think that the public finances can afford tax cuts. The Conservatives have suggested tax cuts—in particular, that there should be no LBTT on transactions of more than £145,000. There are a number of reasons why that is not a good idea. First, the NHS and local government need the money for public services. Secondly, the policy does not help those who are in greatest need and who do not own their own homes. Thirdly, it does not even help many ordinary folk who buy a flat or a house for less than £145,000. For example, flats in the estate where I live go for about £70,000.

I was intrigued to see that the Conservatives down south are looking at increasing corporation tax in the medium term. That is a bit of a change of tack for them, and I say that it is welcome. I hope that the Tories in this Parliament will welcome the need for increased taxation if we are to protect public services.

On the subject of taxation more generally, as the cabinet secretary pointed out in her letter of 2 March to the Finance and Constitution Committee, we are "limited" when we do not have

"full devolution of tax powers".

Income tax, in particular, is a problem. It is still, in essence, a reserved tax, with the Scottish Government having the power only to vary rates. The UK income tax system is far too complex to start with, and it is made worse by having national insurance as a separate and highly regressive tax on top.

On the spending provisions, I very much welcome the record spending on the NHS, the focus on mental health and, of course, the increase to a 2 per cent pay rise for most public sector workers. I accept that most of us would like higher increases for many workers, but we have to live within our means.

The reality is that, even with UK borrowing, there are limits to spending. We have increased NHS spending over a number of years. If Opposition members feel that we have not given enough to local government, as Annie Wells has just said, they must think that we have given too much to the NHS. Those are the two main parts of our budget, so providing more for one almost inevitably means providing less for the other.

On capital spending, I very much welcome the continued emphasis on housing—especially on social rented and other affordable housing. In recent years—and even right now—in the Glasgow Shettleston constituency we have affordable housing going up in Dalmarnock, Bridgeton, Parkhead, Calton, Baillieston and Shettleston itself, to name but a few places. We cannot overstate how important such housing is. It means that people can have good-quality housing

that they can afford, it helps people to overcome fuel poverty and, as we have seen in recent months, it gives young people the space to study effectively, even when that is being done remotely.

I am always uneasy when we talk about longer-term borrowing for revenue costs, be that by individuals or by the country. However, we should certainly be borrowing for capital expenditure, especially for housing. It is disappointing that the UK Government has cut back on our capital spending, especially financial transaction money.

Such housing investment gives our communities long-lasting assets, at the end of the day, and it creates jobs and boosts the economy along the way. It should certainly be possible for the Scottish Government to borrow prudently, as local authorities can, rather than having artificial limits placed on it by Westminster.

Overall, I am very pleased to support the budget. It has been a strange year, and it looks as though 2021-22 will not be normal either, but we can have confidence, in Scotland at least, that the public finances are in safe hands.

18:23

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, warmly wish Bruce Crawford well for the future. I thank him for the many thoughtful contributions that I have had the privilege of listening to in my short time in Parliament.

The past year has been tough for everyone. More than 7,000 lives and tens of thousands of livelihoods have been lost. Families and friends have been separated, and the attainment gap in our schools has become a chasm. The national crisis cried out for a national recovery plan to get us through the trauma of the Covid pandemic. We needed a budget that would start to fix the foundations of the economy, protect our NHS, tackle Scotland's plague of inequality and reward our key workers. Instead, sadly, we have a budget that has, largely, just papered over the cracks.

I know that Covid did not create the inequalities in our society, the weaknesses in our economy or the utter neglect of our social care system, but it has cruelly exposed them. More than ever, we needed a bold and ambitious budget to take Scotland forward, but we have instead a budget that barely brings us back to where we were before the coronavirus.

That is the case not least when it comes to a group of workers who have been so badly let down during the pandemic—Scotland's social care staff. They have been let down by a lack of personal protective equipment, a lack of testing and a lack of proper guidance. That meant that Covid-positive patients were transferred into our

care homes, but those workers looked after our loved ones as if they were their own—often caring for them in their final moments as Covid took its terrible toll in our care homes. They did so in return for wages that, frankly, we should be ashamed of. We were all quick to clap for those care workers during the first lockdown, but it is not our praise that they need; it is an increase in their wages.

That is why Labour did not make unreasonable demands during the budget process. We gave our backing to the calls by the GMB for £15 per hour for care staff. We did not demand that it happen overnight, but instead asked for a first step of £12 per hour in this budget. That would be entirely affordable with just a fraction of the extra funds that the Government has received since it published its draft budget.

Although we would like to have seen much more being improved in the budget, we made it clear that we would back it if the Government agreed to a fair day's pay for a fair day's work for our social carers. However, the Government has failed to provide that. The cabinet secretary said she recognises that Labour engaged in good faith to seek a better deal for our care workers. However, we want her to recognise those care workers. They were there when we needed them most, so it is a shame that the cabinet secretary is not there when they need her. Sadly, promises of jam tomorrow do not go far enough.

The budget was a chance for the Parliament to come together to unite and stand with our carers. It was a test of how serious we are about genuinely building back better. However, when it comes to social care, Parliament has failed the test.

However, Scotland's social care workers can rest assured of one thing: Labour is on their side and will continue to stand with them until we get the better pay deal that they deserve.

In the short time that I have, I want to touch on the fact that it is important to consider the budget in the context of the previous four in this session of Parliament. If we do that, one thing that stands out is the single biggest attack on local council services in living memory. Despite having the largest budget in the history of devolution, this year's local government budget is still 2.4 per cent lower, in real terms, than it was in 2013-14. Even before the allocation of the recent additional consequential, the Scottish Government's budget was 3.1 per cent higher.

Since 2013-14, local government has faced a cumulative cut of £4.3 billion, tens of thousands of council jobs have been cut and services have been axed. I have never quite worked out why the SNP has such disdain for local government.

During the past four years, our councillors have seen a determined attack on the services that the most vulnerable people rely on. For four years, councillors the length and breadth of Scotland have had to wrestle with painful cuts.

At a time when one third of Scotland's schoolchildren are leaving school without the expected literacy and numeracy levels, we have seen savage attacks on learning support staff.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you draw your remarks to a close?

Colin Smyth: I will do, Presiding Officer.

At a time when one third of Scotland's school children are obese, we have seen a record number of leisure centre closures.

In the next parliamentary session, we need to consider again how local government is funded and how to support properly the services that we all rely on.

18:28

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): During the past year, public services, businesses and families have faced unprecedented challenges, so recovery has to be our core focus during the coming financial year. I am glad that that is the approach that the Scottish Government is taking with the budget, which meets the needs of the nation.

First and foremost, I welcome the fact that the health portfolio will receive additional resources, both for core health services and for suppressing the spread of Covid-19, with funding at a record £16 billion. That is an increase of more than £800 million.

After the UK Government's insult of a public sector pay freeze, most of Scotland's public sector will receive a pay rise of either £800 or 2 per cent. That acts as a benchmark for pay-deal negotiations between employers, trade unions and the NHS workforce. During the past year, we have all relied on our public sector workers, and they now rely on their elected representatives to pass the budget so that they can receive their well-deserved pay rise.

At the same time, many families across Scotland will benefit from a council tax freeze, thanks to £90 million that is being made available to local authorities specifically for that purpose. That includes £2.182 million for North Ayrshire Council, which covers my constituency.

Thus, local taxpayers will again have respite from increasing council taxes in 2021-22—just as they did for nine consecutive years from 2008 to 2017. It is therefore no surprise that the average band E council tax is £1,338 per year in Scotland,

which is a thumping £480 less than it is in Tory England, and the gulf is set to widen further. Two thirds of English councils are imposing the maximum 4.9 per cent council tax rise, which is far in excess of inflation. That is not to mention the derisory 1 per cent pay rise that is being offered to nurses in England.

The Tories, of course, removed the need to consult on council tax rises. Until last November, any local authority in England that was planning a rise of more than 2 per cent had to hold a local referendum, but no longer. In Saturday's *The Daily Telegraph*, the Local Government Association said:

"Councils face the tough choice about whether to increase bills to bring in desperately needed funding ... at a time when we are acutely aware of the significant burden that this could place on some households."

As I have recounted in detail many times over the years in budget debates, the Tories have eviscerated English council budgets, so for the Tories in this chamber, utterly beholden to their bosses in London, to come here and pretend to be the defenders of local government in Scotland, is an insult to the intelligence of every Scottish voter. To make it the fig leaf from behind which they oppose the budget, which they would never support under any circumstances, stretches the credibility of even the most gullible. The Tories should just be honest and say, "It's an SNP budget, so we won't support it."

The council tax freeze is only one part of the budget, which also introduces free school meals for all primary pupils and a £100 million programme of one-off pandemic support payments to help to relieve the significant financial stress of families across Scotland.

Housing was another Tory gripe, yet in the four years to 2020 the SNP Government built more than nine times more social rented homes per head of population in Scotland than were built in England. Under this Government, 4,340 new homes have been built in North Ayrshire, including 496 council and 1,022 housing association homes. The funding for North Ayrshire Council to build homes amounts to £67.916 million over the past five years alone.

I am delighted that ferry service resources will increase from £255.1 million to £287.6 million—an increase of almost 13 per cent. That is invaluable to my island constituents. Motorway and trunk road expenditure will rise by more than 10 per cent, from £748.9 million to £825.9 million, while rail expenditure will rise by more than 4 per cent to £1.3149 billion.

I recall 2009, when Labour set out a list of demands for the Scottish Government. The finance secretary met them all, yet Labour still

voted against the budget in panic at impending electoral defeat. When no budget had been approved a week later, they felt forced to vote for exactly the same budget. It is time for Labour to get behind this budget, too, and not to ask for what they know cannot be delivered without either significant increases in taxes or switching of resources from other portfolios—neither of which they have identified.

Equally, I am delighted that the cabinet secretary has listened to businesses and included in the budget their number 1 demand, which is extension of 100 per cent rates relief for the retail, hospitality, leisure, newspaper and aviation sectors for a further year; £719 million of support added to £120 million of—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, please draw your remarks to a close.

Kenneth Gibson: I will do so. That was backed by £1.1 billion of investment in jobs and skills.

Although the coming year will be difficult, the budget puts us on a clear path to a fairer, greener and more prosperous post-pandemic Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This is Mark McDonald's final speech, so I will be a little more generous in the allocation of time than I was to the previous two speakers.

18:33

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind): Thank you, Presiding Officer. On the off chance that I lose track and forget to do this, I say that, having served under Bruce Crawford in the previous session of Parliament on the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee, on which you also served, I regard him as one of the statesmen of Scottish politics and think that he will be remembered as the best Presiding Officer that this Parliament never had. I wish him well for his retirement. That was not to denigrate your role in the chair, Presiding Officer. Having worked alongside you in the north-east of Scotland across a range of issues, I say that, although we have seldom agreed, we have always disagreed respectfully, so I also wish you well as you step down from Parliament at the end of the session.

I will back the budget at decision time. I am grateful that the cabinet secretary was good enough to meet me and to come back to me on some of the specific points that I raised. I recognise that she takes a slightly different view from me on the tax issue, but perhaps the wider debate that the Finance and Constitution Committee has sought to encourage will serve as a better way to explore the best way to ensure that tax in Scotland is progressive in both nature and utility.

There is no doubt that we face an uncertain future as we emerge from the pandemic and the past year has given us all pause to reflect on the things that truly matter the most to us. That must also be true of the expenditure priorities of Government. That means looking at how finances are allocated in global sums but, crucially, it is also about how that funding filters down to the communities that we all represent.

Mental health is a topic that has been at the centre of much discussion in the chamber and it has been brought into even sharper focus by the pandemic. Large-scale expenditure is of course to be welcomed, but if that money is not directed to community-based services that are there to relieve pressure on the crisis end of the system, all that we do is create and maintain a self-perpetuating cycle of tragedy. I hope that there will be careful reflection on how that money is to be spent.

I will, however, play no part in those future deliberations, and it is perhaps appropriate that I now turn to some wider reflections. I have thought long and hard about what to say at this moment, how to find the right words to say and whether it is even appropriate to talk about the concept of achievements when they will never be the things that people think of in relation to my time here. Nevertheless, I remain proud of my work on issues around autism and disabilities. I have tried where possible to amplify the voices of those who are less often heard and to champion causes that matter not just to my family but to many others out there across Scotland.

There have been many gains in that time, such as the expansion of autism-friendly social experiences and the improvement of the accessibility of public buildings for people with autism, including this very Parliament building. There have been gains in support for carers and the campaign for changing places toilets. Where and when I can after I have left this place, I will continue to advocate on those issues, because I will have a lifelong interest in them.

Daniel Johnson: I commend the member for his efforts in advocating for those with autism. I give him the pledge that I and others who are returned to the Parliament will continue to raise those issues, because they are highly important. I thank him for his efforts.

Mark McDonald: I am grateful to Daniel Johnson for that. I know that others share that passion and will continue to advance the issues in the next session of Parliament.

I am also proud to have been able to introduce the baby box to Scotland, which is something that friends and constituents who have had babies since 2017 have been keen to tell me they have been delighted to receive. Its latest iteration, which

was introduced by my successor Maree Todd, followed the same approach that I instigated of having a competition to provide an interactive design for the box. I hope that the scheme continues to be a great success in the years to come, showcasing the ambition for Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up in.

I am, however, only too aware that none of those things will be foremost in anyone's mind as I speak in this chamber for the final time. I recognise that I have made poor decisions in my life and, although I have never set out to deliberately cause upset to anyone, the fact that people felt hurt and upset by my actions causes me immense regret and sorrow. Although I have apologised sincerely for those actions, I want to take the opportunity to do so in the chamber: I am sorry.

I have learned a lot about myself over the past few years, and I hope that I have been able to emerge as a better person as a consequence. It is difficult to describe how it feels to have a version of yourself held up in front of you that you do not recognise as a true reflection of your character, values or intentions. I can only hope that people will take me as the person that I am now and not as the person that I perhaps once was, or have been portrayed as being.

I am grateful for the support that I have had from friends, many of whom have known me since we were at primary school together and who have stood by me through the best and worst times of my life. I am grateful for the love of my family, who pulled me back from the edge of darkness on more than one occasion. I am grateful for the support and kindness of those in this building who offered it as I found myself in a difficult place. My mantra every day is to try to be a better person today than I was yesterday and to focus on being a better person still tomorrow. I am grateful to those who believe that such a journey is possible, and I thank them for holding my hand along the way.

It has been the privilege of my life to have been able to represent the people and communities of Aberdeen Donside, where I live and grew up. I put on record my thanks to my dedicated team of staff—Kerry, Anna, Sarah and Rachel—who have delivered an outstanding level of support to constituents during the pandemic. They are fantastic individuals and I have no doubt that they will all go on to bigger and better things. I hope that the next MSP for the area will get the same level of joy and satisfaction from representing such a diverse range of communities as I have done. Although I wish that the ending had been a happier one, I sincerely and universally wish everyone good luck, good health and goodbye. *[Applause.]*

18:39

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Before I get to my substantive contribution, I put on record the support that Mark McDonald has given to the two really important cross-party groups in the Scottish Parliament that I chair, on palliative care and on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions. Without his support, we would not have been able to progress a lot of very important work. I wanted to put that on the record, and I give him my good wishes for the future.

I extend my good wishes to Bruce Crawford, too. Like almost every back-bench MSP has done at one time or another, I have leaned on Bruce for his support, advice and wisdom, and I thank him for all the occasions when he has given me that over the years. I wanted to put that on record here this afternoon.

I am of course here to speak about the budget bill at stage 3, which I will be supporting. It was introduced by the Scottish Government, but it has been shaped by the Parliament. Changes to the budget were always likely, but the scope of those changes was always going to be uncertain, given the wholly unsatisfactory way in which the UK Government has progressed its own budgetary provisions, completely out of synch with Scotland's budget process.

The Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill was published on 28 January, with the Scottish Government partially flying blind in relation to the resources that it would be able to deploy. Of course, the Scottish Government moved swiftly to allocate additional money both for the current financial year and into the next financial year through the budget that is before us, with Barnett consequentials of £1.1 billion being announced by the UK Government on 15 February.

Some people have sought to paint that as the largesse of the UK, but let us be clear and put it on record that that is borrowed cash, and Scottish taxpayers, along with others, will have to pay that back over many years. That said, I welcome the use of those funds, with the Scottish Government providing an additional £275 million to councils for Covid pressures, an additional £50 million for further and higher education, increases from £50 million to £90 million to help councils to introduce mitigations in schools because of Covid, and an additional £25 million to help tackle poverty and inequality.

There has also been the leverage of additional investment for the budget before us. For instance, £120 million is going into mental health, as we have heard, bringing expenditure up to £1.2 billion, and there is an additional £100 million for low-income households.

I welcome the budget deal with the Greens. It had to wait for last week's UK budget and for unallocated consequentials to be agreed. Much of that spend has allowed us to go further and quicker in areas where we agree. I welcome the extension of free bus travel to all those aged 21 and under and the agreement on a timetable for our joint commitment to delivering free universal school meals up to primary 7 on a phased basis by August 2022.

I will also mention some of the other agreed commitments to supporting those who are most in need. That includes £130 for households receiving council tax reduction and two payments of £100 for the families of children qualifying for free school meals. As convener of the Social Security Committee, I point out that our committee has wrestled with how best to get money into the pockets of those who are most in need more generally, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. I support and warmly welcome the payments that have been announced. However, in the new session, we will want to take stock of how best we support low-income households. The Parliament must always do everything that it can.

The Scottish social security system is not there simply to mitigate the impact of a flawed UK welfare system—the benefits freeze, the bedroom tax, the rape clause and other provisions that are wholly unsatisfactory. We must use the powers that we have in this place to help those who are most in need. Other provisions in the budget do that: those supporting the best start grant and best start foods, the carers allowance supplement, the young carers grant and the job start payment, to mention just a few. Of course, there is also the game-changing Scottish child payment. Those are all levers by which we can choose to get money quickly to households that are struggling. The budget supports all those things.

If we had all the levers in this place, we could of course do more, but that is a debate for another day. Irrespective of the powers that sit in this place, we must always use them to help those who are most in need.

I have sought to focus on the use of social security powers and the related budget commitments. That is deliberate. The budget will increasingly need to be scrutinised very carefully, and that includes the budgets underpinning our agreed priorities as a Parliament. In this budget, that increases by 7.1 per cent, reaching £4 billion for the first time. We will have to ensure that the fiscal framework can support that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will have to draw your remarks to a close now, Mr Doris.

Bob Doris: I will finish by saying, as I did when I started, that this budget was shaped by

Parliament, and I hope that the Parliament will support it this evening.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

18:44

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to Bruce Crawford and to all those who are retiring from Parliament. I have served with Bruce twice on the Finance and Constitution Committee—I came back for more—but I of course remember his skill as the SNP business manager. Indeed, I sometimes thought that he was far too skilful for his own good, and for ours. We will miss him, and all the others, too.

Scottish Labour engaged with the cabinet secretary in good faith during the budget process. Although there is much in the budget that we would like to improve, I said at stage 1 that if the Government accepted our proposal to reward social care workers and give them the respect that they deserve, we would vote for its budget. Nothing could be more straightforward or clear, so for the SNP to set its face against rewarding our social care staff is a huge disappointment.

We clap for social care and healthcare staff every week. They rightly deserve our praise, but they also deserve a raise. They are the people who look after some of the most vulnerable people in our community; who, during the pandemic, have faced death daily, putting themselves and their families at risk; and who coped without adequate personal protective equipment, a lack of guidance and the routine discharge of Covid-positive patients from hospital to their care homes. It is therefore simply unacceptable that we should ask them to do those jobs on poverty pay.

That work force is low-paid and predominantly female, and many workers have second jobs to make ends meet. If we cannot recognise them now, when will we do so and when will we recognise the value of what they do for all of us and for society? The time for warm words has passed. Do not tell me what the Government is doing about the gender pay gap when it ignores this game-changing opportunity. Do not tell me how grateful the SNP is for health and social care workers when it ignores them when it counts most, and do not tell me that collective bargaining—which I heartily approve of—will get us there. The situation requires a step change from the cabinet secretary and a pay rise now.

The Scottish Government has received billions of pounds to deal with Covid. I accept that a lot of that is non-recurring money—indeed, the cabinet secretary confirmed to me yesterday at the Finance and Constitution Committee that she is carrying forward £1.1 billion into the new financial

year. However, she also confirmed that over and above that, the Scottish Government has £1.3 billion in recurring funding on top of its existing budget. The cost of providing an immediate wage rise of £12 an hour would have been £470 million, according to the cabinet secretary—I suspect that it is less, but let us accept that figure.

The SNP has said to social care workers that they are worth 20p per hour more—that is all. The cabinet secretary has said that she cannot afford to do anything in the budget because she does not have sufficient recurring funding but that she might be able to find the funding in May. If she can find it then, she can find it now; it is the same financial year—the same budget. I cannot hide my disappointment that the SNP has rejected this opportunity. I am also disappointed that there is only a 2 per cent rise for NHS staff, who we would all agree have been on the front line of the pandemic.

Let me spend my last few minutes on wider issues. We all agree that we need a budget for recovery that will tackle the mass unemployment that will drive hundreds of thousands of people into poverty; that invests in business; that protects jobs and boosts economic recovery; and that remobilises our NHS for the many people who are waiting too long for diagnosis and treatment.

I can welcome much in this budget, but it does not go far enough. I welcome the extension of free school meals and the extra money for mental health. However, England and Wales spent 11 per cent of their health budget on mental health, and Scotland spent only 8 per cent. Despite the announcements, little has changed.

The coronavirus crisis might have exposed the deep inequalities in our society, but it did not create them. The truth is that when the pandemic hit, Scotland's economy was struggling. We need a bolder, more ambitious budget that builds the foundations for a better, more prosperous future. This budget does not take us far enough down that road.

18:49

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): As many others have done, I pay tribute to Bruce Crawford. As Murdo Fraser said, he spoke with grace and wisdom. I was trying to think of something to add, and came up with one anecdote. Bruce and I once had breakfast together at the Holyrood hotel, and he kept asking me about Moray and agriculture. It was only when he asked me about refereeing that I realised he thought that I was Douglas Ross. [*Laughter.*] I had to correct him eventually.

I felt moved by Mark McDonald's heartfelt speech. Mark and I were at university together.

We did not get on particularly well then, and probably do not do so now. However, I was moved by his contribution. I think that people should be treated fairly, and there is always an opportunity for redemption.

On the matter in hand, I recognise Willie Rennie's concession on mental health in the budget, but joining forces with the SNP and Greens is perhaps a big price to pay. As he said, he is Mr Consensual.

I congratulate the cabinet secretary on securing her budget. As I said in the debate a fortnight ago, there are many positives in it to welcome. We are all pleased to see the extra funding for the NHS, as well as the extension of 100 per cent rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses and the newspaper sector. The SNP planned to end that support until the Scottish Conservatives forced it to back down. I am glad that we did, because more than 14,000 Scottish businesses will now find it easier to get through the crisis.

Regarding the freeze on income tax, despite the SNP's natural instinct to raise taxes, thanks to pressure from the Scottish Conservatives, hard-pressed families are finally getting a break.

As ever, the Greens will vote for the budget, but it will not address the key environmental failures of the SNP. There are many of them, but I will be as brief as possible. There is the failure to meet the 2013 recycling rate target; the failure to meet biodiversity targets; the failure to eradicate fuel poverty as promised; the failure to meet the target of 11 per cent of heat from renewables by 2020; and a 400 per cent increase in incineration, making Scotland the ashtray of Europe. I could go on, but I realise that time is short. The point is that, given that climate challenge is the greatest challenge that we face, this budget will not go far enough. In some ways, it goes to show that the Greens are merely the anarchist wing of the SNP.

I just wish that the SNP had listened to the Scottish Conservatives more, and delivered a road map to recovery, both for the short term to open up businesses and for the long term in relation to low-carbon projects, such as the electric arc furnace or a plastics recycling plant. As the cabinet secretary will have been aware when she assisted in announcing the ban on plastic straws, currently only 2 per cent of plastics that are collected in Scotland for recycling is actually recycled in Scotland. For the benefit of the Greens, I point out that that leaves 98 per cent that is not.

I wish that the SNP had delivered the Swedish-style job security council that we proposed, to match up those who need work with new opportunities, or the procurement reform that we suggested to favour local businesses, protect jobs

and retain wealth in our communities. Those are sensible measures that would help to start and sustain the recovery. However, we see no sign of them—rather, we have a budget that does not go far enough, despite our reasonable requests.

Due to the pandemic, councils face a £0.5 billion black hole, but the SNP voted against Scottish Conservative plans to guarantee them a proportion of the Government's budget, rather than the SNP offer. That point was well made by Murdo Fraser, who made it clear that services will be under severe pressure. Annie Wells described councils as “the whipping boys”.

The housing budget has been slashed by £148 million, the innovation and industry budget is down by £66 million and the rail infrastructure budget has been cut by £33 million. I could go on. Do those cuts sound like this is a Government with its eye on recovery?

Contrast that with the budget that the UK chancellor has delivered, which has another £1.2 billion for Scotland, bringing the total to more than £13 billion.

Kate Forbes: Does Maurice Golden think that the chancellor went far enough on non-domestic rates?

Maurice Golden: I am delighted that, in the Scottish Parliament, Kate Forbes listened to the Scottish Conservatives on non-domestic rates and extended relief by 100 per cent. I am confident that if we had more Scottish Conservatives in Westminster standing up for Scotland, we would have a far stronger, better push for Scottish constituencies. Sadly, according to Pete Wishart, the longest-serving MP in Scotland, the biggest contribution of SNP MPs in a generation has been two amendments to a finance bill, asking for more information. That is hardly something for Scotland to be proud of.

We are delighted about the extension of furlough, the British Government scheme that has protected 1 million Scottish jobs, and about the millions of pounds in the UK budget for low-carbon projects in the north-east of Scotland and a North Sea transition deal that will kick off green recovery efforts. It is a British budget that is on Scotland's side, but the SNP will oppose it simply because it comes from the Conservatives. The SNP's focus will be on holding another illegal wildcat referendum this year—how will that support Scotland's recovery?

The SNP needs to get its act together. Protecting jobs, helping families and launching a recovery, not a referendum—those should be its priorities.

18:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): I pay tribute to three speeches that had nothing to do with the budget. The first was by Willie Rennie, who said that the public do not want to see, witness or watch political squabbling in the middle of a global pandemic. I agree, and I am proud that, in a particularly unpleasant political climate, the budget will be supported on a cross-party basis.

The second speech was that of Bruce Crawford, who talked about kindness and respect. He said that words matter, which they do. We often talk about the rise of abuse and vitriol in Scottish political discourse, and that starts with us. I hope that we all rise to the challenge that he lay down for the next parliamentary session.

Finally, politics would be all the better and kinder if we saw more of the humility and humanity that was shared in Mark McDonald's speech and less of the arrogance and self-righteousness that is so often associated with politicians. Self-evidently, nobody in the chamber, including me, is perfect. I commend Mark McDonald for his comments, his representation of the north-east in meetings and correspondence with me, and his service to his constituents over the years. I hope that the ring-fenced £15 million of funding for the north-east economy will serve his constituents well.

Every member in the chamber has welcomed elements of the budget in their speech. The funding and initiatives that they have welcomed and the certainty and stability that our constituents want can be delivered only if the budget is passed.

A number of members have commented on pay and public sector pay policy, and Labour members have put on record their interest in securing a fair deal for social care workers. Like Kenneth Gibson, I refute and dispute the position that the UK Government has taken in its approach to public sector and NHS pay. The approach in England is simply not fair to front-line staff, who have worked so hard during the pandemic. We recognised that hard work and gave our NHS staff a £500 thank-you bonus. We still hope that the UK Government will follow our lead and do likewise for vital health and care staff in England. We have already given a 1 per cent uplift—backdated to December—as a floor in NHS pay negotiations, and we are negotiating with staff representatives, including unions, on going further to deliver a fair pay deal.

Clearly, the wider public sector pay policy, which has been amended today, does not apply directly to NHS staff, as their pay is negotiated separately. It does indicate, though, that we are taking a different approach in Scotland, with a guaranteed pay rise of at least 3.2 per cent for those who earn

less than £25,000 and 2 per cent for those who earn up to £40,000. Not only does our pay policy reflect the huge contribution that public sector workers have made in tackling the pandemic, it does so in a progressive way, prioritising pay rises for lower earners.

The Tories welcomed a number of initiatives. They called for non-domestic rates relief to be extended. We delivered. They called for free school meals to be extended and expanded. We have delivered. They called for additional funding for local government, which I delivered on 16 February. They can call for everything and anything that they want, but the people of Scotland will see them voting tonight against all the initiatives that they called for and all the representations that they made on behalf of Scottish businesses, Scottish families and Scottish taxpayers. They have talked about the broad shoulders of the union while seeming to forget that people in Scotland happen to pay taxes to UK Government coffers as well and that the UK Government has engineered our reliance on itself by denying us, and depriving us of, very basic fiscal powers that would allow us to borrow like every other normal Government around the world in order to deal with the pandemic.

Willie Rennie talked about what the Liberal Democrats have secured in the budget. After five years of minority Government in which, like my predecessor, I have had to negotiate with other parties, people can see the difference that other parties can make in securing their key initiatives if they engage rather than carp from the sidelines.

Patrick Harvie talked about some of the big questions that the Parliament and elected politicians will face in the future, including on the tax base. That is one area for questioning. There are others. The fiscal framework will come under review next year. The cross-party Finance and Constitution Committee has indicated where the fiscal framework should go. I have suggested a broad review of the fiscal framework, which has been found wanting during the pandemic.

The other big question is on how we reshape our economy. The budget today sets the groundwork for reshaping our economy by investing in retraining, in reskilling, in the future growth of our tech sector and in low-carbon initiatives.

John Mason talked about the need to use our funding wisely and about having to live within our means. Of course, the Scottish Government has to balance its budget. I am sure that all of us could write lists of priorities, things that we want to do and additional funding that we want to secure. That is all true, but, as John Mason said, within a balanced budget, increasing funding in one area—for example, local government—would require an

honest and transparent discussion about where that funding was to come from. If the request is to increase funding for local government—which is a perfectly reasonable request to make—it must be accepted that that funding will need to come from elsewhere. We cannot ask for increases in every budget line without agreeing where they are going to come from.

One comment that did not get as much attention today was about the need for capital infrastructure and for additional investment in that infrastructure. There will be significant increases in capital investment not just over the next year but over the next five years, to provide certainty and to inject confidence in our economy. That is, of course, despite a 5 per cent cut to the Scottish Government's capital budget, which was not reversed at the most recent UK budget. Instead, we saw a strange and unpublished approach to levelling up whereby it seems that certain seats in Scotland got more in the way of levelling-up funding—or at least a commitment to more of it—than elsewhere. The challenge that the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Scottish Government face is in the UK Government cutting our capital budgets and then deciding itself how to spend that money, purely in order to put a union jack on it. If that happens, I think that the people of Scotland will have serious questions about its priorities.

I reiterate my appreciation of the constructive nature of the cross-party discussions that we have had on the budget. This is a budget that, ultimately, delivers for the nation. It delivers for the business community, for households and for our public services. It deals with the issues of today while laying the groundwork for recovery. It will help to create and protect jobs, support a sustainable recovery and respond to the pandemic while delivering the certainty that businesses and people need.

With that in mind, I urge all members to support the budget today. I commend it to the chamber.

Committee Announcement

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is an announcement by the Education and Skills Committee on the Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill. I call the convener, Clare Adamson, to make the announcement.

19:06

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I rise on behalf of the Education and Skills Committee for an unusual purpose: I speak not to inform the Parliament about work that we have undertaken but to explain why, with regret, we are not proceeding with deliberations on the Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill. I beg the forbearance of members so late in the evening and trust that they will understand.

The bill was introduced by Johann Lamont last year and would require the Scottish ministers to produce and implement a national transitions strategy to improve outcomes for children and young people with disabilities in the transition to adulthood. Councils would have to produce a transition plan for each child and young person with a disability, who should receive appropriate support before, during and after the transition to adulthood.

The committee received 75 responses to our call for views on the bill, and we took evidence from Johann Lamont and her bill team on 24 February.

Given the nature of the proposals, it is vital that the committee hears from people with lived experience, third sector organisations, local authorities and the Scottish Government itself before we report at stage 1. Unfortunately, there is not enough time left in this parliamentary session for us to take that evidence.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful that the committee has taken the bill as seriously as it has, and I express my regret that we have run out of road.

I am sure that members will agree that it is significant that the bill proposal received support from more than half the members who could have supported it and that the bill has the overwhelming support of families and young disabled people with lived experience of the challenges of transition from childhood to adulthood. I am sure that members agree how important those voices are.

I urge members who might return to the Parliament to consider whether they want to pursue such a bill and whether a new committee might support it. Perhaps whoever forms the new

Government will recognise how fundamental the rights for which the bill would provide are for young disabled people who are accessing adulthood, if we want to call ourselves a fair and equal society.

I wanted to thank the committee for its consideration of the bill and to urge members to recognise just how significant the measures would be for young people in our communities.

Clare Adamson: I thank Ms Lamont and agree with everything that she has said.

I thank Ms Lamont again for having given evidence. I also thank Bill Scott, from Inclusion Scotland, and Robert McGeachy, from Camphill Scotland, for their evidence to the committee, and I apologise to the young people who desperately wanted to give evidence. I trust that their voices will be heard in this Parliament in the not-too-distant future.

It is clear from the response to our call for views that the proposals deserve further scrutiny. I know that we cannot hold a future Government and committee to that in session 6, but we trust that the committee's views will be heard. I thank Johann Lamont again for raising this really important issue and I hope that, in the next session, the Parliament finds a way to improve outcomes for disabled young people in the transition to adulthood.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-24331, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business on—

(a) Wednesday 10 March 2021—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform;
Rural Economy and Tourism

insert

followed by Motion of No Confidence

delete

6.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

8.00 pm Decision Time

delete

followed by Members' Business

(b) Thursday 11 March 2021—

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.40 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

19:10

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question this evening is, that motion S5M-24300, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the climate change plan, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the reports of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, the Local Government and Communities Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee on the Scottish Government document, *Securing a green recovery on a path to net zero: climate change plan 2018-2032*.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-24318, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to. Because the question is on legislation, we will have to suspend for a few moments to allow members in the chamber and online to access the voting app.

19:10

Meeting suspended.

19:13

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We will proceed with the division on motion S5M-24318.

The vote is now closed. Please let me know if you were not able to vote.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
 (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)

Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 70, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. We will move shortly to a members' business debate in the name of Beatrice Wishart. I urge members who are leaving the chamber to wear their masks, to follow the one-way system and to keep 2m distance from others throughout the campus.

Early Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I ask members to be quiet—you have said your farewells.

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-24252, in the name of Beatrice Wishart, on Upstart Scotland.

The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I ask those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the calls from Upstart Scotland for the reform of early primary school education and the introduction of a statutory kindergarten stage up to age seven; recognises the work of campaigners across the country to further the campaign, which was launched in 2016; notes the evidence presented by Upstart Scotland, which suggested that children under seven, in Shetland and across Scotland, could benefit from an approach that supports their wider physical, emotional, social and cognitive development, and that this can lead to the best long-term outcomes and attainment, and understands that Upstart Scotland has the support of experts for this, including the Commissioner for Children and Young People, academics, doctors, charity directors and frontline education professionals.

19:18

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank those Opposition members who gave their support to the motion, thereby allowing it to be debated.

This is the first time that there has been a debate in the Scottish Parliament on raising the school starting age. It would be a big change, and I understand why some people are nervous about it. Scotland's school starting age has been with us since 1870; it is deeply ingrained in our culture, habits and expectations. Victorian politicians chose the age of five so that mothers could provide labour and their children could join them sooner. I do not believe in change for the sake of change, but the fact that something has lasted a long time does not mean that it should carry on without question.

Other countries do not start formal schooling so young. Scotland is an outlier in Europe, with only Cyprus and Malta keeping the United Kingdom company. Starting later would match what we now know about how children develop, how the early years are best grounded in play, developing skills and using the outdoors to develop curiosity and confidence, and how important that is to physical and mental health and wellbeing.

It is not about putting off learning until children reach primary 3, because attending school would still be mandatory; it is about transforming how

children learn in what are currently P1 and P2. It is about recognising the long-term educational benefits of starting more formal schooling a little later, because the evidence shows that starting later does not mean finishing behind. Instead, children are better prepared to shine in areas such as literacy and numeracy.

By learning together through play, children develop the critical skills that they need for more complex tasks, with better long-term outcomes. If we start a child on those tasks before their brains are developed enough, they fall behind others in their class who were ready. They lose confidence, which can have lasting impact. The best way to close the attainment gap is not to open it in the first place. I pay tribute to Upstart Scotland, which has been working diligently to build a platform for that evidence. That has been invaluable to me as I have worked through my initial reservations, and I now firmly believe that it is a sensible way forward.

The most recent programme for international student assessment results were worrying, as they told us that, despite the best efforts of teachers, pupils and parents, something was wrong in Scottish education before the pandemic. However, there is more to be found in those results than just that cause for concern. PISA comparisons consistently show that countries with later school starting ages have performed better. Places such as Finland, which have enviable outcomes in attainment, wellbeing and overall satisfaction with the education system, have always been among the highest-scoring nations. By the age of nine, pupils in Finland have higher reading levels than pupils in the UK, having started at the age of seven, not four or five. Instead, in Scotland, we push four and five-year-olds through national assessments—a testing regime that the Scottish National Party Government continued against the will of Parliament.

Recovery from the pandemic through education will not happen overnight, and changes such as the one that I propose will not magic away other problems. There is plenty else that we must address, too. However, children start school only once, so it is important that we get it right for all their life chances.

19:22

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in this important debate, and I thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing it to the chamber.

Nothing is more important to our children than the early, formative years of their lives. Upstart Scotland is a respected and informed organisation with the best interests of children at its heart and as its core aim. I have every regard for the

organisation, which believes in the importance of play and the fundamental need for children to experience all elements of growing and learning in the natural world. Having time and space to play is essential for physical and mental health and the development of communication, as well as for social and problem-solving skills. Sadly, during the pandemic, children have been missing play with their friends at school or at home, and many children without outside space have been restricted to playing indoors. That is just one of the terrible consequences of the pandemic, and it is affecting our younger people.

Play is natural: wanting to play is a human instinct, as well as an instinct in animals. How much time do we spend playing with our pets, who, from birth, instinctively want to play? The principle applies to animals in the wild as well as to domestic pets. I entirely agree with the ethos of Upstart Scotland, and I am heartened to see that, over the past five years, early years providers in schools have come to see promoting play as an essential part of their role as practitioners.

Shortly after I was elected, I met an inspirational woman—my constituent Pauline Scott, who runs Lullaby Lane nurseries in Bearsden and Milngavie—and her team of early years providers. She taught me much about the importance of attachment and play and their benefits to children and their families. I was impressed by Pauline’s approach as a practitioner, and I remain impressed by her as an employer. She leads a team of caring professionals who do a job that is, frankly, invaluable to society.

When my son was at nursery, 25 years ago, things were very different. The care was excellent and I had no complaints at the time, but, looking back, there was little evidence of outdoor or unstructured play, which is essential for little ones’ development.

Beatrice Wishart’s motion asks us to support

“the reform of early primary school education and the introduction of a statutory kindergarten stage up to age seven”.

I have much sympathy for that idea and agree that it should be part of a wider discussion. The evidence that has been cited by Upstart Scotland and our European neighbours is, as Beatrice Wishart outlined, very persuasive. Upstart Scotland has suggested that emerging from the pandemic would be a good time to restructure our primary education system. Our focus just now is on getting all children back to school, but that is not to say that, when that is successfully and safely done, the conversation should not begin. It would require considerable societal change, with many wider consequences to be considered.

It is clear, in my view, that starting formal schooling later does not harm a child academically. In that regard, I welcome the Government’s changes to the deferral scheme, which gives parents the choice to delay school until they believe that their child is ready. I expect that the minister will mention that in her closing speech.

I commend Upstart Scotland’s work and its research into a vital issue, and I again thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing the matter to the chamber.

19:26

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I am very pleased to keep Beatrice Wishart company in the chamber, for the benefit of those at home. What a Parliament it would be if it was just me and the Liberal Democrats, eh? No comment is required, Presiding Officer, but I thank you.

As is customary, I thank the member for bringing a really important subject to members’ business in what little parliamentary time we have left. That she chose this topic over any other is both wise and welcome. It is also good to see Ms Wishart in person in the Parliament, after a difficult year.

I, too, pay tribute to Upstart Scotland, and to Sue Palmer specifically, for all its excellent work and its persistent efforts in highlighting the importance of the early years in—as has been mentioned—levelling the playing field in education. I do not have much time to go into the detail of its proposals, but rest assured that I am halfway through reading the book “Play is the Way”, which I encourage other members to read. It can be dipped in and out of very easily, and some excellent arguments and concepts are raised within it.

The motion makes a few specific calls that I feel unable to support. In normal times, perhaps I would have supported them, but we are in the middle of that awkward manifesto period. I am sure that the member will understand and will forgive me for not putting my name to specific policies. However, I remain sympathetic to much of the motion’s content. I think that there is cross-party consensus that we all want to give Scotland’s children the best start in life, although disagreements may remain over how we deliver that.

As UNICEF has rightly put it:

“The first five years of a child’s life are fundamentally important. They are the foundation that shapes children’s future health, happiness, growth, development and learning achievement at school, in the family and community, and in life in general.”

Research also tells us how important those early years are

“for the brain’s organizational development and functioning throughout life. They have a direct impact on how children develop learning skills as well as social and emotional abilities.”

Therefore, when an organisation such as Upstart Scotland comes along and puts forward good ideas, I hope that the Government will consider those good ideas, wherever they come from.

There is, no doubt, a case to be made for much of the content of Upstart Scotland’s aims, and, to that degree, I welcome some of its goals. In a recent Conservative policy paper, we made calls for “Closing the Word Gap” among young children before they enter school. I very much welcome other aspects of its aims and ambitions—for example, its focus on the importance to learning of outdoor activities. I do not think that we can overstate the importance of outdoor learning. That particular industry has experienced many difficulties during the past year and has been campaigned for by colleagues such as Liz Smith, among many other members, who has highlighted the plight of outdoor learning centres right now.

Upstart Scotland also focuses on the concept of kindergartens—we could spend a whole day debating that issue—the importance of the three Rs, of cognitive learning and of play, and the vital role that the early years workforce plays. It is also right to highlight the value of children having time and space for play, because that is vital for their health and all-round development.

We know that children are spending, on average, half as much time in active, creative or outdoor play as their parents did, but that is not to say that digital does not work—it does, and it has its role. Gaming and digital activities are often blamed for causing someone’s inability to learn, but their role in learning is underestimated. We do not talk enough about the role of technology. The events of the past year remind us of the importance of digital learning, although nothing can replace face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers.

In the few short moments that I have left, what about the subject of starting school later? Such a policy might have benefits, and we should always keep our minds open to such ideas, but there are also thoughts to the contrary. A quote from Professor Thomas Cornelissen—I apologise to him if I have mispronounced his name—of the University of Essex best summarises the problem. He says that

“surprisingly little is known about what the optimal school starting age is, despite its obvious policy relevance.”

That sums up the debate: we do not know enough, and we need more research.

I am not here to judge or decide. Many countries take different approaches, and what works in one country might not always work in another. Nonetheless, we should never be afraid to challenge the status quo, which Upstart Scotland does admirably.

19:30

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I add my thanks to Beatrice Wishart for bringing to the chamber a members’ business debate on the Upstart Scotland campaign. The debate is timely, as we start to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Scotland’s young people and, perhaps, have the chance to look ahead to doing things differently and better, as we recover from the pandemic. If there has ever been a time to look again fundamentally at how we can give children and young people the best start in life, it is probably now.

The Parliament has made significant progress in the session by passing legislation—some of which has been groundbreaking—to improve young people’s lives, which members from across the chamber have fought for. There was the long-delayed victory for the Give Them Time campaign, which stood with parents who wished to defer their child’s entry to primary school. The bill to incorporate into Scots law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is also to be passed imminently.

The Parliament can be bold and can drive forward change when it wants to. With the introduction of 1,140 hours of early years education for three and four-year-olds, now is probably the time to properly consider Upstart’s campaign for a proper kindergarten stage to be introduced, and for formal schooling to begin at the age of seven.

As Beatrice Wishart pointed out, Scotland is in the minority internationally in respect of its formal schooling age; in most countries, children start formal education only at the age of six or seven. As members have said, an increasing body of academic research shows that a kindergarten stage might have benefits and could help to change cultural attitudes to early education and raise awareness of the importance of play—in particular, outdoor play—in learning.

As the motion says, the potential benefits of delaying the start to formal schooling include support for

“wider physical, emotional, social and cognitive development”.

A later start will require serious consideration if the evidence shows that it could lead to better long-term outcomes and help to close the poverty-

related attainment gap, which Beatrice Wishart spoke about.

As other members have said, there is growing support for Upstart's campaign across Scotland, including support from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, many academics, doctors and many front-line education professionals. However, it is important that we take parents with us in any such reform.

It is worth noting that the debate has been reported—indeed, misreported—as being about moving the school starting age from five to seven. That is not exactly what the motion calls for; addressing the proposal by making a disruptive change in the law would not, as the motion suggests, be the best approach. Much better would be a shift to a more blended transition from the early years to more formal education, which would build on changes that are happening in the pedagogy of early primary school.

This is a debate that we should and must have. Upstart Scotland should play a big part in the development of an education recovery plan in the coming months, but so, too, must parents, teachers and wider society.

19:35

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): The physical and emotional wellbeing of our children and young people is always of paramount importance. I wholly support how the Upstart campaign has positioned child wellbeing centrally within its ethos and activity.

I also strongly agree about the benefits of play-based pedagogy, child-centred learning and outdoor educational experiences. It has, as part of my role as Minister for Children and Young People, been a privilege to visit many school and pre-school settings. I have seen at first hand the impact of play-based approaches and of learning outdoors. I am a passionate believer that that work should continue.

However, my experiences of visiting schools and early learning settings have also demonstrated to me that the extremely positive educational outcomes are being delivered without the need for the introduction of a formal kindergarten stage. The inherent flexibility of curriculum for excellence, combined with the hard work and creativity of our education practitioners, already allows play-based approaches to be delivered up to the age of seven—and beyond.

We have a tremendous opportunity to build on that work and to ensure that child-centred and play-based pedagogies become the norm for all children, from birth to seven, across Scotland. It is important that that can be achieved without the

need to formally change the school starting age—a move that, as others have acknowledged, would cause significant disruption, particularly as we continue to battle a pandemic.

I have listened to persuasive contributions from a number of colleagues this evening, so I will take time to respond to some of them.

Beatrice Wishart mentioned that the current school starting age is detrimental to academic attainment. Without understanding the consequences of other factors, we cannot conclude either that raising the school starting age would be risk free or that lower starting ages in Scotland drive current performance. The data from the PISA—programme for international student assessment—2015 assessment suggests that there is little connection between school starting age and performance at the end of compulsory education. There was virtually no difference in performance in maths, and in reading there was a slightly negative relationship. Overall, PISA's data suggests that the effect of pupils' starting age on educational performance is very weak compared with other interventions.

The primary assessments were also mentioned. I must make it absolutely clear that if it is not appropriate for a child to sit those assessments, they should not take part in a standardised assessment. That was made clear when we debated the issue previously, and should be clearer than ever this year.

Jamie Greene talked about outdoor learning, for which we share a passion across Parliament. Although early learning and childcare settings can find it easier to take children outdoors, perhaps because of the ratio of adults to children, there is evidence of really excellent outdoor learning in schools. The unique challenges of the current pandemic mean that outdoor learning will be even more important as we return to school. We continue to support that work. This year, we have funded development of free-to-access professional development courses that focus on outdoor learning.

Recent discussions with academics about the transition to primary 1, the feelings of children in the pandemic as they return to school and the indicative learning about play and learning have been really good. Play and learning are indivisible—they are one and the same thing for children. Children have been playing a lot in the last year: they have been exercising agency and choice, being creative, being playful and socialising. As a Government, we have put children right at the centre of our decision-making as we have navigated the pandemic. The evidence is that there have been some excellent gains from that. There have been efforts to take

back the streets, and to focus on intergenerational learning and enhanced family time.

I was very pleased to hear Iain Gray acknowledge some of the groundbreaking work that we have achieved during this session of Parliament. I am delighted with the work on deferral, and that we have finally passed legislation on that promise. The incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child will happen next week, and the commitment to 1,140 hours of funded childcare will be delivered this year.

In conclusion, I thank Beatrice Wishart for bringing the debate to Parliament. I am thankful for the opportunity to take part in it and for the thoughtful contributions of colleagues from across the Parliament. I truly believe that, in Scotland, we have a chance to create the child-centred play-based approach that Upstart supports, without the need for major organisational change.

It is significant that in response to the publication of the Scottish Government's "Realising the Ambition: Being Me" document for early years education, Upstart's March 2020 newsletter stated:

"If this document can be translated into practice in all Scottish early years settings (including P1), Scotland's ELC provision will be up there with the Nordic countries ... and Upstart will be redundant."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 19:40.

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

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