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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 24 March 2021

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 12:30]

First Minister's Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. We will start today's business with First Minister's question time, but before we turn to questions I invite the First Minister to update the Parliament on the latest situation with the Covid pandemic.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): For the final time in this parliamentary session, I will give an update on the day's statistics. Yesterday, 692 new Covid cases were reported, which is 3.1 per cent of all the tests that were carried out yesterday. The total number of confirmed cases now stands at 215,075. There are 321 people in hospital, which is 20 fewer than yesterday, and 31 people are currently receiving intensive care, which is three more than yesterday.

I regret to say that, in the past 24 hours, a further three deaths have been registered, which takes the total number of deaths under the daily measurement to 7,562. National Records of Scotland has just published its weekly update, which includes cases in which Covid is a suspected or contributory cause of death. Today's update shows that, by Sunday, the total number of registered deaths linked to Covid under the wider definition was 9,897. Sixty-five of those deaths were registered last week, which was 39 fewer than the week before. That represents a fall of more than 50 per cent in the past two weeks, which is further welcome evidence that the vaccination programme is now reducing deaths in the community as well as in care homes.

That said, the total number of deaths also reminds us of the dreadful toll that Covid has taken. Again, I want to send my condolences to everyone who has been bereaved.

I will also quickly provide an update on the vaccination programme. As of this morning, more than 2,249,612 people had received a first dose of the vaccine, which is an increase of 34,940 since yesterday. That means that we are on track, by the end of today, to have given a first dose to more than half of the adult population, which is a significant milestone. In addition, yesterday, 13,581 people received a second dose, which brings the total of second doses given to 249,252.

From today, Public Health Scotland will publish a daily breakdown of first and second doses within

priority group 6, which comprises adults with a particular underlying health condition and unpaid carers. It will also provide more detailed figures on vaccinations for health workers and social care workers, broken down into those two distinct categories. For the first time, it has also just published an analysis of vaccinations by ethnicity and deprivation level.

Returning to today's figures, a first dose of the vaccine has now been given to virtually everyone over 65, 93 per cent of people aged 60 to 64, 63 per cent of people aged 55 to 59, and 41 per cent of people aged 50 to 54. Today, we will publish an update to the vaccine deployment plan, which confirms that we are on course to offer first doses to all of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation's priority groups by mid-April. It also confirms that, supplies permitting, we will have offered a first dose to all adults by the end of July.

All that is encouraging and very hopeful. As we take part in the final First Minister's question time of this parliamentary term, a return to greater normality for the country is now much more in sight. Of course, that all remains dependent on our continuing to suppress the virus. Therefore, for now, it is vital that everyone continues to follow the stay-at-home rule, except for essential purposes, and to follow all the FACTS guidance. That is how we will continue to protect ourselves and one another. It is also how we will get back—I hope soon—to a much more normal way of life. I thank everyone, again, for all their co-operation and sacrifice.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button.

Education (Attainment)

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): I add my condolences to those of the First Minister, for all those who have died, and I thank all those who are helping in the health and vaccine effort as we tackle Covid across the country.

Three major publications have been released this week. On the first two of those, questions remain about the lack of accountability and the serious flaws in the Government's handling of sexual harassment complaints. However, in my last First Minister's question time, I want to make sure that the third document—the Audit Scotland report on the attainment gap, "Improving outcomes for young people through school education"—does not go unexamined.

Before we get into the detail of that, the Deputy First Minister said at today's Education and Skills Committee meeting that he was nervous about the use of the phrase "catch up" when talking about

pupils affected by the pandemic, as that assumes that all children have fallen behind. Does the First Minister agree with that view, or does she share my concern that everything possible must be done to help pupils catch up after the better part of a year out of the classroom?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will come directly to that question but, first, I say that Ruth Davidson could have chosen to ask me about education in any previous week, but she has chosen to indulge in smears instead of focusing on the issues that people want to focus on. I am therefore pleased that she is back on to the issue of education and attainment in what is, of course, her last FMQs before she goes to the unelected House of Lords.

On attainment, the Audit Scotland report published this week has lots for us to think about as we head to the election and as a new Government takes office after that. It narrates much progress, both in raising attainment and in closing the attainment gap. It recognises the obvious impact that Covid has had on that progress but also, I think, can give us confidence that the key building blocks are in place—through, for example, the attainment challenge, increased funding and increased numbers of teachers.

On Ruth Davidson's specific question, I agree with the Deputy First Minister. I think that it is really important that we support young people to catch up on their education. The Scottish Government has announced significant additional investment, supporting increased numbers of teachers and a host of other initiatives, to help with that. However, I make no apology for saying that, when it comes to the wider wellbeing of young people, it is really important that we recognise the impact of Covid not just on their education, which has been really significant, but on their mental health, in being away from their friends, grandparents and families, and that we take that holistic approach. Therefore, for example, we will be introducing a summer programme, backed by £20 million of additional investment, that will allow us to focus on the broader wellbeing of children, so that we make sure that they recover and catch up in that wider sense. Education is part of that, but it is not the only part.

Ruth Davidson: A bit of contrition from the First Minister might be in order, after the failures of her Government have been exposed, rather than a lack of honour or indeed any contrition. I do not know how the Deputy First Minister can say that he is concerned about the words "catch up", because there is simply no way that pupils who would otherwise have spent the entire year in class can have done anything other than fall behind, through no fault of their own or of their

teachers, over the past 12 months. The only question is, "How far?"

While we respect the summer work, we want to know what else the Government will do to turn the situation around. It is not as if there was not already a serious problem in Scotland with a deeply entrenched attainment gap.

This week's Audit Scotland report says that the attainment gap "remains wide" and that improvements are not happening quickly enough. It specifically says that those

"in the most challenging circumstances have been most affected"

by the impact of school closures, and that those same disadvantaged children have less access to remote learning and to online resources.

The Government has had years in charge of education, so why is progress on closing the attainment gap so slow?

The First Minister: First, Ruth Davidson has spent weeks misrepresenting me. Many legitimate questions should have been, and have been, asked of me, and I have shown plenty of contrition where that has been merited. However, I have heard on the grapevine that there is a lot of division within the Conservative Party about its tactics over the past few days, so, moving on from misrepresenting me, Ruth Davidson is now misrepresenting the Deputy First Minister.

I am really not sure what many people could find to disagree with in the view that, yes, we should help young people to catch up in their education, but, as we do that, we should help them to recover from the overall wider impact that Covid has had on them. That is the point that the Deputy First Minister was making. I find it really hard to see how and why Ruth Davidson would disagree with that.

The Audit Scotland report has much to say about progress. For example, it says:

"At the national level, exam performance and other attainment measures have improved ... There has been an increase in the types of opportunities, awards and qualifications available to children and young people and an increase in the number awarded."

The report also focuses on the impact of Covid, and that is why we are so focused on dealing with that in the widest sense. We have committed almost £400 million of new funding over this year and next year as part of education recovery. That involves funding a range of actions, including the recruitment of 1,400 additional teachers, 200 additional support staff, new digital devices and youth support work—all the things that we need to do to support young people. That funding is also supporting the introduction of a £20 million pupil equity funding premium, which will be part of

record investment through the attainment Scotland fund.

I hope to be standing here again in the next parliamentary session—that is up to the Scottish people. While Ruth Davidson is off taking £300 a day to sit in the unelected House of Lords, those of us who are in this chamber will be getting on with the job of improving education for all.

The Presiding Officer: I appreciate that this is a political exchange, and I always allow some latitude, but you have twice mentioned the House of Lords, First Minister. The point has been made. [*Interruption.*] It is a political exchange—I get it, and I understand it—but the point has been made, and I would rather that it was not so personal.

Ruth Davidson: Gallant but not required, Presiding Officer.

The First Minister turns a good line on this:

“My aim—to put it very bluntly—is to close that attainment gap. Not by a bit, but to close that attainment gap completely.”

That was said more than five years ago; as a promise, it has been proven worthless. The Government was running out of solutions well before the pandemic struck. The Audit Scotland report criticises the slow rate of improvement and it highlights the attainment Scotland fund, but it also makes the point that the attainment fund needs to change. Reading and writing are the basic core skills of every pupil, but the attainment gap for literacy in attainment challenge areas increased from 2017 to 2018, and it increased again from 2018 to 2019.

Seven months ago, after the previous return of pupils to the classroom, the Scottish Conservatives were calling for measures to help them get back up to speed: 3,000 extra teachers, a national tutoring service and an independent inspectorate to ensure that schools were getting back on track. That has all been ignored, while our children are continuing to pay the price for Government complacency. Five years ago, Nicola Sturgeon said that she was going to shut the attainment gap “completely”. Can she now tell the country when that will happen?

The First Minister: If the Scottish people re-elect me to be First Minister, I will continue the work that we have been doing over those five years to improve attainment and close the attainment gap. Looking at the first five years of the Scottish attainment challenge programme, there is evidence that almost all the short-term and medium-term outcomes have been achieved. There has been demonstrable progress on several of the long-term measures to close the attainment gap. For primary pupils, the gap in literacy and numeracy has narrowed. For secondary 3 pupils, the numeracy gap has narrowed. The gap in the

proportion of young people in education, employment and training has narrowed year on year. The gap between the most deprived and least deprived pupils achieving one pass or more at level 5 has gone from 33.3 percentage points to 20.8 percentage points. I could go on.

Progress has been made, albeit that it has been hampered by a global pandemic. That is why we are investing in, and not just talking about, recruiting more teachers—we have recruited more teachers. As is shown in the Audit Scotland report on education, spend on education in Scotland has gone up by 5 per cent in real terms. We have the highest spending per head of any of the nations in the United Kingdom, and we have the highest number of teachers since 2008. Indeed, we have the highest number of primary teachers since 1980.

We will get on with the hard work of improving attainment and closing the attainment gap. At the risk of upsetting you, Presiding Officer, which I would never want to do, I will add that I am sure that Ruth Davidson will be watching us from afar.

Ruth Davidson: Nicola Sturgeon described closing the attainment gap as her “sacred responsibility”, but the Audit Scotland report is clear that the attainment gap that was meant to be closed is just as wide as ever. Who is to blame on that vital issue? Why, it cannot be the party that has been in full control of our education system for the past 14 years—no. On Monday, we heard the Government’s only solution when confronted by more than a decade of failing Scotland. It was another independence referendum bill, because that is all it has.

For my last question to Nicola Sturgeon in the chamber, I ask her this: how many times will she demand another independence referendum before she finally gets round to closing the education attainment gap?

The First Minister: There will be another independence referendum if the people of Scotland vote for another independence referendum. That is called democracy, which I know is a principle that Ruth Davidson perhaps does not, these days, recognise as much as she might once have done.

It is not me who is running away from responsibility and accountability—I am about to put myself before the Scottish people. I will put before the Scottish people my record in office; tell them, in areas where we have not made as much progress as we wanted to make, why that is the case; and put forward a positive case for the future. I will put forward the plans that will see us continue to improve attainment and close the attainment gap; continue to improve the health service and support economic recovery; and—

yes—continue to support plans to allow this country to choose its own future, so that we can build that recovery firmly on the basis of the values of a majority of people in Scotland, not the values of Ruth Davidson and her Westminster bosses.

As that was her final question, I say that I genuinely wish Ruth Davidson well. Five years ago, she was trying to persuade people that she was the next First Minister. That did not quite work out—but I hope that she has a happy time in the House of Lords, Presiding Officer.

Hospital Infections

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I join the First Minister and Ruth Davidson in sending our condolences to all those who have lost a loved one and in saying thank you to all our heroes on the front line.

There has been a lot of focus on two reports this week, but, no matter how devastating they were or could have been, nothing is more devastating than the report that I have here. On Monday, the “Queen Elizabeth University Hospital and Royal Hospital for Children: Case Note Review Overview Report” was published. The review looked into infections of children and young people who were receiving treatment in the cancer ward at the Royal hospital for children, and its findings were heartbreaking. It found that almost 40 infections

“were ‘Most likely’ linked to the hospital environment”

and that, tragically, they played a part in the deaths of two children.

We would never have got to this point if it was not for the bravery of national health service whistleblowers, but there are still a lot of unanswered questions. Can the First Minister confirm that every family of a child who had an infection as a result of the hospital environment has been informed—in particular, the families of the two children who tragically died?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I agree with the member’s characterisation of the report. I also agree that there are questions that still require to be answered, and there are undoubtedly questions that families want to be answered, which is why we have instructed a full public inquiry into the matter. The inquiry was formally launched on 3 August last year, and we look forward to that inquiry doing its work in the months to come.

I am pleased that “The Queen Elizabeth University Hospital/NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Oversight Board: Final Report” has been published. That report sets out a number of failings of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, as well as a series of recommendations that the Government expects the board to take forward

and implement. I also welcome the publication of the case note review overview report. It was essential that those who were most deeply affected by the events at the Queen Elizabeth hospital had their voices heard and, as far as possible at this stage, their questions answered.

With regard to families, the expert panel is—as, I am sure, Anas Sarwar is aware—now preparing individual reports for families who have been affected. It is expected that those reports will be issued to the families in the week beginning 12 April, in order that they will have not only the information from the overview report but specific information relating to the circumstances in which their own children were placed.

Anas Sarwar: I understand what the First Minister says, and I welcome the public inquiry, but it has taken far too long for families to be informed of the possible outcomes for their children. We have a duty of candour law in Scotland, which means that there is a duty to inform all families. I suggest that there have been breaches of that duty of candour law.

One of those families is the Darroch family. Kimberley Darroch’s 10-year-old daughter, Milly Main, had leukaemia and was in recovery but, sadly, caught a deadly water-borne infection and died. For years, Kimberley was never told the true cause of her child’s death. Nothing that I have done in my time in the Parliament has been more important or difficult than raising the case of Milly Main. I promised that I would not rest until I got answers and justice for Milly and all the families affected. Four years on from Milly’s death, we are finally starting to get answers. Milly’s family have demanded a fatal accident inquiry. They understand the delays due to Covid, but it is unfair to prolong their grief.

I know that the First Minister cannot direct the Lord Advocate, but, given the findings in this report, does she agree that there must now be that fatal accident inquiry?

The First Minister: I will genuinely try to be as helpful as I can be within the constraints of my responsibilities. First, I agree with the view that, I think, comes through in the overview report, that among the lessons to be learned by the health board are lessons around transparency and openness. That point has been firmly and clearly made, and it is one that I would expect the health board to reflect on seriously.

I note that Anas Sarwar has worked closely with Milly’s family and Milly’s mum, in particular. To that family and the families of all the children affected, I say that there is a determination on my part and on the part of the Government to get the answers that are required but also to ensure that lessons

are learned, and we will not rest until that is done as well.

Milly's care was reviewed as part of the case note review, and, as I said in my initial answer, the expert panel is now preparing individual reports, which will include one on Milly. I know that Milly's family are—as is their right—engaged in legal proceedings, and, obviously, I do not want to say anything that would prejudice any of that.

The decision about whether there should be a fatal accident inquiry is not for me to make, and—this is important, given the separation of powers—I should not say anything that could be seen to be putting undue influence on the law officers, whose decision that is. That said, I completely understand and sympathise with the view of Milly's family that there should be a fatal accident inquiry, and I am sure that the strength of that feeling is understood by the law officers, although they have considerations that they have to weigh in reaching that decision, as they have in all cases. However, I absolutely understand why Milly's family want that inquiry to happen.

Anas Sarwar: We cannot put all of this on the health board. There are lessons for the health board, but there are also lessons for the Government. Nicola Sturgeon was the health secretary when the Queen Elizabeth university hospital was commissioned and built, and she was the First Minister when the hospital was opened. We now know that, one week before the hospital was opened, an independent report found that the water supply was not safe and posed a high risk of infection. That report was ignored and the hospital was opened anyway. That is another example of secrecy and failure that has had devastating consequences, and no one would have known about it without the bravery of national health service whistleblowers, which led to the issue being exposed in Parliament.

This case is just one of the huge challenges that our country was facing even before Covid—there are countless others—and we know that, even when lockdown ends and the virus is defeated, we will need to focus all our energy and effort on delivering the strong and fairer recovery that Scotland needs. We cannot come back after 6 May and carry on with the old arguments, with politicians fighting with each other, focused on their own interests and not the national interest. Why can the First Minister not see that?

The First Minister: I will come on to that final point in a moment, because it is important and I have a particular perspective on it after this past year. First, though, on the issue of the Queen Elizabeth hospital, I agree that there are issues for the Government, as there are for the health board. I hope that, whatever people think about my decisions, my politics or my views on things, they

agree that this is a Government that is prepared to face up to issues that arise and learn lessons. The public inquiry that has been instructed here is a key part of doing that. It will look at all the issues, parties and players that are involved and reach its conclusions, as is right and proper.

I mean no disrespect to other ministers—every ministerial job is really important and carries heavy responsibilities—but, as health secretary, I recognised each and every day the particular import of the decisions that I made, so those things weighed heavily and I carried that responsibility very heavily. Therefore, when things go wrong, I absolutely realise the importance of recognising that and learning lessons.

On the issue of focusing on the things that matter, plenty of things divide us in this chamber, and that is the hallmark of a healthy democracy. We should be able to have those debates and differences of opinion without resorting to personal attacks. That is what I hope will change in the next session of Parliament. Some people will agree with the decisions that I have taken and some people will not, but, every day over the past year, I have focused 100 per cent on trying to lead a country through a crisis, and that will continue to be my focus for as long as I am First Minister.

The crisis changes our perspective. It has changed my perspective and, as we come back from the election, although we have differences of opinion and we should debate those things rigorously, the future of the country really matters, and it matters that we get it right. We should not shy away from debating the powers of this Parliament and the values that guide our recovery, but we should do so respectfully, civilly and with the recognition that, although we might disagree, we all have the best interests of this country at heart. I hope that those of us who come back after the election will bring that spirit back with us into the new session of Parliament.

Education (Attainment)

3. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): What the First Minister has just described should be the spirit of the Scottish Parliament and we all have a responsibility to try and live up to that. In the past year, however, I am afraid that Scottish politics has been poisonous and it needs to change.

The Audit Scotland report on the attainment gap said that the Scottish Government's performance on education is "limited and falls short". The First Minister said that she would close the poverty-related attainment gap completely, but that was six years ago.

"It will not be done overnight,"

she predicted, but we have had 2,000 overnights since then. The First Minister did not answer the

question earlier, so I ask her again. How much longer will young people have to wait before the First Minister delivers on what she promised?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I intend to continue doing what the Government and I have done for the past five years, which is making the progress, taking the decisions and making the investments to progress that work. Building on the progress in this parliamentary session, I expect us to make significant progress over the next session, if that is what the people of Scotland choose.

It is right to prioritise raising attainment and closing the attainment gap. The Audit Scotland report recognises

“that the complexity of contributory factors means that it will take time”

to achieve that. It also recognises that Covid has undoubtedly hampered progress:

“Pupils living in the most challenging circumstances have been most affected by school closures ... inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid”.

However, the report also narrates progress when it says that

“exam performance and other attainment measures have improved”

and that there has been an increase in the opportunities, awards, qualifications and the number of those being awarded, as well as an increase in school investment over the past few years.

The building blocks are in place, and progress has been made. If the people of Scotland put their trust in me and us again, my focus and determination are to make sure that we continue that progress in the next parliamentary session.

Willie Rennie: I do not think that the First Minister should trumpet a 36-point poverty-related attainment gap. The First Minister has not been in power for five years; the SNP has been 14 years in power, and she is responsible for the state of education today. At this rate of progress, it will take 35 years to have equity in education. Meanwhile, yet more generations and thousands of young people will be left behind. There is a yawning attainment gap; 5,000 teachers are on casual contracts; maths and science results are at a record low in international league tables; an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report is hidden from the voters on purpose; and even the Government’s website admits that performance is worsening.

The Liberals Democrats have put forward a plan to get Scottish education back up to being the best. We even supported measures in the budget on education—that is how determined we are to turn the situation around. The First Minister said, “Judge me on education.” Now is the time for

people to judge. Does the First Minister accept that she has had enough time and that she has not done enough for young people in Scotland?

The First Minister: No, I do not accept that, but it is not really up to me; we are about to go into an election campaign and it will be up to the Scottish people. In the election campaign, I will put forward my record and that of my Government. I will be straight with the Scottish people about the challenges that we face, where we have not made enough progress and what we intend to do about that. On 6 May, people in Scotland will make their decision. They will either re-elect this Government or they will not. That is democracy; that is accountability and scrutiny, which I welcome and relish.

I say to Willie Rennie that I did not trumpet anything. I say very gently to him that, through his continued mischaracterisation of the position with the OECD report, he is almost engaging in Trump-like behaviour. The OECD has said that we cannot publish the report before it is finalised, because it is the author of the report. We got its agreement to place a summary report in the Scottish Parliament information centre, but the OECD set the conditions for sharing the report with the Parliament. Anybody in the Parliament who has taken the opportunity to read the report will know that Opposition claims about it do not stack up with the reality.

I am absolutely willing, prepared and looking forward to putting the Government’s record before the Scottish people. I know that we have more work to do in all sorts of areas, but I will read out what the International Council of Education Advisers says about Scottish education, which is an important antidote to those who want not only to highlight where there is more work to be done—which is absolutely right and proper—but to talk Scottish education down in order to do down the Government. It is important to put what it says on the record. It says:

“Scottish education exhibits many strengths. It values equity as well as excellence. It has an excellent standing internationally. It is investing effort and resources to narrow attainment gaps, working with and strengthening the teaching profession”.

That is the foundation that we have. If the Government is re-elected, we will work every day in the next parliamentary session to build on that foundation.

Child Poverty

4. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I, too, send my most sincere sympathies to all those who have lost a loved one during the pandemic, and my most grateful thanks to all those who are working on the front line.

The link between poverty and educational attainment cannot be overstated. One of the most important moments of this parliamentary session was in 2017, when we unanimously agreed targets to tackle child poverty. Of course, targets need action, and I am proud that the Scottish Greens have played our part. For example, this month's budget deal will extend free school meals to all primary school children, which will benefit 200,000 children, and £100 million in pandemic relief payments will be paid to the poorest households across Scotland between now and Christmas.

The pandemic is hitting the poorest families the hardest, and the Tory Government's callous decision to scrap the £20 uplift to universal credit from September will, according to experts, push another 20,000 children in Scotland into poverty.

We need to do more. The Scottish child payment will make a difference, but it is not enough. Will the First Minister join the Greens and commit to increasing the Scottish child payment at the earliest opportunity?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will publish a manifesto in a few weeks' time, when I will set out the plans that my party will take into the next parliamentary session if we are re-elected. We are, of course, the party that introduced the Scottish child payment, which is "game-changing", in the words of campaigners against child poverty.

Alison Johnstone is right that although setting targets to reduce child poverty is important—I think that Scotland is still the only part of the United Kingdom that has such targets, but I will be corrected if I am wrong about that—actions to back up those targets are what matter most. We are certainly the only part of the UK that has a child payment that puts money into the pockets of the poorest families in order that they can give their children a better start in life, which then helps with their education.

We have also made a commitment to extend the provision of free school meals to all primary school children all year round. Of course, at an earlier stage in the pandemic, we made payments to the poorest families, and we have agreed, as part of the budget negotiations, to continue those payments.

The Government's record is strong. There is more to be done on all such areas, particularly in the light of Covid. One thing that makes the decision and the debate about Scotland's future so important in the next parliamentary session is that we should not have to face up to such challenges with one hand tied behind our back. As we put more money into the pockets of the poorest families, the Tory Government at Westminster takes that money out of their pockets. That is why we need to complete this Parliament's powers

through independence, so that we can genuinely build the kind of country that we want, based on the values that we want it to be based on.

Alison Johnstone: The First Minister will be aware that the End Child Poverty coalition is calling for a minimum boost of £10 to the Scottish child payment.

We will miss another target that the Parliament passed—our climate target—unless we choose a different future. This week, Scotland's Climate Assembly, which was established under a Scottish Green Party amendment to what became the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019, showed a clear appetite for more ambition from the Government. The assembly said:

"If we fail to act now, we will fail our current and future generations, in Scotland and across the world ... Politicians ... must have the courage to act now".

For two years in a row, climate targets have been missed. Transport emission levels keep on rising. Last week, the First Minister would not even speak out against the continued exploration for new fossil fuel reserves in the North Sea, even though we already have far more fuel than we could burn within the terms of the Paris Agreement. Will the First Minister find the courage to act now and make a clear statement that our future depends on leaving such reserves in the ground and issuing no further licences?

The First Minister: First, we will not fail to act now and are not failing to act now. Our climate change plan sets out the range of policies across all our responsibilities that are necessary to take now, not just to get to net zero by 2045 but to meet our very ambitious interim targets along the way. We are already a world leader in that; other countries recognise us in that position. We have made substantial progress but, as with all such things, there is much work still to do.

On the comments about oil and gas, I spoke up last week for a just transition—a transition to net zero that does not leave people behind and does not leave people on the redundancy scrapheap but instead supports people who work in sectors that we want to leave behind to move into the sectors of the future. Our continued support for the oil and gas sector in north-east Scotland is conditional on a sustainable, secure and inclusive energy transition.

There is no dubiety or disagreement about the destination, but how the journey is made matters to people's jobs, their quality of life and their living standards. That is important. The Scottish Government will not ignore such issues.

Unpaid Carers (Vaccinations)

5. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how many unpaid carers have been vaccinated to date. (S5F-04925)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As of this morning, 85,692 unpaid carers have received a first vaccination dose. As I said earlier, Public Health Scotland will publish new data on that and other aspects of vaccination later this afternoon. I reiterate that the Scottish Government recognises the importance of protecting all who provide care for others. That is why we launched the NHS Inform portal last week, which allows unpaid carers to register to receive the vaccine.

Stuart McMillan: I thank all unpaid carers, who have helped many people throughout the pandemic—I thank particularly those in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency but also those across Scotland. Does the First Minister agree that all unpaid carers should register via the self-registration website to ensure that they are vaccinated in priority group 6?

The First Minister: Yes—I will come back to that in a moment. I echo Stuart McMillan and thank all who have cared for relatives, friends and loved ones through what has been a really difficult 12 months and who continue to care for them. We owe unpaid carers an enormous debt of gratitude at all times, but that is particularly true of their contribution in the past year.

To answer the question, I strongly encourage those who are eligible to register on the NHS Inform portal so that they can have an appointment to receive the vaccine arranged. To support that and ensure awareness, we are running a national marketing campaign via digital channels, the press, radio and other public relations activity, as I said yesterday. That will ensure that everybody is aware of the system. I hope that unpaid carers will take the opportunity to come forward and get vaccinated.

School Inspections

6. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister for what reason more than 700 schools have not been inspected in over a decade. (S5F-04927)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Scotland has a three-level approach to evaluating and improving education: schools have a responsibility to evaluate their own performance; local authorities have statutory duties of quality improvement and reporting; and the third level is external inspection.

Education Scotland has significantly strengthened its scrutiny functions. In 2018-19, there were 252 school inspections, which was an

increase of more than 30 per cent on the previous year. Education Scotland was on track to exceed that figure in 2019-20, before inspections had to be paused in March last year due to the pandemic. In addition to individual school inspections, Her Majesty's inspectors of education carry out national thematic inspections focusing on key priorities in education. Those often include visits to individual schools.

Jamie Greene: Education rightly deserves a good airing at First Minister's questions. I cannot think of anything more important for us to shine a light on at our own end of term. No one in the chamber ever tires of thanking teachers or school staff for their efforts, but it is worth reminding the First Minister of some key figures that she cannot blame on Covid.

There are 704 Scottish schools that have not been inspected in more than a decade. Another 1,600 have not been inspected in the past five years. The Government has also failed its own manifesto pledge to reduce class sizes and, despite the spin that we heard earlier, there are 1,700 fewer teachers in the system than there were when the Scottish National Party took office. A leading architect of the SNP's own curriculum reform concluded that its implementation had slashed subject choice for young people, not increased it.

The First Minister asked to be judged on her record on education above everything else. How would the First Minister rate her performance?

The First Minister: That is not up to me or to Jamie Greene—it is up to the Scottish people on 6 May. They will have that opportunity.

Education deserves an airing at First Minister's questions every week, but I do not choose the questions that I get asked. Ruth Davidson has chosen week after week recently to ask me about something completely different. It is good that the Tories are finally focusing on issues that actually matter to people across the country.

I have set out some responses to the Audit Scotland report and have set out the three levels of inspection and scrutiny in Scottish education. I intend to continue—with the agreement of the Scottish people, should they choose to give that in a few weeks' time—to get on with the job on increasing attainment and closing the attainment gap. If the Conservatives continue to sit there in the next session of Parliament—or perhaps over here—I hope that they will ask more about education and health than they have chosen to do in recent weeks in this one.

Self-isolation Support Grant (Approval of Applications)

7. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that local authorities with the highest deprivation rates are least likely to approve self-isolation support grant applications. (S5F-04929)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Local authorities have built the self-isolation support grant to fit within the wider Covid supports that they have in their areas. Any variation in the number of applications for the grant or in the award rate depends on the spread of the virus. There is no consistent link between deprivation and award rates, although areas of high deprivation tend to make a greater number of awards.

Early engagement with local authorities suggested that a major reason for applications being rejected was that they came from people who earned more than the income threshold for the grant. We significantly increased that threshold in February. We will begin reporting the impact of the updated eligibility from April and will continue working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and with local authorities to identify further potential improvements.

Pauline McNeill: Overall, fewer than one in three of the people in Scotland who have applied for a self-isolation grant have received one. Worryingly, approval rates are as low as one in six in some council areas. It is rapidly becoming a postcode lottery. In North Lanarkshire and Glasgow, two of the council areas with the highest deprivation levels, the success rate for applications is below 20 per cent, whereas in Edinburgh almost 50 per cent of those who have applied for the grant have been successful. Does the First Minister agree that such wide variation suggests that something is not quite right about the system, particularly if areas of high deprivation have such low success rates? Will she commit to an urgent review of the scheme to ensure that there is a higher success rate, particularly in areas of high deprivation where our poorest communities may be losing out?

The First Minister: I do not think that we need to have an urgent review, because we are reviewing the situation on an on-going basis, and the changes that we have already made to eligibility would bear that out. When we think that changes are required, we are responding to make sure that more people get access. We are seeing that the number of applications being approved is increasing. In January, awards were 33 per cent higher and applications were 36 per cent higher than was the case in December. Eligibility has, of course, been extended.

We will continue to look carefully at the situation. There is some variation between local authorities, although not necessarily all, and that is something that we need to look at carefully, but some of it will be explained by the fact that some local authorities have different supports in place. Self-isolation is part of a wider arrangement of how people are being supported. We look at that regularly and we will continue to make changes as we think necessary to ensure that people are getting the support that they need to self-isolate, because we know that self-isolation will continue to be a key part of our defence against Covid.

Tuition Fees

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Tuition fees in England and Wales have been mired in broken promises. Instead of keeping fees low, the Tories have bumped them up, making it much harder for students from deprived backgrounds and areas to access higher education. If the First Minister is re-elected, will she commit to maintaining free tuition? Does she agree that students should not leave university with a mountain of debt before they have even started work?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I agree wholeheartedly with Sandra White. As long as I am First Minister, there will be no tuition fees in Scotland. That is a commitment that I make very strongly, and I say that not just politically but personally. Had there been tuition fees when I was younger, it is unlikely that I would have gone to university. Having had the opportunity of a university education, it would be wrong for me to take that opportunity away from others.

Sandra White has raised this question and I think it is appropriate that she has done so in what will be her final contribution in the chamber. Sandra White represents a large number of students and has represented them extremely well, as she has represented her entire constituency. She and I have been colleagues from Glasgow in the Parliament since 1999. She has made an outstanding contribution. She is a great colleague and a great friend, and we are going to miss her greatly. I wish her all the best in her retirement.

Store Closures (Aberdeen)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Less than two hours ago, Aberdeen was rocked by the announcement that, after more than 30 years in the city, John Lewis in Aberdeen will not reopen. That comes just two weeks after Debenhams shut the doors of its Aberdeen store. That means that 256 employees could be made redundant and, given that BHS remains empty five years after closing, Arcadia has shut several stores in the city

and Debenhams is now empty, the outlook for Aberdeen high street is bleak.

What will the Government do to help employees and reinvigorate Aberdeen retail after the pandemic? Does the First Minister now agree that the SNP's decision to delay the business rates revaluation has had a devastating impact on businesses in Aberdeen?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, this morning's news from John Lewis is a blow to Aberdeen and my thoughts are with all the employees of John Lewis who will be affected.

As the member is aware, the Aberdeen store is the only one in Scotland among a number across the United Kingdom that John Lewis has decided not to reopen after lockdown. The reason that he gives for that does not bear any scrutiny.

However, the member raises an important issue, and he is right to raise it. The Scottish Government will engage with John Lewis directly. The partnership action for continuing employment initiative will be used to help employees who are affected. We will, of course, also engage with Aberdeen City Council.

The revitalisation of our high streets will be one of our priorities as we come out of lockdown and out of the pandemic. We will work with local authorities and the Scottish Retail Consortium to make sure that we are taking the right steps. In the short term, we will do everything that we can to support the affected employees.

Breast Cancer Waiting Times

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Breast cancer waiting times in Tayside are now 17 weeks from general practitioner referral to first appointment. As the First Minister knows, that is a severe breach of Government-recommended maximum waiting times and an eternity for patients.

I asked the First Minister about the issue a month ago. She said that she would get more detail and come back to me. I have heard nothing. Women are worried and are waiting for a long time. Will the First Minister look into the issue—today, please—and tell me what has been done, before this parliamentary session ends?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We have already taken action in that regard. I know that Jenny Marra is stepping down from Parliament, and I will ask the health secretary to give more detail later today. For example, Glasgow and Edinburgh are providing assistance to Dundee to help with its waiting times, so that women are not waiting an inordinate amount of time for the breast cancer care that they need.

This is a really important matter. Part of the remobilisation and recovery of the health service is about making sure that any cancer treatments and care that have been delayed—most cancer care will have proceeded as it should have done—are caught up on as quickly as possible. We have already taken steps to deal with the situation in Tayside.

As I said, we will get further information to Jenny Marra today. Given that this is likely to be her last contribution to Parliament, I take the opportunity to wish her well in the future.

Covid-19 (Recovery of Town Centres)

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Further to Liam Kerr's question, how will the Scottish Government support town centres to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are providing financial support to all businesses, many of which will be in town centres. Grants for the retail, hospitality and leisure industries will be paid in April. That will include final support for closure as well as start-up support. We have, of course, extended 100 per cent non-domestic rates relief for retail, leisure and hospitality premises for the entirety of the next financial year. The place-based investment programme will also help to progress some of the steps that we need to take to support town centres and wider community-led regeneration.

This week, we published a joint response with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to the town centre action plan expert review group's report. We will work with partners to respond fully to the group's recommendations, if we are returned to Government at the election.

Health Records (Veterans)

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): On leaving the British armed forces, many veterans experience long delays in their general practitioner surgeries getting access to their military health records. That could delay GPs' diagnosis of any health issues. Will the First Minister ensure that that matter is addressed as soon as possible, to prevent veterans' health issues from increasing due to unnecessary delay?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I undertake to look into the issue that the member raised. I hope that there is a general acceptance and agreement that we take the healthcare of veterans extremely seriously. Veterans should have access to healthcare in the same way as anybody does, and we have taken our wider responsibilities to veterans extremely seriously.

I am happy to look into the member's specific point and have the health secretary write to him as quickly as possible.

Harassment Complaints (Scottish Government Handling)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The First Minister has acknowledged the catastrophic failure of the Scottish Government in the handling of harassment complaints, and I welcome her comments.

The development of the policy was flawed, the appointment of the investigating officer was wrong and documents were even withheld from the Court of Session. I do not believe that the First Minister is happy with any of that, so why, three years on, has no one assumed responsibility? Why does she still have confidence in the permanent secretary who presided over all that terrible mess?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I take responsibility for what happens in the Scottish Government, and I take responsibility for acknowledging when things go wrong and for putting right things that go wrong.

Many things matter to me. If I am re-elected as First Minister, there are—as we have reflected on during this First Minister's question time—many priorities and many things in my in-tray and on my desk. However, few things matter more to me than making sure that we have a culture in the Scottish Government in which anybody who believes that they have been subjected to harassment can come forward and have confidence and trust that their complaints will be listened to and addressed properly.

The Government did make a mistake on that—I have certainly never shied away from that. However, I will also never shy away from saying this: it made a mistake in the course of trying to do the right thing. The Government was determined that—unlike what would undoubtedly have happened in years gone by—such complaints would not simply be swept under the carpet. That is the right starting point. What we must do now is put right the things that went wrong, so that mistakes are not made in the future. I deeply regret what happened, and I have apologised—and will continue to do so—to the women who were let down.

My final point is this. I do not say this in an adversarial sense, but I hope that Jackie Baillie will reflect on the fact that, in doing its important work, the committee also let women down by leaking misrepresentations of their evidence. Therefore, we all have things to learn. I hope that we will learn the important lessons that are there for all of us.

Scottish Census (Deferral)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I note that the Scottish census has been deferred until March next year. Will the First Minister say whether that is a consequence of the Covid pandemic?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, that was a consequence of the pandemic. I know that other United Kingdom nations took a different decision, and there have been controversies relating to that. We want to see the census happen on its renewed timescale, because the information that it provides us with is incredibly important.

Clinical Trials (Recruitment)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): As we all know, the pandemic has impacted on much of our daily life. I have not heard mention of recruitment for clinical trials restarting. Such trials are crucial to the development of new medicines and treatments, and can give hope to many people. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that clinical trials are fully restarted?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will ensure that information is provided on exactly what is happening across the whole range of clinical trials. The chief scientist's office has already taken steps to ensure that they restart. Scotland has a very good record on recruitment to such trials, and to clinical and medical research overall. Over the course of the pandemic, it has played its part in terms of recruitment of people for trials of the coronavirus vaccines, which have been so important. As is the case for all aspects of healthcare, there is now a real focus on getting things back to normal as quickly and as safely as possible.

Trident

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): In an interview with the BBC, Sir Keir Starmer has claimed that in the forthcoming Scottish Parliament election Trident is not on the ballot paper, because it is not a matter for Holyrood. However, in 2015, here at Holyrood, Labour voted to oppose nuclear weapons, which was brilliant.

Does the First Minister agree that spending increasing billions on weapons of mass destruction is disgraceful? Does she also agree that it is clear that Sir Keir Starmer has proved, once and for all, that people cannot ride two electoral horses when it comes to scrapping nuclear weapons?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): By this time next week, we will be taking part in all sorts of election debates, so I look forward to Anas Sarwar proudly articulating Scottish Labour's policy of

unilateral nuclear disarmament and of getting rid of Trident nuclear weapons from the Clyde. If he does not do that, I will have to assume that Sir Keir Starmer has not allowed him to do so. We will find that out in the course of the election campaign. *[Interruption.]*

Anas Sarwar is saying that he is the boss. We might find out, over the course of the campaign, whether that is so. It will be a real test of whether Mr Sarwar backs Scottish Labour's policy on nuclear weapons or whether the policy of Sir Keir Starmer and Jackie Baillie will prevail. I am looking forward to finding out the answer to that question.

In my view, nuclear weapons are both immoral and a grotesque waste of money that we should be investing in health, education and conventional defences. As I have done for my entire life, I will continue to put forward the case for unilateral nuclear disarmament and getting rid of Trident from the Clyde once and for all.

Covid-19 Restrictions (Island Communities)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Last week, the First Minister's statement on Covid-19 restrictions left our island communities in limbo. While the rest of Scotland prepares for such restrictions to be eased from 26 April, islanders remain in the dark.

According to the First Minister's statement yesterday, they will remain in the dark for a further "few weeks". The Government has now launched a consultation process, but that has not included the local council or the local member of the Scottish Parliament. It sets out a binary choice for islanders of either staying in level 3, despite there having been no cases here for weeks, or of moving to level 2, with tighter restrictions on travel into and out of the islands. Why was the consultation not undertaken before last week's announcement? Does the First Minister still believe that she is following the data and the science?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The data says that allowing people to come together and to travel means that the number of cases of the virus will rise. That is what we are trying to avoid. It feels as though Liam McArthur would have criticised us whatever we had done. Had we decided to impose a decision just on the islands, no doubt we would have been accused of being centralist and of not listening to islanders' views. However, because we have decided to consult and take views before reaching a decision, we are being accused of leaving islands "in limbo".

Neither of those things is correct. There is a really difficult decision for islands about going down a level, as the data at the moment would justify, and opening up their economies.

Unfortunately, because of the nature of the virus and the threats that it poses, it is not possible immediately to do both of those things. Therefore, we want to come to an agreement with islands councils about which option is best for them. That is the right way to proceed, instead of simply taking a decision here in Edinburgh and trying to impose it on islands, from the centre. We will take that decision in partnership with the islands as quickly as possible.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I apologise to the half dozen members whom I was not able to select.

Point of Order

13:30

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. As we are going into recess for the election after today, can you advise on how the Scottish Government can be held to account on regulations? I am sure that you know that today the regulations on forced closure of churches in Scotland have been deemed to be unlawful. As the session of Parliament comes to a close, I am concerned about how we can hold the Government to account to ensure that there are no other unlawful regulations, and that churches in Scotland are not again forced to close.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I thank Ms Smith for the point of order. That matter was discussed at length several times by the Parliamentary Bureau; the bureau agreed that we would go into and observe recess.

There is the facility for the COVID-19 Committee to meet to scrutinise legislation, if it feels that it is necessary. However, the committee has made it clear that it will do that only in an emergency.

I imagine that there will be calls for recall. However, I make it clear now that I will not recall Parliament unless there really is an emergency. Members can always feed through their points in the newspapers, in the normal way.

13:32

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): Good afternoon, everyone. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the campus. I ask members to take care to observe those measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber.

The next item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is education and skills. Members who wish to ask supplementary questions should press their request-to-speak buttons or, if you are joining us remotely, indicate in the chat function that you have a question.

Digital Exclusion (Glasgow Schools)

1. **Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has carried out of the number of school pupils in Glasgow experiencing digital exclusion. (S50-05138)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Scottish Government worked with local authorities through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to establish the scale of need across Scotland. Councils and schools know their learners and families best. Therefore, funding of £25 million was allocated, via a formula that is based on deprivation and rurality, for them to address local need.

Glasgow City Council received £3.1 million, through which it has distributed 7,240 devices and 4,225 connectivity packages to learners. The council has received an additional £5.8 million to further support remote learning, which can be used flexibly to deliver additional devices or connectivity where need still exists.

Johann Lamont: It was revealed at a recent meeting of Glasgow City Council's education committee that more than one third of primary 1 to 6 pupils in Glasgow were identified as needing a digital device for home learning and still do not have access to one. Digital exclusion among disadvantaged children and young people was already a significant problem before lockdown and remote learning, and the pandemic has compounded that. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that it is entirely unacceptable

that, one year after lockdown, children still do not have access to the devices that they need in order to learn. The devices are not a bonus; they are central to their learning.

What further action can the Government take to address digital exclusion and ensure that young people, including the 35 per cent of Glasgow primary school children who have been identified, do not fall through the net? How will the Scottish Government focus attention more broadly on that most vulnerable group of young people, whose life chances have clearly been disproportionately affected by the Covid crisis?

John Swinney: I fundamentally agree with the direction of Johann Lamont's question. I believe that we are now in an era when use of a digital device is central to the effective participation of children and young people in education. The Government has taken a number of significant steps to enhance the propositions that have already been put in place by local authorities. Glasgow City Council has a strong record on provision of devices to young people in its education system. Some other local authorities—for example, Scottish Borders Council—have opted to provide devices to all pupils.

One of the priorities that the Government has pursued throughout the pandemic has been to address the digital divide, and it has done so through the work that I recounted in my earlier answer and through the connecting Scotland programme, which has been taken forward by my Cabinet colleague Aileen Campbell, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government. It remains a significant priority for the Government, and we will pursue it actively, should this Government be re-elected in May.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a supplementary question from Clare Adamson.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg your pardon: I had pressed the button for my own question later.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would have thought that you would know by now. [*Laughter.*]

Gaelic-medium Education (Glasgow)

2. **Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with Glasgow City Council regarding the provision of Gaelic-medium education. (S50-05139)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has regular discussions with Glasgow City Council on matters relating to Gaelic-medium education, and we have been delighted to support the expansion of

provision within the city. This month, my officials met Glasgow City Council staff and discussed the council's management of primary 1 and 2 entry, Gaelic probationers and the support that can be offered to the high proportion of parents who do not speak Gaelic at home.

Sandra White: I thank the cabinet secretary for that very encouraging answer. It is my understanding that Glasgow City Council has 140 GME places available; however, 170 applications have been received to date. That is extremely encouraging, but will be disappointing for some.

Can the cabinet secretary provide an assurance that there will be support to ensure that people who seek to place their children in Gaelic-medium education in Glasgow will have the opportunity to do so?

John Swinney: There is a lot of encouraging news in the work that Glasgow City Council is undertaking to support Gaelic-medium education. The council has reached another high this year, with about 160 primary 1 pupils seeking entry. The council often finds that there is a drop-off in applications before places are taken up. However, I hope that the council's expansion of its Gaelic-medium estate from three primary schools to four, with support from the Scottish Government, will reassure Sandra White and her constituents that it is planning further expansion of Gaelic-medium education in Glasgow. I pay tribute to the council for the energy and commitment that it has given to that important policy objective.

Lastly, because this will be the last time that I respond to a question from my dear friend Sandra White, I wish her well on her retirement from Parliament.

West College Scotland Campus (Investment)

3. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what resources it has provided for investment in the West College Scotland campus. (S50-05140)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Since the financial year 2014-15, there has been investment of £20,650,274 in the West College Scotland campus.

Neil Bibby: West College Scotland has not received its fair share of investment for years, and the college capital budget is being cut. As far back as 2017, the Scottish Funding Council's estate survey identified the need for significant investment in both the Paisley and Greenock campuses, and potential plans for new fit-for-purpose buildings. However, the Scottish Government's infrastructure strategy to 2025 gives no indication at all that there will be funding for estate development in Paisley or Greenock. When

will the Scottish Government invest in a modern campus for West College Scotland students in my region?

Richard Lochhead: I assure Neil Bibby that the Scottish Funding Council considers the securing of funding for replacement of the West College Scotland campuses to be a high priority. Indeed, in recent times, the college has been given more resources to progress an outline business case for those improvements.

It is well documented, and recognised, that capital budgets have been under pressure for many years. We certainly believe that the college has a strong case, and we hope that further progress can be made as soon as the resources become available and the outline business case is progressed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have supplementaries from Stuart McMillan and Jamie Greene. I call Stuart McMillan.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): For the final time, I thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I have met representatives of West College Scotland and have corresponded with the Scottish Funding Council about the proposed new campus in Greenock. Can the minister provide an assurance that every effort will be made to assist West College Scotland to provide a facility for future generations that can also help to stem the population decline that Inverclyde has experienced over the past 30 years, and which it continues to face?

Richard Lochhead: Stuart McMillan is perfectly correct to highlight the important role that West College Scotland plays in the local economy and region. I hope that the next Parliament and Government continue to treat as a priority the college and its outline business case for improving the campuses. As I indicated in my previous answer, further funding has been made available in recent times to take forward the business case. In addition, the SFC is developing a medium-term estate strategy for the college sector, in which, I am sure, West College Scotland will have a prominent place.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest as an alumnus of what is now West College Scotland in Greenock.

The next session of Parliament will see the 10-year anniversary of what has become college regionalisation. Will the minister and other members ensure—subject to whichever party forms the next Government—that Parliament engages in scrutiny to ensure that that work results in the reality that was anticipated for the regionalisation programme?

Richard Lochhead: Jamie Greene is, of course, testament to the excellent college sector in the west of Scotland, and has illustrated that today with his excellent question.

On the role of the college regions, Jamie Greene will be aware that the Scottish Funding Council is undertaking a fundamental major review of the cohesion and sustainability of further and higher education, and is focusing on the college regions as part of that wider project. It is absolutely essential that Parliament scrutinises closely the outcome of the SFC review, because it will be fundamental to the future of Scotland and our further and higher education sector.

Lifelong Learning and Reskilling (Support)

4. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support lifelong learning and reskilling. (S5O-05141)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): We are investing significantly in reskilling interventions in recognition of the important role of reskilling in supporting future skills transitions, including a just transition to net zero and our economic recovery from the pandemic. That includes investment in our national transition training fund, which supports individuals to retrain in order to secure more positive employment outcomes. We have recently confirmed on-going support for the fund in 2021-22.

We have also committed to developing a lifelong learning framework that will raise the importance of adult learning and ensure that it is integrated into the wider education and school system.

Clare Adamson: I am sure that the minister will join me in welcoming publication of the Cumberford-Little report and the Open University's prospectus, "Skills+ Scotland", both of which call for a skills-led recovery. The OU prospectus sets out a vision to galvanise higher education to support an inclusive economic recovery over the lifetime of the next Parliament. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that higher and further education remain open and accessible to everyone at any stage of their life?

Jamie Hepburn: The Cumberford-Little report is an important one that we are considering closely. It aligns neatly with wider ambitions in the future skills action plan and with the wider skills realignment that we need.

The Open University is an excellent organisation in terms of its approach to lifelong learning generally. Recently, it has become involved in the flexible workforce development fund, which I have responsibility for and which has now been opened

up to small and medium-sized enterprises, and it is leading on that work.

On the wider question about accessibility of higher education, we will, of course, continue to invest significantly in higher education in the coming financial year. One of the fundamental things that we will continue to do in relation to accessibility is retain our commitment to free university education. One of the questions in the coming election will be whether the other parties will follow suit.

Schools (Full-time Return of Pupils)

5. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it will provide to schools in light of its announcement regarding the full-time return of pupils in April. (S5O-05142)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): To date, we have committed more than £375 million to local authorities and schools as part of education recovery. That investment continues to fund additional teachers, support staff and, if necessary, the cost of safety mitigations in schools, such as infrastructure adjustments.

We are currently updating relevant guidance and will publish it before Easter. I have emphasised the importance of supporting young people's wellbeing as they come back to school, and work is already in train across partners to deliver wellbeing and outdoor activities. As with all aspects of our education response to Covid, I have been grateful to the Covid-19 education recovery group for its expert advice as we have formed plans for the full-time return to school.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Since indicating the return to school, the Scottish Government has taken a less equivocal stance, particularly in relation to secondary pupils. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that he will give a minimum notice period for any changes to scheduled returns after the Easter holidays, to help parents and carers to plan? Further, can he assure local authorities that the additional costs that they face because of mitigation measures that he has recognised will be essential to enable pupils to return will be adequately supported by central Government, rather than coming out of local education budgets?

John Swinney: The Government's central planning assumption is that schools will return full time for face-to-face learning after the Easter holidays. In some parts of Scotland, that will be on 12 April; in the overwhelming majority of areas of Scotland, it will be on 19 April.

Of course, all primary schools and early learning centres are back full time, and secondary schools

are back for all pupils—not on a full-time basis, but with pupils supported by remote learning.

Our objective and central planning assumption is for secondary schools to return full time, but we must take into account the prevalence of the virus at that stage, and we will give as much notice as we can on the approach to return.

The advisory sub-group on education, which provides us with clinical advice on these issues, will meet on 6 April, and its views will influence our planning and the steps that we will take to reopen schools full time from 12 April in some parts of the country.

The member asked about money, and the Government has committed more than £375 million to local authorities as part of education recovery. That is a significant investment by the Government in the additional costs of the local delivery of education, and we will continue to discuss with local authorities any issues that arise from such a substantial financial contribution by the Government.

School Closures (Support for Pupils)

6. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what it is doing to ensure that pupils are able to catch up on any learning lost as a result of school closures. (S5O-05143)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The term "lost learning" is not an appropriate description of the challenges that we face, and focusing on it does a disservice to the work of school staff across the country. Last week, the education recovery group reinforced the importance of supporting children through positive action, with a need to focus on wellbeing in learning as we move towards the full-time return to school.

Work is already under way to consider what support our young people might require over the summer term and the summer holiday. We are working with local authorities and Education Scotland, which share that ambition, and discussions are under way to understand what strategic action is needed at the national level to support and facilitate specific and meaningful local activity in schools.

Jeremy Balfour: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer but, with respect, my children have lost out. There are things that they have not been able to learn in the past year because of the closure, and that needs to be caught up on at some point. The London School of Economics says that we need to invest millions of pounds into doing that, and the Conservative Party will fund £120 million, spread across two years. Can the

cabinet secretary provide assurances that the Scottish Government's catch-up programme will be similarly ambitious in scale? Will the Government allocate funding directly to schools, which are best placed to target funding where it is most needed?

John Swinney: I will not reiterate the comments that I made about the language and terminology that Mr Balfour insists on using in his question. I do not think that it is a particularly helpful description of the challenges that we face.

I think that young people have learned a great deal during lockdown. That is a tribute to their families and carers, who have supported them, and to their schools, for supporting their learning. A great deal has been accomplished through remote learning, which has supported young people adequately. This morning, I explained at length to the Education and Skills Committee the importance of supporting individual learning, and the education system will ensure that that such learning is supported.

The voters will have a choice on 6 May and we will see what they make of the Conservative Party's plans. However, based on the performance of the Conservative Party at the moment and its shocking, shabby behaviour over the past few weeks, I do not expect that its message will attract much support from the public in Scotland.

Education (Attainment Gap)

7. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to assist children from the poorest backgrounds with their education. (S5O-05144)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Our mission to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap remains central to our plans. That is why we have committed a record £200 million to the Scottish attainment challenge, including the introduction of a £20 million pupil equity funding premium for 2021-22, which emerged from the budget discussions and agreement with the Liberal Democrats. We continue to support our young people from low-income backgrounds with free school meals and a national minimum school clothing grant, and expansion of the free school meals provision was agreed in the budget with the Green party.

Our report on progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap, which was published on 22 March, presents a strong body of evidence showing that good progress is being made towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

James Dornan: Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the announcement of an additional

£25 million to tackle poverty and inequality will not only further enhance the £100 Covid hardship payment for children and young people who receive free school meals, but enable support to be extended to children who receive free lunches in early learning and childcare settings?

John Swinney: Those provisions will be in place. They are part of the Government's efforts to tackle child poverty in a number of areas—including through education expenditure and through the wider work that we take forward in collaboration with my Cabinet colleague Aileen Campbell—to ensure that we take a series of integrated measures to address the impact of child poverty, which, of course, has a significant bearing on the educational attainment of children and young people in Scotland. The provisions are part of the Government's overall strategy to tackle the attainment gap.

Presiding Officer, I am uncertain about whether you will call members to ask further supplementaries on this question, but this is likely to be one of the last questions that you call me to answer. I extend my warmest wishes and grateful thanks to you for being a colleague over the past 22 years, particularly during the long sentence that we spent together on the Smith commission.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary, but I am afraid that you have Iain Gray now. [*Laughter.*]

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): My apologies to the cabinet secretary for extending his sentence for slightly longer, but I promise that it will not be for too long.

For the whole of this parliamentary session, the Government has had the good will and support of the whole chamber for its top priority of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This week's Audit Scotland report shows that it is true, as the cabinet secretary has said, that the Government has invested hundreds of millions of pounds through the attainment Scotland fund and other funding to that end. However, the same report says:

"Progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the ... Government's aims."

On reflection, why does the cabinet secretary think that the Government has made so little progress on closing that gap, which it called its "sacred responsibility"?

John Swinney: Presiding Officer, it is somewhat apposite that you have extended my handling of questions by bringing in another member of the Smith commission, who regularly bemoans the fact that I react in an uncharitable fashion to his participation on it. However, on his last day in Parliament, I will desist from such behaviour.

Mr Gray raised issues from the Audit Scotland report, which, as I told the Education and Skills Committee this morning, is a reasonable and fair report. It recounts the fact that progress has been made in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, but it also recognises that the challenges are stubborn.

The report highlights that progress has differed around the country by local authority area. That is a substantial issue that needs to be explored and which I will discuss with local authority partners, should the Government be returned at the election, to ensure that the lessons of good performance and good improvement that are being achieved in some parts of the country can be reflected in other parts of the country. That will enable the Government to intensify the work that we have always said would be a longer-term project and would last for more than one parliamentary session.

The key conclusion of the Audit Scotland report is that good progress has been made. The Government will build on that progress if it is re-elected in May.

Higher Education Students (Return to University)

8. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its road map for higher education students to return to university. (S5O-05145)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Universities will continue to adhere to the limit of 5 per cent of students for in-person learning at any one time until 26 April. There will be some limited flexibility above the 5 per cent limit for some specialised and postgraduate courses. We will discuss with universities arrangements for any increase in the number of students beyond the 5 per cent limit after 26 April, when Scotland will move into protection levels.

I am pleased to announce today a package of further support for further and higher education students, to provide reassurance that they can complete their studies when they have been impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. The package includes eligibility for full-time HE students to receive a guaranteed one-off Covid payment of up to £1,600 for additional study of 16 weeks or less. HE students who require an extension beyond 16 weeks can apply to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland to continue to receive the standard monthly package of bursary, grant, loan and fees until their extended course ends.

Jamie Greene: Concern remains that, for the majority of higher education students, a

meaningful full return to campus is not proposed until May and even then it will be only for blended learning. Under the Government's road map proposals, students will be able to go to the pub but not to lecture theatres. Are there plans to alter the course of action and allow more students to get back on campus as quickly as possible, if the virus situation allows it?

Richard Lochhead: We are taking a cautious approach in Scotland. Our objective is absolutely to allow more students to return to campus when it is safe to do so. We are paying close attention to the course of the pandemic and to the advice from clinicians and others. As I said in my initial answer, we are keeping the situation under close review. After 26 April, when the hope is that Scotland will move into protection levels, we will decide what that means for further and higher education.

Members should rest assured that we are determined to ensure that as many students as possible can complete their courses and get a degree of university experience if that is safe to do before the end of term. We hope to make such progress.

Health and Sport

Heart Disease Improvement Plan (Financial Support)

1. **Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what financial commitment it has made to support the delivery of the refreshed heart disease improvement plan. (S5O-05146)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Mairi Gougeon): We published our heart disease action plan on 23 March—yesterday—and confirmed an initial investment of £2.2 million to drive forward the actions that are in the plan. That represents a doubling of investment from the previous heart disease improvement plan. Delivery of the actions that the new plan contains will enable us to minimise preventable heart disease and to ensure that everyone with suspected heart disease has timely and equitable access to diagnosis, treatment and care that supports them in living well with their condition.

Monica Lennon: Given that 700,000 people in Scotland live with heart disease, the action plan's publication is welcome. Adequate funding is vital to meet the needs of people across Scotland for the best treatment and care. I welcome the increased funding that the minister referred to, but funding for the plan's previous iteration was only £1 million, in comparison with £117 million for cancer and £42 million for type 2 diabetes. What is the minister's response to campaigners and patients who do not yet feel convinced that heart

disease is a strong enough priority for the Government?

Mairi Gougeon: I assure everyone that tackling heart disease is a strong priority for the Government. What we have proposed is the initial investment, which represents a doubling of resource from the previous plan, as I just said. The delivery of the key actions that are in the plan, such as the effective use of data that we outline under priority 4, will ensure that resource is allocated appropriately in the future to drive forward improved patient outcomes. I hope that that assures Monica Lennon.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In 2019, I raised the fact that the British Heart Foundation had revealed evidence that, although heart disease kills three times as many women as breast cancer does, the prognosis for female patients remains much poorer than that for men. What steps have been taken in the past two years to involve medical professionals in improving that unacceptable situation?

Mairi Gougeon: We absolutely recognise the significant impact of heart disease on women. That is why we made a commitment in our programme for government to developing and implementing a women's health plan, which will include cardiac disease as a key pillar. The plan will aim to reduce women's health inequalities by raising awareness of women's health and improving women's access to healthcare throughout their lives. Implementation of the actions that are in that plan will align with implementation of the heart disease action plan, which highlights the importance of tackling inequities in access to diagnosis, treatment and care for people with heart disease.

Cervical Screening Appointments (Backlog)

2. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is planning to address the backlog in cervical screening appointments that has arisen because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and whether this will include offering human papillomavirus self-testing. (S5O-05147)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government has provided just under £1 million to support capacity in sample taking and colposcopy. The impacts of Covid-19, including the need for additional infection control measures, continue to present challenges, but those are kept under close review. There are no current plans to issue self-testing kits as part of the programme's recovery. Although it continues to gather evidence, the United Kingdom National Screening Committee has not yet recommended that self-sampling should be

incorporated into the national programme. A pilot study is under way in NHS Dumfries and Galloway and a more extensive pilot is currently being scoped.

Claire Baker: The minister will know that there is a reported backlog of six months in the screening programme. Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has called for a roll-out of self-testing. Screening rates are lowest among young women and in the most deprived areas. I urge the Government to push forward with a wider roll-out of self-testing, at least for those groups. I recognise the pilot that is taking pace in Dumfries and Galloway and welcome the scoping for further pilots. However, given the current circumstances and the continuing lockdown, I hope to see faster progress in using self-testing kits to increase the number of women taking part in the programme.

Mairi Gougeon: I understand why the member asks for faster progress. It is vital that we base our decisions on the best clinical advice that is available. Our advice is based on that of the UK National Screening Committee, which has not yet advised the use of self-testing. The pilot is important. As I said, we will scope out a further research project. That could be an important piece of work, but we must make ensure that research takes place and that we learn any potential lessons before taking further clinical advice to decide whether we should roll out self-testing.

Organised Sport (Accessibility)

3. Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure wider accessibility to organised sport for children and young people once restrictions on this are lifted. (S5O-05148)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Mairi Gougeon): Physical activity and sport have a crucial role to play in Scotland's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. The active schools programme will remain a central pillar in getting young people to participate in sport. It will be vital to work with and listen to young people to rebuild their enthusiasm for sport.

The programme for government commits the Scottish Government to working with sportscotland and Scottish governing bodies of sport to rebuild membership and participation levels following the negative impacts of Covid-19. We will also build on the positive changes in sport and physical activity, such as increased walking and cycling, that we have seen during the Covid19 pandemic to build wider community participation, particularly in disadvantaged and underrepresented communities.

Maurice Corry: There is understandable concern that Covid-19 has exacerbated inequality

of access to sport for children from disadvantaged communities, at the same time worsening the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Will the minister give details about how the Scottish Government is actively assisting local authorities in ensuring that every child is able to participate in organised sport, such as swimming lessons, especially given the role that sport can play in bridging the inequality gap for those living in poverty?

Mairi Gougeon: The member is right. We see that as a key focus of our transition out of the pandemic, as physical activity is hugely important in improving physical and mental health.

I referred to our important work with active schools. Funding of £900,000 for sport facilities was announced today by sportscotland. That will be invested in clubs, communities and leisure trusts and will do exactly what the member is asking for, providing diverse and inclusive opportunities. It will improve community access to sport and physical activity. The First Minister today outlined a summer programme of activities, in which I hope that sport and physical activity will play a key role. I hope that all of that will address the issues that the member raises.

Covid-19 (Hospital Transmission)

4. **Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to research by the University of Edinburgh suggesting that more than half of severe Covid-19 cases were as a result of transmission in hospital during the second wave of the pandemic. (S50-05149)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The research study makes an important contribution to our consideration of all those matters. However, it is limited in that it uses a wider nosocomial definition than has been agreed internationally. That extended timeframe overestimates nosocomial Covid-19 from the “indeterminate” category. That reduces the opportunities that we have to identify areas for improvement.

However, it is an important piece of work and it adds to our overall knowledge of nosocomial infection and the additional steps that we need to take on top of those that we have already taken to reduce it as far as possible.

Annie Wells: As we remobilise the national health service from the grip of the pandemic, can the cabinet secretary explain how the Government will prevent it from happening again?

Jeane Freeman: In answering that question, I need to add a touch of realism about things happening again. As one of the report authors notes,

“The reality is that there are a number of constraints on the ability to have complete infection protection in hospital settings. The reasons for that are multifactorial and complex. One is the built environment. Some of the older hospitals do not have a lot of single rooms.”

We need to be careful in comparing wave one and wave two, given that, in wave two, we were dealing with a virus strain that was significantly more infectious than the strain that we were dealing with in wave one.

All that said, however, a number of additional steps have been taken on top of the world-renowned Scottish patient safety programme. There is additional personal protective equipment. There is now testing of all admissions to hospital settings from emergency right through to planned, including maternity. Testing of our patient-facing staff is now extended to other NHS staff, as well as social care staff. There is also, of course, the constant monitoring that our clinical advisers do, led by our chief nursing officer. The nosocomial group brings in additional academic and clinical experts to identify from looking internationally and elsewhere in the UK whether there is more that we can do, in addition to the steps that I have already outlined.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Hospital transmission of Covid-19 remains an issue, with data for the week of 28 February showing at least a further 30 cases. Staff have been raising their concerns for several months now, and the Scottish Government needs to safeguard staff. What is being done to ensure that enhanced PPE is being provided?

Presiding Officer, I take this opportunity to wish the cabinet secretary well in her retirement and thank her for her co-operation over the years.

Jeane Freeman: My thanks go to Ms Baillie for those kind words.

She is right. Nosocomial infection of any virus in a hospital setting and in other institutional settings is really important. We have listened carefully to what staff have said to us about PPE. Our clinical advisers continue to look at the issue to see whether more can be done about the PPE that staff are clinically advised to use.

In a recent communication with staff, we have also stressed the importance of individual staff members undertaking their own assessment of the risk that they believe that they face and exercising their professional judgment. Guidance is important, as is the provision of PPE. At this point, I record my thanks to the NHS’s procurement exercise that ensured that we never ran out of PPE at any point during the pandemic. However, it is important to leave room around the guidance for the professionals to make their own judgment and for management to enable that clinical judgment.

When there are difficulties with that, I am happy to intervene and ensure that professional judgment takes first place.

Cancer Pathway Review (Dumfries and Galloway)

5. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the short review into cancer pathway arrangements and reimbursement of travel expenses for patients in Dumfries and Galloway, which it committed to carrying out on 24 November 2020. (S5O-05150)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): As I have previously explained, the pressures of the pandemic mean that NHS Dumfries and Galloway and the board's partners have paused reviewing cancer pathways, which is a complex piece of work. They will return to the issue in the spring. As we see case numbers come down, the pressure on Dumfries and Galloway lessens.

I have set out in the chamber that the patient travel guidance will be comprehensively reviewed and will take full account of the matters that Ms Harper raises. The review is a substantial exercise for the Government and NHS boards, which requires prioritisation alongside our response not only to the pandemic but to the remobilisation of services. Further updates will be provided as the review progresses.

Emma Harper: I thank the cabinet secretary for everything that she has done in this Parliament and wish her all the very best for the future.

My constituent Dr Gordon Baird, on behalf of Galloway community hospital action group, lodged a petition that urges the Scottish Government to explore the creation of an agency, or a commissioner, to address the health needs of people in rural Scotland. Australia has already done that. I am due to meet Australia's regional health minister to hear whether something like that could be established to support people across Stranraer and Wigtownshire. Is the Government, in principle, open to looking at the creation of a rural health commissioner?

Jeane Freeman: I am happy to go beyond that principle. I know that Emma Harper will be familiar with Professor Sir Lewis Ritchie, who has undertaken considerable and valuable work for us in looking at remote and rural medicine, instituting a number of improvements and, importantly, listening to practitioners in those areas. I am very happy to let Ms Harper and other members know that work is under way to establish a national institute for remote and rural medicine and healthcare practice. Should the Scottish National Party be returned to Government following the

election, we will take every step to ensure that that is put in place as soon as possible.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): On the issue of the reimbursement of patients' travel expenses, will the Scottish Government consider reviewing the reimbursement of chronic pain patients who have been forced to travel to England and pay privately for pain relief because Scottish national health service pain clinics were closed during earlier lockdowns? Of course, some patients are still having to go to England as waiting times have doubled.

I, too, wish the cabinet secretary all the best for the future.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Elaine Smith has been a doughty champion of that and many other issues during her time in Parliament, and I extend my wishes to her.

Elaine Smith raises a really important point. She knows that the current legislation, and the legal advice on it, prevents us from using public funds to reimburse patients where out-of-area treatment has not been on the basis of an NHS Scotland referral. However, as she will know, I hope, today we announced our intention, should this SNP Government be returned, to introduce legislation to ensure that mesh-injured women who have sought private treatment out of area can be reimbursed. I would hope that my successor will consider what other areas might also be appropriate for reimbursement.

Hospital Waiting Times

6. James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action is being taken to reduce hospital waiting times. (S5O-05151)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): We are working with all health boards with specific targeted actions to reduce hospital waiting times. That includes the investment of additional resources. Some £60 million will directly support elective care. That will be progressed in the context of the framework for clinical prioritisation that I published in November 2020.

There is also additional investment to increase diagnostic capacity, with three computed tomography scanners, ensuring access across all regions. We have developed Scotland's first ever early cancer diagnostics centres, with three pilots due to come on stream by summer. There is also, as Mr Kelly knows, the continued expansion of our elective centres: NHS Golden Jubilee hospital's phase 1 expansion, which supports eye care and orthopaedics, is complete and patients are now being treated.

I make the additional point that, as we remobilise our national health service, we must recognise that for more than 15 months many of its staff have worked tirelessly—as they are still doing—in pressured conditions that have taken a physical and emotional toll on them. As we plan the recovery of the service, we must understand that its staff are our greatest single resource and that we must allow time for them to recover so that they can continue to do the important work that we need them to do and that we ask of them.

James Kelly: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and wish her well for the future. I draw her attention to an article in this morning's edition of *The Times* in which Chloe Scott, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon, highlights the unprecedented levels of lengthy waiting times for surgical operations. Even a 20 per cent increase in those would mean that it would take four years to clear the backlog. This is a really serious situation. What action is being taken to reduce such waiting times so that people waiting for surgery such as hip or knee replacements will not have to wait for four years to get relief from their pain?

Jeane Freeman: Mr Kelly is quite right to say that this is a really serious issue. Inevitably, it has been considerably exacerbated by the past 15 months, during which the NHS has had to pivot. During the first wave of the pandemic, the NHS largely paused all but urgent and emergency treatment and some cancer treatments in order to deal with Covid. In the second wave we have begun to remobilise. Over the summer, we and our NHS staff did useful work to enable us to begin to catch up, but that was inevitably reduced when the second wave hit.

In addition to the work on cancer treatment waiting times, which Ms Gougeon highlighted earlier, work is under way specifically to examine those for elective procedures. When this session of portfolio question time finishes I will go straight into a meeting with the current chief operating officer of NHS Scotland, John Connaghan, to look in detail at actions in addition to those that I have just set out.

Should this Government be returned after the election—as I very much hope that it will be—I trust that it will be able to set out a comprehensive remobilisation plan. Officials' work on that is well under way. All our NHS boards have produced their own immediate plans, which we are bringing together to consider how we might progress in order that people should not have to wait for as long as Mr Kelly has suggested, which would not be acceptable. At the same time, we must ensure that our NHS staff, who have worked so very hard and to whom we owe significant thanks, are given time to take the annual leave that they have postponed and to have the rest and recuperation

that they will need in order to progress the work that we want to undertake.

Presiding Officer, I ask whether you could allow me a moment's flexibility to say a few things, since—unless there is another supplementary for me to answer—I think that these will be the final words that I say in the chamber. I would like to make a couple of points and to thank a number of people.

I have been very privileged to be here. I have been especially privileged to have held two ministerial offices. If my voice is now shaking, it is because, unusually, members are all being very nice to me, for which I am very grateful to them. *[Laughter.]* I have learned a great deal, certainly from my work in establishing the social security service, and undoubtedly also from working with the health service. I am honoured to have been the health secretary and to have played my part in working with those in our health service.

In particular, I thank my constituents in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley—undoubtedly the most beautiful constituency in the whole of Scotland, with the most talented people. I hope that Elena Whitham will follow me in representing it. My thanks go to them for electing me in the first place and also to my constituency team, without whom none of this would have been possible. My thanks go, too, to our civil servants and advisers, who—despite sometimes being maligned, albeit unintentionally—do a fantastic job, and to our team of clinical advisers, who I think are second to none.

Finally, there is a group of people who are rarely mentioned, but without whom cabinet secretaries and ministers would flounder, and that is our private office staff. I have been fortunate to have two quite remarkable private offices, to whom I owe a great deal of thanks.

Lastly, Presiding Officer, I offer my very best wishes to you in your retirement, after many years of outstanding service to the Parliament and to the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Och, well, I am going to indulge myself now.

Mental Health Services (Renfrewshire South)

7. Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting mental health services in the Renfrewshire South constituency. (S5O-05152)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Clare Haughey is having trouble with her camera, so we will only hear from her.

Perhaps that was not your last word, cabinet secretary—we have lost Clare Haughey. It is a very specific question; perhaps you would be able

to address a little bit of it for Mr Arthur, if he asks the question again.

Tom Arthur: To ask the cabinet secretary what support the Scottish Government is providing to mental health services in the Renfrewshire South constituency.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): It is a very specific question, and I will make sure that Mr Arthur gets the detail of the answer that Ms Haughey would undoubtedly have been able to give.

I can say a couple of things that I think are really important. First, the mental health transition plan that Ms Haughey has overseen provides significant additional resource to mental health recovery, focusing not only on children and adolescent mental health services waiting times but on preventative mental health and wellbeing for the entire population. Secondly, I am pleased to say that a significant number of the community wellbeing centres, which we announced in a previous programme for government, are ready to be operational from 1 April, and others will come on stream very shortly after. They provide wider support services, particularly for children, young people and their families, which certainly focus on mental health, but with a preventative and supportive focus, all of which will be of considerable benefit.

I am very happy to ensure that Ms Haughey provides a detailed answer to Mr Arthur before today is out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Arthur has waived his right to a supplementary.

Organised Sport (Participation of Women and Girls)

8. **Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to encourage women and girls to participate in organised sport. (S5O-05153)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government appreciates the importance of sport and physical activity for women and girls and the positive impact that it has on their physical and mental health. As we look to rebuild sport in Scotland, we will have to support all women and girls to return safely to sport.

The Scottish Government is committed to working with sportscotland and the Scottish governing bodies of sport to rebuild membership and participation levels, following the negative impacts of the pandemic. To enable women and girls to undertake supported group exercise outdoors, we recently announced that, from 12 March, organised outdoor group non-contact sport

and physical activity can resume. Organised outdoor contact sport for boys and girls under 12 can resume from the same date, subject to sport-specific guidance.

Bill Kidd: I welcome the action that the Scottish Government has taken to break down the barriers that many women and girls face in accessing organised sport. I believe that it is important that women and girls are well represented in the sporting community of Scotland.

What action is the Scottish Government taking at a local level, particularly in schools, to encourage girls to participate in sports at a younger age? We know that teenage girls, in particular, are increasingly likely to drop their participation in organised sport.

Mairi Gougeon: In the school environment, the active schools programme will remain a central pillar of our efforts to get young people to participate in sport. We have more than 400 active schools staff across the 32 local authorities. Prior to the pandemic, in a single year, more than 300,000 young people made a combined 7.3 million visits to active schools sport and activity sessions before school, at lunch time and after school. That participation was supported by 21,000 volunteers.

For us to get back to and surpass those levels, it will be vital that we work with and listen to young people in order to rebuild their enthusiasm for sport. There are 150 registered secondary schools in the young ambassador programme, and sportscotland will target those schools and support the young ambassadors to promote participation in sport in their schools.

It is important that we raise the profile of women in sport. We have some fantastic role models, and it is important to highlight that. We seem to do particularly well when it comes to sports such as football and netball. We all have a role to play in talking about the sports at which women excel and in making the most of the positive role models that we have.

Communities and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Questions 6 and 8 have been grouped.

Community Engagement

1. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on increasing levels of community engagement since the enactment of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. (S5O-05154)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Since we introduced the 2015 act, we have taken many positive steps to increase community engagement. We have introduced participation requests and asset transfers, which provide a powerful mechanism for enabling communities to participate in public decision making and to take control of public land and buildings. Our investing in communities fund, which was launched in 2019-20 and is backed by about £11.5 million each year over three years, enables communities to decide on their terms how to address local challenges. Our national support programme for participatory budgeting has enabled over 122,000 voters to have a direct say on the allocation of millions of pounds. In addition, we are working in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, through the local governance review, to help to further empower communities and strengthen local democracy.

Christine Grahame: I thank the cabinet secretary for her response. As this is her final appearance in the chamber, I wish her well.

The Covid pandemic has brought communities together as never before, as has been seen in the work of Broughton Village Store, Tweed Togs, the Bridge in Galashiels, Tweeddale Youth Action, Penicuik Ambassadors, Gorebridge Resilience and many others—I do not want to try your patience, Presiding Officer. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that is community empowerment and something on which the legislation allows communities to build?

Aileen Campbell: I absolutely agree with all that Christine Grahame has said, and I thank her for her kind words. I am very familiar with some of the groups that she mentioned—particularly the Broughton shop, which is just over the hill from me, in Biggar. It has done a phenomenal amount of work.

If it had not been for our communities, the country would simply not have been able to demonstrate the resilience that it has demonstrated over the past year. We need to take that learning and make sure that we do not lose it, because, if we trust and support our communities, Scotland will succeed and we will meet all our aspirations in our national performance framework. I pay tribute to all the work that Christine Grahame's constituents have done over the past year. I sincerely thank them, because, without them, we would not be where we are.

City Centre and Beachfront Regeneration (Aberdeen)

2. Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it will provide for the regeneration of the

city centre and beachfront in Aberdeen. (S5O-05155)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): The Scottish Government is committed to working with Aberdeen City Council and other partners as they take forward the city and beachfront master plan. The Government has demonstrated its commitment to Aberdeen and its city region through a variety of strategic investments including our £125 million commitment to the Aberdeen city region deal, the £62 million that has been committed to the energy transition fund, and the significant on-going capital funding for community-led regeneration.

The Government's new £325 million place-based investment programme will provide further funding to Aberdeen over the next five years. The programme will help to link and align place-based investments, ensuring that there is a coherent approach to regeneration with the involvement and support of communities.

Lewis Macdonald: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I, too, wish her well after her term as a member of this Parliament and a minister. She will have heard, at First Minister's question time, about the devastating news for Aberdeen city centre and its regeneration of the proposed closure of the John Lewis store on George Street, with the loss of 265 jobs. She may have heard, since then, that a petition has been launched, calling for John Lewis to reconsider that decision. I note that the Aberdeen economic partnership has offered to engage with the John Lewis Partnership to discuss ways in which the decision can be reconsidered.

Will the Scottish Government support that offer from the Aberdeen economic partnership? Will the cabinet secretary work with all concerned to seek to persuade John Lewis to reverse the decision?

Aileen Campbell: I thank the member for his question. Like the First Minister, I share the disappointment about John Lewis's plans and I appreciate that this will be an incredibly concerning time for the staff who are involved and their families. The First Minister also intimated that support would be available through the partnership action for continuing employment initiative. However, if further developments continue, it would be wise for the Government to continue to explore all options with regard to what can be done and to identify what actions, activity and support might be helpful in this space.

I point out that, in a more general sense, we have recognised that our high streets will be critical to our recovery. Today, along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we have published our response to the town centre action

plan review, which I commend to Lewis Macdonald. The review was led by Professor Leigh Sparks, who is esteemed in that field, and I pay tribute to him for his work in the area.

We will work across Government to look at any options and opportunities that might exist, and we will engage with Lewis Macdonald as best we can. I put on record my thanks to him for all his contributions to the Parliament's work and for being a strong voice for Aberdeen and the north-east for many years. I wish him well in the next chapter of his life.

Orkney Islands Council (Meetings)

3. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met Orkney Islands Council and what was discussed. (S5O-05156)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I last met James Stockan, leader of Orkney Islands Council, and John Mundell, interim chief executive, on Tuesday 23 March to discuss a range of issues relating to the relaxation of Covid restrictions specific to Orkney and the islands.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response and join other members in wishing her all the best, as I did in yesterday's debate on the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill.

The cabinet secretary will be aware of the disparity in funding per head of population between Scotland's three island authorities. At present, that represents a shortfall in Orkney's allocation of around £8 million in comparison with Shetland's and £15 million in comparison with that of the Western Isles. That has been a long-standing concern of Orkney Islands Council, but little progress has been made over recent years. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that disparity needs to be addressed in the next session of the Scottish Parliament?

Aileen Campbell: I thank Liam McArthur for his kind words. As he knows, funding is allocated to local authorities through the distribution formula, which is agreed with Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Any changes to that would need to be made via COSLA. Whoever holds my position in the next session will be able to continue to engage with COSLA on that basis.

I point to the fact that there has recently been investment through the islands deal, which my colleague Michael Matheson has taken forward. There continues to be a recognition of the importance of our island communities to the success of Scotland.

We will take on Mr McArthur's viewpoint. I will make sure that whoever takes up my position in the next session understands his concern, but any changes to the distribution formula would have to be made through engagement with COSLA.

Housing Strategy

4. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its housing strategy. (S5O-05157)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): On 15 March, we published Scotland's first long-term housing strategy, "Housing to 2040", which is a 20-year plan to deliver good-quality, energy-efficient, zero emissions homes with access to good outdoor space, transport links, digital connectivity and community services. It includes new commitments to deliver 100,000 affordable homes by 2032; to set a single set of standards for our homes; to tackle high rents in the private sector; and to decarbonise heating in line with our climate ambitions.

However, as we have said many times before, housing is about so much more than bricks and mortar. The strategy will also contribute to our aims of tackling poverty and inequality and driving inclusive economic growth. Realising the ambition in the strategy will require a lot of hard work, but in the pursuit of a fairer, greener Scotland, that work will be more than worth it.

Annabelle Ewing: I very much welcome the Scottish National Party Scottish Government's ambitious house-building plans for the next decade. Can the cabinet secretary provide any clarity to me, as the MSP for the Cowdenbeath constituency, as to what is planned at this stage for the kingdom of Fife in terms of the number of houses to be built, the jobs to be created and the investment to be made?

Aileen Campbell: Scotland has led the way on the delivery of affordable housing across the United Kingdom, with almost 100,000 affordable homes being delivered since 2007. That has been driven by my colleague Kevin Stewart, who has been a great colleague to work alongside, and I pay tribute to him for his commitment on the issue.

"Housing to 2040" includes an ambition to deliver a further 100,000 affordable homes up to 2032, with at least 70 per cent being for social rent, once the current 50,000 affordable homes target has been delivered. That ambition will play a key role in helping Scotland's economy to recover from the pandemic, including supporting a total investment package of around £16 billion and 12,000 to 14,000 jobs each year. It is not just about good homes, it is also about creating great

places, and I know how committed Annabelle Ewing is to making sure that her constituents and her colleagues in Fife Council are supported. Therefore, we have made more than £150 million available for affordable housing in Fife over the session, which will deliver a range of housing and a mix of affordable tenures but will focus primarily on social rented housing, which is a key Government priority.

I commend Fife Council for its ambitious projects across the kingdom of Fife to ensure that people across Fife get access to good housing, and we will continue to keep Annabelle Ewing updated about what that means for Cowdenbeath.

“Housing to 2040”

5. Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to take forward the recommendations by the tenement maintenance working group in its strategy, “Housing to 2040”. (S5O-05158)

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Our new long-term housing strategy, “Housing to 2040”, sets out our intention to introduce a new housing standard so that everyone can expect the same high standards of housing and accessibility no matter what kind of home or tenure they live in. The new standard will support our commitment to address common standards in tenements and take action on the recommendations of the parliamentary working group on tenement maintenance. I will take the opportunity of the last day of term to thank the members of that group, particularly my colleague Ben Macpherson, who helped found it.

Maureen Watt: If in post after the election, will the minister be bold in following those recommendations, such as those on compulsory owners associations and building reserve funds, so that our wonderful tenement buildings such as the granite ones in Torry in my constituency and across Aberdeen will be restored to their former glory?

Kevin Stewart: We intend to undertake research this year that will consider the need for building reserve funds for tenement dwellings and mandatory owners associations for tenements, as recommended by the parliamentary working group. The outcome of that research will allow us to make a determination on what the levels of building reserve funds should be set at and the costs for mandatory owners associations. We will take action for the benefit of Maureen Watt’s constituents in Torry and other places.

I pay tribute to my friend and colleague Maureen Watt, who has been amazing in the Parliament for her constituents. Maureen and I go back a long

way—30 years—and she has been the best possible friend. The only time that she has ever feared me is when I thought that she was going to go into labour in a car that she and I were in on a snowy country road.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was too much information, Mr Stewart. [*Laughter.*] We will move on quickly.

Affordable Homes

6. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to increase the number of affordable homes. (S5O-05159)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: How well do you know Ms Maguire, Mr Stewart? [*Laughter.*]

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Not that well, Presiding Officer.

As the cabinet secretary has mentioned, having already delivered almost 100,000 affordable homes since 2007, we want to deliver another 100,000 homes by 2032, with 70 per cent of those being for social rent. As our 20-year housing strategy, “Housing to 2040”, sets out, that ambitious target will begin when the current 50,000 affordable homes target has been delivered, and work to continue to do all that safely is on-going. To start on that path, we are investing an initial £3.44 billion. Delivering those homes will be beneficial to Scotland’s communities and will provide a significant economic boost, supporting a total investment package of around £16 billion and up to 14,000 jobs a year.

Ruth Maguire: Within the strategy, I particularly welcome the fact that the new housing standard applies to all tenures, so that everyone will be living in good-quality accommodation regardless of whether they own it or rent it from a private or social landlord.

I have had a number of constituency cases where the local authority has delayed repairs to damp properties, including to the homes of folk who are vulnerable due to their age or medical conditions, citing the pandemic restrictions as the reason. After representations have been made to the local authority, those cases have been resolved. Can the minister confirm that such repairs are deemed essential, that all landlords have a responsibility to maintain their stock and that nobody should be expected to stay in a damp property?

Kevin Stewart: I appreciate that dampness in folks’ homes can be distressing. Any house that is let by a social landlord must be substantially free from rising and penetrating damp. If problems come to light, any repairs must be carried out as

soon as is reasonably possible. Repairs of that nature can be carried out under the coronavirus restrictions where the work is essential and can be done safely, and where owners' or tenants' permission is granted.

The current regulations set out essential work for minimum standards of habitability, safety and maintenance. Work to prevent significant problems developing, for example, should be carried out in people's homes at this time. Of course, it is up to landlords, in consultation with tenants, to carry out a risk assessment to ensure that such work can be carried out safely.

Affordable Homes

8. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many affordable homes it has delivered since 2007. (S5O-05161)

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Scotland has led the way in the delivery of affordable housing, with almost 100,000 affordable homes delivered since 2007, including more than 68,000 for social rent, of which more than 15,000 were council homes. We want everyone in Scotland to live in a warm home that is affordable and meets their needs, which is why housing, and affordable housing in particular, has been and remains a priority for this Government.

As the member knows, we were on track to deliver 50,000 homes within this parliamentary session, and we remain committed to completing that job. Unfortunately, coronavirus got in the way. We are working with partners across the housing sector to deliver the remaining homes as quickly and safely as possible.

Gillian Martin: Housing provision in rural areas is critical in ensuring that we stem rural depopulation and support communities to thrive, as the minister knows. Can he explain how the Scottish Government's housing strategy will specifically support rural communities such as mine in Aberdeenshire East?

Kevin Stewart: We make clear in "Housing to 2040" our commitment to take action so that rural and island communities have access to high-quality affordable housing in the market that has been planned alongside the economic and physical infrastructure that is required to help people live, work and thrive in those areas and to help stem rural depopulation. We have committed to continuing the £30 million rural and islands housing fund, which supports additional affordable rural and island homes as part of the wider affordable housing programme. In addition, we have announced new permitted development

rights to allow for the conversion of agricultural buildings for residential and commercial uses.

This might be my last opportunity to speak, Presiding Officer, so I wish you a very happy retirement, and I wish the cabinet secretary all the best in her future endeavours. You are two cracking South Lanarkshire quines, and I will miss you greatly. *[Applause.]*

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

Covid-19 (Community Support)

7. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much it has spent supporting communities affected by Covid-19 in the last year. (S5O-05160)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): We have allocated more than £1 billion to support local communities through the coronavirus pandemic. That includes over £550 million through the communities funding package, which includes more than £140 million to tackle food insecurity, £51 million to enable the continued provision of free school meals during school closures and holiday periods, and over £100 million for the third sector and community organisations.

Our 2021-22 Scottish budget includes an additional £100 million to support households through pandemic support payments, which means that low-income families could receive up to £530 additional financial support between last December and the end of the year.

Dr Allan: The Scottish Government dashboard shows that £6.9 million of the funding in the areas that the cabinet secretary mentioned has been spent in my local authority area. What will the Government do to ensure that such funding develops in line with the positive developments that I hope we will see as we come out of the final phases of the Covid pandemic in the months ahead?

Aileen Campbell: We will always seek to ensure that we learn all that we can from the support that we have put in place so that we can continue to support people during the pandemic. Our focus will be relentless on ensuring that that is the case and is what drives our recovery approach.

Covid has exposed the inequalities of our society. Recovery should therefore not be about returning to normal, as normality has failed too many. Instead, we should renew and reform our country to create a fairer, equal Scotland.

Guided by the work of the social renewal advisory board and its calls to action, my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville and I have

published our initial responses to the board's work, and there is £25 million to take forward some of the recommended actions.

Ensuring that people and place are at the heart of the recovery will be the job of the next Government and members in the next session. I know and expect that Alasdair Allan will ensure that that will continue to be the case.

As this is my last opportunity to speak in the chamber, I would like to say a few words, which will be my final contribution in the Parliament. I am aware that I have had many final contributions of late—last night, Christine Grahame said that I had had more comebacks than Frank Sinatra. However, these are my final words. I say all this with an enormous lump in my throat as the reality of not seeking re-election to serve the constituents of Clydesdale starts to hit home. Clydesdale is, of course, the most beautiful constituency in Scotland.

When I intimated that I would not seek re-election, I said that a big part of that was about wanting to spend a bit more time with my boys, Angus and Crawford, who are growing up fast. They have never known their mum not to be a minister. When I had my youngest son, I became the first Scottish minister to take maternity leave.

Stepping back from front-line politics does not mean stepping back from my aspirations for this country and for our communities. Just as the country has relied on its communities to help to respond to the pandemic and help with our resilience, so, too, will the recovery be dependent on them—on their creativity, commitment and ingenuity. Flourishing, vibrant communities that are empowered and trusted will be central to how we reform and renew our country, with fairness and equality at its heart. It has been my privilege to serve as the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government and to get a glimpse of the glorious diversity of our communities and all the rich vibrancy that they bring. It has also been a privilege to serve in all the portfolios that I have held.

Without this descending into an Oscar-style tribute, I want to say thanks to my ministerial colleagues, the amazing group of Scottish National Party MSPs whom I have worked and campaigned alongside, and all the staff in the Parliament—the posties, the canteen staff, the clerks and everyone who keeps the Parliament ticking over. I thank my office staff in Carlisle—Charlene, Euan and Jack—my long-suffering private office, and all the Government officials and special advisers who provide so much support to ministers and have done so much during this challenging year.

For now, I am looking forward to new challenges ahead, including hitting the road with my colleagues to campaign for the restoration of powers to the Scottish Parliament. I know that we do not all share that objective, but I say to all MSPs across the chamber and across the parliamentary divide whom I have worked with, chewed the fat with and had some laughs along the way with, and, indeed, to everyone: thank you for being great colleagues. All the best to you, Presiding Officer, as well. I look forward to catching up with you in South Lanarkshire sometime soon. But for me, that's all folks. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. That was a lovely way to conclude portfolio questions.

Greensill Capital UK (Administration)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Right—back to normal. The next item of business is a statement by Fergus Ewing. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:50

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): My statement concerns the administration of Greensill Capital UK Ltd and its implications for businesses in Scotland. At the outset, I emphasise that the subject matter concerns sensitive commercial affairs, so I will be careful in my remarks and in answers to members' questions, in order to avoid saying anything that might breach commercial confidences or cause harm. I hope that members, too, might recognise the sensitivity of the situation and the reasons for my caution.

Greensill Capital is a United Kingdom headquartered financial services company that specialises in supply chain finance, working capital solutions and securitisation. Greensill Capital also has operations in the United States, Germany, Australia, Singapore, China, South Africa and the middle east. The last full audited accounts of Greensill Capital UK for the year to 31 December 2019 show revenues of \$420 million and total assets of \$682 million. More recently, the business has faced financial difficulties, and on 8 March, joint administrators from Grant Thornton were appointed to Greensill Capital UK.

Although Greensill Capital has no base in Scotland, the reverberations of its administration might still be felt here. At this stage, reliable information on the extent of Greensill's operations—the range of companies that it financed and the financial exposure of creditors—remains unclear. A more substantive picture should emerge over the coming weeks, as the administrators assess Greensill's state of affairs and prepare a statement of proposals for creditors.

In the meantime, certain wider commercial repercussions of the Greensill administration have begun to surface. For example, it is clear that the Gupta family group of companies, known as GFG Alliance Ltd, has been impacted. GFG Alliance is a large multinational company with more than 35,000 employees, operating from some 270 sites in 30 countries around the world. In Scotland, GFG owns several businesses, through Liberty Steel Group Holdings UK Ltd, Alvanne Aluminium Group and SIMEC Energy group. Those groups operate the Dalzell and Clydebridge steelworks,

the Lochaber aluminium smelter, the hydroelectric power station at Fort William, Jahama Highland Estates and Shand Cycles Ltd. Some of those businesses have received public sector support.

Across other parts of the UK, the GFG Alliance is prominent in the steel, engineering and energy sectors. For example, Liberty Steel UK is Britain's third-largest steel producer and employs nearly 3,000 people at 11 sites across England, Scotland and Wales.

I spoke with Sanjeev Gupta, who is the executive chairman of GFG Alliance, last Thursday. He was open about the challenges that are posed by the collapse of Greensill, but he also emphasised the underlying operational health of GFG's Scottish operations. He indicated that market demand is strong and that metal prices are currently among the best in more than a decade. Hence, GFG's Scottish steel and aluminium businesses are presently on a profitable footing, according to Mr Gupta, who told me that the group has adequate funding for its current needs while it progresses refinancing. Nevertheless, he confirmed that stabilising the finances of the GFG Alliance in the near term is important to its future activities, including those in Scotland.

On Monday, I spoke with the trade unions that represent GFG workers in Scotland—GMB, Unite and Community. They expressed a very positive picture of the current strong markets in metals, and of the strategic value in retaining the skills and industrial capacity in those operations, which are needed for the transition in Scotland to a low-carbon economy.

Members of the Scottish Parliament—in particular, those who have constituency interests—will, rightly, want to be kept up to date. That is why I was keen to make my statement and take questions before the election recess. I also undertake to update members further, as required by circumstances, throughout recess. I assure members that officials are engaging regularly with the business at local and national levels and through a ministerial task force. We are monitoring the situation closely.

I have information to provide about GFG's footprint in Scotland, the public sector support that has been provided and the economic return. Liberty Steel Dalzell Ltd is the recipient of a Scottish National Investment Bank loan of £7 million. The Dalzell plant recommenced steel production in late 2016, having been mothballed by its previous owner, and the loan facility was agreed in March 2017. According to information from the business, at the end of the 2020-21 financial year Liberty Steel Dalzell will have invested over £18 million to make Dalzell operational and to enhance its capability and its product portfolio.

In the five years since reopening in 2016, Dalzell will have produced and sold over 300,000 tonnes of heavy plate steel. Sales to domestic and international markets have generated more than £163 million in revenue. Perhaps most important is that Dalzell currently employs 140 workers, including 3 apprentices, thereby retaining vital industrial skills and supporting livelihoods.

In autumn 2016, the Government intervened in support of continuing aluminium production in Lochaber. The Fort William smelter is of huge significance, as it is the UK's last remaining smelter. Its current production capacity is 48,000 tonnes of aluminium per year. The complex has been operational for more than 90 years and remains a major source of employment in the west Highlands.

In 2016, Scottish ministers sought Parliament's permission, through the Finance and Constitution Committee, to provide a guarantee of the smelter's power purchases. The committee reviewed and approved the contingent liability. Our support, which we offered to any bidder with plans for long-term industrial operations of the Lochaber businesses, prevented break-up of the assets and closure of the smelter. The amounts that are guaranteed by the Scottish Government are published in its consolidated accounts; they vary between £14 million and £32 million per annum over the 25-year life of the guarantee.

Members may be interested in the economic return. According to information that has been provided by the business, GFG has created 40 new jobs in Lochaber since 2016, which has increased total employment in the complex to 200 jobs, currently. Payroll and pension contributions that have been generated from that employment total over £41 million. Spending with suppliers, including many local businesses, has exceeded £34 million since GFG's acquisition. Those income flows are the very life-blood that sustains communities and supports a large and valuable supply chain with hundreds of associated jobs.

In conclusion, Presiding Officer, I remind members of the sensitive commercial nature of the issues arising from the administration of Greensill Capital (UK) Ltd. Its collapse has clearly caused difficulties for a range of businesses, so we must tread carefully in order to avoid fuelling harmful speculation. We in the Government will continue to do everything in our power to support Scotland's steel and aluminium sectors and their highly-skilled workers. Our actions will always be motivated by the desire to protect and create jobs, and to protect strategic industrial assets and foundational sectors on which additional supply chains and jobs rely.

As ministers, we are accountable for the decisions that we take. I assure Parliament that,

when we have intervened, substantial due diligence has been undertaken and appropriate measures put in place to protect, and minimise the exposure of, public funds.

No industrial intervention is without risk, but I believe that we have struck the right balance. We have supported and enabled shorter-term and longer-term industrial and economic objectives. We are mitigating risks as far as we can. Critically, we have kept Scotland's steel industry, we have kept our only aluminium smelter open and we are keeping people in skilled work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I will allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we should move on to the next item of business.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the statement, which we have been calling for, and I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of it. There has been considerable media speculation about the future of the GFG group, given the financial issues that are affecting Greensill Capital and what that means for the enterprises concerned in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

It is encouraging to hear from the cabinet secretary that the GFG group believes that the underlying businesses are viable. What assurances can he give us, therefore, about the future of the workforces at Dalzell, Clydebridge and Fort William? The cabinet secretary says that Mr Gupta believes that the businesses are healthy, but has the Scottish Government done anything itself to have that independently verified, rather than just relying on Mr Gupta's word that that is the case?

Secondly, there are public moneys at stake. The Government has a poor track record of investing public funds—I am thinking of Burntisland Fabrications Ltd, Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd and Prestwick Airport Ltd. It has been suggested that the total guarantee from the Scottish Government is close to £600 million. Is that figure correct? How does the Scottish Government assess the overall risk to public funds today in the event of a financial collapse of the GFG group?

Fergus Ewing: I can assure Mr Fraser that continued operation of the smelter and the steelworks are foremost in our objectives. I made that absolutely clear when I met trade union representatives on Monday, when we had an extremely useful discussion. In that discussion, they shared with me their view that the workforce in both plants are optimistic and confident about the future ability of the plants to operate successfully. We have been advised that the

aluminium smelter at Fort William has been trading profitably. Mr Fraser asked what independent analysis we do of that. We receive regular information, which our officials share and discuss with our professional advisers, as Mr Fraser would rightly expect.

As he was a member of the Finance and Constitution Committee that approved the guarantee—along with colleagues in his party and other parties, as was right and proper—Mr Fraser should be aware that in order to provide mitigation of and protection against risk, we obtained appropriate securities, including security over the smelter and the hydroelectric station. I confirm that those are very valuable assets and that, although the security value is commercially confidential, it is very significant indeed.

We took that action to avoid the loss of a steel industry and of the only remaining aluminium smelter in Britain. If we had not acted, they would have closed.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement, and I welcome the engagement with trade unions. I remind the Parliament that I am a member of Unite and of the GMB.

The collapse of Greensill Capital raises concerns for jobs, businesses and public finances, not just here in Scotland but across the UK and beyond. The cabinet secretary said that the Scottish Government is mitigating risks as far as it can. Could he elaborate on the action that has been taken and on whether there are any constraints or barriers to acting more fully?

Like Murdo Fraser, I was wanting to hear a bit more about the verification of what Mr Gupta has said about adequate funding for current needs. Beyond the strength of his word, what particular action is being taken to check out what he has said to the cabinet secretary?

Given the wide-ranging interests of GFG Alliance and its close connections to Greensill, can the cabinet secretary outline what action the Government will take, not just to protect jobs and vital industries in the short term but, much more importantly, for the longer term, too?

Fergus Ewing: I thank Monica Lennon for her question—she asked several questions, in fact. I can say that GFG Alliance is seeking to undertake a refinancing. That is a sensitive commercial matter and we need to be careful not to prejudice or undermine the process. I stress that we will do everything in our power to assist the steel and aluminium businesses and support their highly skilled workers. Back in 2016, when we realised that workers at Dalzell would be made redundant, we devised a special skills course for them. As a result, they were reskilled and retained, and they

were not lost to the steel plant. If we had not done that, we would not have been able to reopen the steel plant. The cost of that intervention was—I have the figure here—just under £200,000.

We can consider making a number of interventions. We will leave no stone unturned in doing so and we will continue to work closely with the trade union representatives, as we did at Dalzell in 2016. At that time, the task force that I chaired met 13 times. It was a very large group that included one Richard Leonard, who was at that point a trade union representative. We worked very well, with no politics involved—we were focused on the objective of providing a future for the jobs at Dalzell. We have done that thus far, but we are not complacent and we are therefore doing everything that we possibly can to secure that future further.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Willie Rennie. I repeat the usual mantra—it is not directed at you, Mr Rennie—of shorter questions, shorter answers.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Five years ago, the Government told us that the multiplier and supply chain impacts in Lochaber would be worth 2,000 jobs. Are we ever going to see those jobs? What discussions did the cabinet secretary have with Mr Gupta about creating those jobs?

Fergus Ewing: In my opening statement, I went over the number of jobs that have been provided. Those jobs are valuable and I hope that the Liberal Democrats support that—they certainly do locally in Lochaber.

I am pleased that we have received assurances on the safeguarding of 165 jobs and the creation of 44 new jobs at Lochaber. I am also pleased that the company has assured us that it has invested more than £41 million in the business since it took over. My understanding, from its information, is that that has included substantial investment in the value of the hydro assets and the further connection of those assets to the national grid, thereby increasing the security value of the property.

Of course, the problems facing the automotive sector meant that the company could not proceed with its original plans. That is simply a fact. In 2016, nobody—neither Mr Rennie, nor me, nor anybody else—anticipated the intervention of Covid. However, the company has brought forward an amended plan that proposes a billets plant and a canning plant. We are working with the company and I was involved in chairing the Lochaber group that deals with it on that matter.

There are challenges ahead, but we are working extremely hard with everybody in order to achieve delivery of those objectives.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and for the Scottish Government's active involvement in the smelter; I know that the cabinet secretary knows it well.

The cabinet secretary was involved in the launch of a—[*Inaudible.*]—about the expansion plans. He is right to say that it is important that there is no speculation. Is he currently able to talk about the status of that plan for the smelter?

Fergus Ewing: I am not quite sure that I caught all that, but the company's plans for expanding activities at Lochaber are in the public domain; I can share more information on that with Mr Finnie.

Those plans, rather than involving the automotive sector and a wheels factory, now involve the billets market, which is broader, I think, and offers real opportunities for job creation. They also include plans for a canning plant that would create for sale some of the finest Highland water from Ben Nevis and its environs, which offers an exciting prospect. The plans are detailed and the investment figures are clear, and I will endeavour to share that information with members across the chamber.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): My grandfather spent most of his working life in the Dalzell mill, so I know just how much it meant to have those jobs and that production secured. Steel is synonymous with my constituency.

Although I know what the steel sector means to my constituents in Motherwell and Wishaw, what does it mean to Scotland's economy and Scotland's future?

Fergus Ewing: Like Clare Adamson's family, many families in the centre of Scotland have the steel industry very close to their hearts and many people have seen their sons and, indeed, daughters work in the plant. That is a story that we wish to continue, particularly as we explore low-carbon opportunities. I believe that the workers at the plant want that positive story to be told and their hard work to be recognised.

I finish by paying tribute to the trade union representatives who assisted me in the task force in 2016, including the inspirational Steve McCool, Ross Clark, Derek Fearon, Richard Leonard, Kenny Jordan and David Tarren. Indeed, I had the pleasure of meeting up again with Ross Clark on Monday to thank him and the workforce for their great work for Scotland.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to provide updates over the course of the campaign recess.

On the Fort William plant, when the plans were changed and announced, the cabinet secretary gave his support and said that support would be given by the Scottish Government. Has the Scottish Government reviewed the business plan for the facility? In its view, are the plans credible? Given the level of support for the facility, what support has the minister sought from the company over the plans?

Fergus Ewing: My officials and I were closely involved in detailed work when we renegotiated the original plan that was approved by the Finance and Constitution Committee, in order to alter the business plan and move away from the model that was reliant on the automotive sector, for reasons that I described earlier, towards more profitable opportunities. We also had professional advice on those plans before we ascribed our approval thereto. We had lengthy discussions and negotiations, which are subject to commercial confidentiality, about the basis of the alterations to the plans and we informed the Finance and Constitution Committee of all that work.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Why was it important that the support went only to a business with plans for long-term operations of the Lochaber premises? What has happened to those plans?

Fergus Ewing: The one clear reason why we took the approach that we did in offering support only to businesses with plans for long-term operations of the Lochaber businesses, including the smelter, was that if we had not done that, the outcome might have been that whereas the hydro asset might have found a purchaser, the smelter would not, and the last smelter in Britain would have shut. That was what motivated us then and it is what motivates us now.

It is true that the situation is challenging, but we are leaving no stone unturned as we try to secure the future for the excellent workers at the Lochaber plant, who are proud of what they do and are trading profitably and providing an excellent return for the local economy. The plant is very much part of the local culture in Fort William and Lochaber.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am pleased to receive reassurance with regard to the GFG Alliance's operations in Scotland, especially in Lochaber. When it purchased the Alcan estate and smelter in Lochaber, a commitment was made to the Scottish Government and, indeed, to the community that it would transfer some of that vast estate to community ownership, which would have created more jobs and boosted the local economy. However, I understand, from East Lochaber and Laggan Community Trust, that that has not happened. I wrote to the cabinet secretary about

this, but, in his response, he appeared to wash his hands of the matter. Can I therefore prevail upon him to ensure that the GFG Alliance makes good its commitment to the community?

Fergus Ewing: I do not think that it is correct to say that I washed my hands of responsibility. I understand, from the company, that there were substantial discussions with community interests, including community councils, and that those took place over a long period. There were also quite detailed discussions about one particular aspect or project that took place.

The company has advised us that there have been substantial investments by the company in improving parts of the Jahama estate, such as the properties and supporting gamekeeping activities. I recognise that there needs to be further discussion on all those things, and, of course, in taking things forward, we wish to encourage the company to look at potential community involvement. However, our primary focus remains the preservation of the plant and the jobs.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): In his statement, the cabinet secretary mentioned the figures of £14 million and £32 million as being the guarantee that was approved in 2016, including by the finance committee, which I do not think I was on at the time. Does that mean that £32 million is the maximum guarantee that we would be liable for in any one year, or does it accumulate in some way so that there is a higher liability?

Fergus Ewing: In my statement, I set out the information that I thought it correct to share with Parliament, and the annual figure repayments vary. The agreement that we reached, and the guarantee that we granted, was, as Mr Mason says, explained and presented to the finance committee, for its approval, as a contingent liability. At that time, the Scottish ministers had to present all proposals to grant guarantees in excess of £1 million. The committee received detailed written advice on the proposed guarantee and had the opportunity to discuss it with me and senior officials before granting approval. As I have said, the committee included representation from across the political spectrum, and, as I understand it, the decision by the committee to approve the facility was unanimous. That cross-party support was welcome then and it will be welcome now. I hope that we will continue to see that approach, because it is certainly what the workforces want from us.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I own a fishery on the River Spey, and water from that river goes down to Lochaber, to the plant.

Before the Scottish Government agreed to the annual revenues guarantee—under the Lochaber guarantee—what due diligence did it do on the generating infrastructure of the plant? Did it accept just the due diligence that was undertaken by Mr Gupta?

Fergus Ewing: As would be expected, at the time of the original transaction, a whole range of due diligence was undertaken. It was conducted by employing leading firms and experts in the various primary aspects that we had to check in the transaction, so I am confident that we approached it and carried out due diligence appropriately. The cross-party finance committee played its required scrutiny role, and every member of every party gave support to the measure, which was very satisfactory.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): As a former employee of British Steel for more than four years, working at Dalzell, I have considerable concerns about the future of the industry. Is the cabinet secretary convinced that the steel industry has a long-term future in Scotland, that it will be a prosperous one and that the workers' jobs will be there not just for them but, hopefully, for future generations?

Fergus Ewing: My ministerial colleagues have carried out work on the long-term future of the steel industry, and we believe that there is such a long-term future. I alluded to the fact that the market and prices in steel are very satisfactory and higher than they have been for some considerable time. As we emerge from Covid, there is optimism within the sector, so the task that we face now is to overcome the current challenges, because we have the capacity to continue to trade on what we understand from the company is a profitable basis.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): In his statement, the cabinet secretary made some positive points, which I whole-heartedly endorse, about the Lochaber smelter. Does he share my view that the smelter is in good financial health, with a strong order book and new investment on stream? Will he do everything in his power to ensure that the smelter continues to be an active ingredient in Scotland's industrial strategy?

Fergus Ewing: Yes, I do, and yes, I will. I am extremely grateful for Mr Stewart's continued support.

I think that that might be David Stewart's last contribution in Parliament. He and I have known each other since, I think, 1990, when we first stood against each other. His presence here will be sorely missed. He is one of a small band of politicians who have been councillors, MPs and MSPs, and, over a long period, he has given devoted service to his constituents in the

Highlands. Over more than three decades, he and I have almost always had a constructive working relationship. He has pursued his campaigns with persistence but always with courtesy, and he will be a sad loss to the Parliament. I wish him, Linda and his family very well. *[Applause.]*

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I am aware that we are about to enter a period of parliamentary dissolution. That said, what is the single most important thing that we, as members of this Parliament, can do right now to try to maintain the jobs and reassure worried workers and their families?

Fergus Ewing: As one reads newspapers that are full of speculation, one does not tend to see in those columns of comment any consideration of the workforce. What struck me from meeting trade union representatives on Monday was the workforce's sense of commitment and enthusiasm to continue doing the great work that they do in Dalzell and Fort William. The single most important thing that we can do is bear in mind that the workers—the 200 at Lochaber and the 140 at Dalzell—should be uppermost in our thoughts. They deserve that we all act responsibly here.

Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

16:24

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

In dealing with the amendments, members should have with them the marshalled list, the bill as amended at stage 2 and the groupings of amendments. I remind members that, if we have a vote, the division bell will sound and proceedings will be suspended for five minutes. Each vote will last for one minute.

Section 6—Definitions

The Presiding Officer: Group 1 is on minor and technical amendments. Amendment 1, in the name of Emma Harper, is grouped with amendments 2 to 4.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I will be happy to move amendment 1 and speak to all the amendments in the group, which are minor and technical. At stage 2, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee agreed to an amendment that Jamie Halcro Johnston lodged whose aim was to clarify that woodland that is used for grazing was included in the definition of agricultural land. I had no strong views on whether that change was needed but, as the minister and the committee believed that the change would be helpful, I supported the amendment.

Technical issues were subsequently identified with the drafting of Mr Halcro Johnston's amendment, and amendments 1 and 2 will rectify those deficiencies. There will be no change to the substantive effect of Mr Halcro Johnston's amendment.

Amendment 3 will remove section 8. Section 129 of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 provides a defence for anyone who has killed or injured a dog if that was done to defend livestock from attack by the dog. When the bill was being drafted, we thought that it would be sensible to amend the terminology in section 129 to be in line with the changes that we were to make to the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953 and to ensure that the same definition of livestock was used in both acts.

However, it was pointed out to me at a late stage that section 129 of the 1982 act has already been repealed except to the extent that it provides a definition of livestock for the purposes of section 74 of the 1982 act, which allows people who find

living creatures other than stray dogs or livestock to keep them if they are unclaimed after two months. As section 129 of the 1982 act is no longer relevant to protecting livestock, there is no need for the bill to amend it. Accordingly, section 8 of the bill can be removed.

Amendment 4 is a minor tidying-up amendment. Section 9 includes section 6(4) in the provisions that are to be commenced the day after royal assent, but section 6(4) merely provides for the parliamentary procedure for regulations that are made under the power that section 6(3) creates, and there is no point in commencing one ahead of the other.

That anomaly came about because, in the bill as introduced, section 6(4) also provided for the parliamentary procedure for regulations to appoint inspecting bodies. Once the power to make such regulations was removed at stage 2, there was no longer any need for early commencement of section 6(4). Amendment 4 will clarify the commencement timing issues.

I move amendment 1.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I was going to ask Emma Harper for a little more clarification about amendment 3, but she has provided that. I thank her and the minister for their constructive approach to my vital clarification in relation to grazing. We will support all the amendments.

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson): The Scottish ministers fully support these technical amendments, which will improve the drafting of this important bill.

The Presiding Officer: That was short and sweet. Does Ms Harper wish to add anything to wind up?

Emma Harper: I am happy that the minor and technical amendments will be made and I am happy to proceed.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendment 2 moved—[Emma Harper]—and agreed to.

Section 8—Consequential amendments to the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982

Amendment 3 moved—[Emma Harper]—and agreed to.

Section 9—Commencement

Amendment 4 moved—[Emma Harper]—and agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: That ends consideration of amendments.

As members might be aware, at this point in 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 or franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. In my view, the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill does no such thing, so it does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): The next item of business is a stage 3 debate on motion S5M-24270, in the name of Emma Harper, on the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

Members should note that the question on the motion will be taken immediately following the conclusion of the debate.

16:30

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am weel chuffed to open the stage 3 debate on my Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill. I am pleased that the bill, which I have worked on for more than four years, has had unanimous cross-party support and is the final bill that will be passed during this parliamentary session.

The bill came about because, in my work as a member, I heard about many horrific incidents of dogs attacking sheep and kye. In pursuing those, I discovered that the current legislation, which is now 68 years old, was seriously outdated and needed to be modernised. I also discovered that incidents of livestock attack are underreported by farmers and crofters. Police Scotland said in its evidence to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee that the auld law

“has not kept pace with evolving practices within the farming industry, some terminology is outdated plus it does not provide sufficient deterrent that could influence an owner or person in charge of a dog to act with greater responsibility”.

It is now lambing season. Fields are full of pregnant ewes and new lambs and it is distressing to see photographs of carnage of sheep and lambs killed in attacks by out-of-control dogs. Those tragic incidents dramatically highlight why the bill is needed.

The bill extends the definition of “livestock” to include llamas, alpacas and buffaloes, which were not covered by the 1953 act. It also expands and modernises the definition of “worrying” to include to “chase, attack, and kill.” It also gives additional powers to the police to allow them to seize and detain a dog suspected of livestock attack on agricultural land for the purposes of identifying and securing evidence of the offence. The bill will increase the maximum penalties for that crime, bringing them in line with the animal welfare legislation introduced by the Government last year.

During the progress of the bill, we heard and saw evidence of the devastating financial and

emotional impact that incidents of livestock worrying and attack can have on both animals and farmers. Those attacks continue to increase in number, as recent media reports show.

During the Covid lockdown, we have seen how important it is for our physical and mental health to be able to access our wonderful countryside, which more people are doing. I encourage everyone to spend time in nature, enjoying the benefits it gives, and to do so responsibly. I am a dog owner and I get great pleasure from accessing the countryside with my twa dugs.

The bill will make a real difference to farmers and will, I hope, help to educate everyone about the importance of keeping our dogs under control around livestock. I hope to see a year-on-year reduction in incidents of worrying and attack and a rise in responsible access to our stunning countryside.

I thank a number of people and organisations, without whom we would not be here today. I thank the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for their scrutiny, MSP colleagues for their support, and the Scottish Government ministers Mairi Gougeon and Ben Macpherson and their officials. A huge thank you goes to Mary Dinsdale, Nick Hawthorne and Kenny Htet-Khin from the non-Government bills unit, to Charles Livingstone, the bill drafter, and to my office manager, Scott McElvanney, who has supported me from the beginning and who has helped us get to stage 3 today. More thanks will be given in my closing speech because the bill has been a real collaborative effort.

I welcome the cross-party way in which the bill has been taken forward and the suggested changes and amendments from committee members and from the Government. We have a piece of legislation that will really make a difference to farmers across Scotland and will promote responsible access to our braw and bonnie countryside, some of the best of which can be experienced in Galloway.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

16:34

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson): I am pleased to speak for the Scottish Government in support of this important legislation, which will do much to protect livestock all across Scotland.

I thank Emma Harper, once again, for her constructive and collaborative approach in bringing this bill to Parliament. A member's bill

does not reach this stage without significant commitment and a great deal of effort, and I know how much work Emma has put into the bill, particularly during the consultation stage, to hear from and listen to a wide spectrum of views. Scott in her parliamentary office has been essential to all that work, as have Parliament officials, particularly the Parliament's non-Government bills unit, and Scottish Government officials, and I pay tribute to my officials for the work that they have done on the bill and more widely.

I also thank the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for the role it has played in hearing evidence and producing helpful recommendations at stage 1. We considered the recommendations carefully, and they led to the changes that were brought in at stage 2 and a bill that now undoubtedly provides a modernised statutory framework on livestock worrying.

Scottish ministers are keen to emphasise that responsibility for investigating the criminal offence of livestock worrying shall remain solely with the police, with assistance from local authorities or the Scottish SPCA as appropriate in the circumstances.

Throughout the bill process, we have worked with key partners and stakeholders to clarify roles and responsibilities and to increase understanding about what private vets may be asked to do in relation to investigating livestock worrying incidents. As a result, I can advise Parliament that a simple protocol for vets in private practice will be drawn up, and it will be endorsed and publicised by all relevant parties, and made available to police officers.

That protocol will be available before the new powers to have dogs examined are expected to come into force later this year, and will give suitable prominence to the point that Police Scotland, as the investigating authority, will pay for any investigative work that it requests. That should reassure Peter Chapman and others who were interested in that point at stage 2.

There is no doubt that farmers and crofters care deeply about the welfare of their livestock, and the bill will help to ensure that all animals that are commonly farmed in Scotland receive the protection from attack that they deserve.

Some members might have noticed that the Scottish Government and the Scottish SPCA have been running a responsible dog ownership campaign. Although it has not been solely focused on livestock worrying, it emphasises the importance of training pet dogs correctly and reminds dog owners that they have a legal responsibility to ensure that their dog is kept under proper control in order to prevent incidents and reduce the risk of them occurring. The campaign

offers dog owners practical tips and advice to ensure that they know the steps to take to prevent their dog from getting out of control and causing harm to others, including livestock.

It will be necessary to halt that campaign as we move into the pre-election period, but I hope that a future Government will consider running it again. Education is key to ending livestock worrying incidents and the associated unnecessary suffering for all concerned.

It is not often that the Government comes to a stage 3 debate with very little to say in amendments, but we had none on the bill. That is a clear signal of the bill's success. Through members working collaboratively throughout the legislative process, we have a bill before us that is worthy of Emma Harper's hard work and I hope that members will pass it unanimously.

Indeed, in the circumstances that we are in, I reflect on my first speech in Parliament five years ago, when I stated that we share a

"unifying hope of a better Scotland"—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2016; c 81.]

across all parties, perspectives and constituencies. I think we would do well to keep that in mind. This bill is a good example of how, when we work together, we can produce effective legislation and make positive change for the common good of all Scotland. I ask members to pass the bill.

16:39

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business and a member of NFU Scotland.

I am pleased, once again, to have the opportunity to speak on the bill at its final stage, and on one of the final items of business of this parliamentary session. It will, I hope, be the seventh member's bill to pass at stage 3 in this session, and I again commend Emma Harper for guiding it through the Parliament.

This is one of the bills on which I have had the pleasure to speak at all stages, given that it came before the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee at stage 2. I was even able to add a few words to clarify the bill's coverage of woodland grazing. The minister graciously remarked that that was both "helpful" and "probably unnecessary", but I am pleased that that clarity is included—Scotland's woodland grazers will rest that little bit easier in their forests, orchards and thickets once the bill is passed, as will the many other livestock farmers across our country, who the bill defends.

More seriously, in the two decades of this Parliament, members' bills have served to get a number of important issues on to the floor of the chamber for debate and, on many occasions, effected significant change.

It is a positive feature of this Parliament that members' bills arise. As Emma Harper set out, her bill will update legislation on livestock protection drafted in the mid-1950s. It recognises that time and context have moved on.

Although the broad principles were agreed to, this has not been an easy bill. There has been significant amendment, reflecting the findings of the stage 1 report. However, Emma Harper's positive and consensual approach aided the process considerably.

There are two worthwhile objectives behind the bill. The first is animal welfare. At stage 1, we heard many examples of the injuries and distress that livestock can face from attacks and worrying incidents. Many of us will have direct experience of that, given that a number of farmers are represented in the chamber.

The second objective is to address the economic harm that occurs from damage to livestock. The incidents that the bill sets out to guard against can have considerable costs. We know all too well that farming today often runs on tight margins and that livestock are a valuable asset; and dog attacks can often be very distressing to livestock owners in their own right.

As I mentioned at stage 1, the bill is far from anti-dog. As a big supporter of Holyrood dog of the year, my pro-dog credentials are well known. However, too often, owners are not providing the proper control of dogs in rural areas. In some cases, that is bred by indifference; on other occasions, it is ignorance.

The Dogs Trust, in supporting the bill, has highlighted the many occasions when worrying incidents can take place without the owner present. A dog may have escaped from a garden, or been left out unaccompanied. That is why it is important that information campaigns are run, that school pupils—even in our urban communities—learn the countryside code and that everyone in our rural communities recognises the dangers that can occur. Prevention is key.

Our countryside is the heritage of everyone, and visitors are valued, but it is important that we are all sensitive to the fact that Scotland's rural areas are not just beauty spots but the workplace for many thousands of people and bring their own risks and dangers. Understanding them, and the people who populate those parts of our country, is vital.

I will not dwell long on today's amendments. They are largely technical changes that improve the bill and tie up loose ends from the volume of work that was undertaken in committee. However, the bill is much changed as a result of stage 2. The direction that it has taken has narrowed its scope a little but also provided considerable improvement.

The minister's work to ensure that penalties fitted well into recent reforms to animal legislation was a welcome step. My colleague Peter Chapman, with his considerable experience, lodged important amendments around specialist veterinary care and the allocation of costs, recognising the practicalities around examinations in practice and on the ground. John Finnie made an important point in committee that much of the work will hinge on the protocols and working relationships between farmers, vets, the police and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in relation to evidence recovery. Significantly, Emma Harper's changes reflected the considered view of the committee and the evidence that it heard.

The bill tackles a perennial issue of complaint in Scotland's countryside, which can cause considerable harm to livestock and the people who work our land.

I, too, add my thanks to all those who have contributed to improving the bill and supporting its progress, from the people in the sector who provided evidence to our always exceptional committee and legislation teams for their work on pulling together the stage 1 report and stage 2 amendments.

The bill has reached stage 3 thanks to the positive efforts of members from all parties, in the best traditions of this Parliament. I offer again my congratulations to Emma Harper. I am pleased to say that it will have the support of the Conservatives at decision time.

16:44

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The bill represents a positive step for Scotland's agriculture sector and our animal welfare standards, so Scottish Labour is happy to support it. I thank Emma Harper for introducing it.

Although I have now passed the baton of being Scottish Labour's rural economy spokesperson to my colleague Rhoda Grant, during my time in that position over the past three and half years, and also as a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee and a member who represents a large rural region, I have heard all too often about how common livestock worrying is and the devastating welfare, financial and emotional impact that it can have.

NFU Scotland has highlighted a recent survey, which found that 72 per cent of its members had been affected by livestock worrying, and the Scottish Government's estimates suggest that each incident costs an average of almost £700. Particularly alarming are the concerns, which a number of stakeholders raised, that rates of livestock worrying are on the rise.

It is therefore clear from the evidence that more needs to be done to tackle the scourge of livestock worrying, which will involve making legislative changes. The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953 is almost 50 years old and, sadly, like far too much of our animal welfare legislation, is badly in need of updating. The bill will help to deliver that improvement.

However, it is important that we get the legislation right, so I am pleased that, as the bill passed through Parliament, the member in charge, Emma Harper, took on board many of the concerns about the bill that I and other members of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee raised in our stage 1 report. The bill was much improved during stage 2 and, as a result, I am pleased that we have been able to get to a position where it seems that all parties can not only vote for it but do so with confidence that it will help to deliver the robust legal context that is needed.

I hope that the bill will be a first step towards making meaningful progress in reducing the rates of livestock worrying. However, of course, prevention is always better than punishment, and the passing of the bill must be a starting point for consideration of what more needs to be done to tackle the issue more widely. A key aspect of that must be a strong awareness campaign that will communicate not only the specific effects of the new laws but the seriousness of livestock worrying in general, and the practical steps that can be taken to avoid it.

Indeed, in her response to the committee's stage 1 report, Emma Harper noted:

"in most cases incidents of livestock worrying and attack are likely not premeditated and often lack ... intent to cause harm."

A number of stakeholders also made that point as the bill made its way through Parliament. The National Dog Warden Association (Scotland) said:

"Most dog owners do not believe their dog is likely to attack sheep and are shocked and distraught after the event."

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home pointed out that livestock worrying often occurs when the owner is not even present. Changing the law will not tackle that, but raising awareness of livestock worrying and how to prevent it might help.

The laws introduced in the bill and in the 1953 act are undoubtedly needed, but our aim needs to be that they are used as seldom as possible. That will mean having a strong awareness-raising campaign to accompany the bill, and longer-term measures such as consistent education and improved infrastructure and signage. In order to understand the issue and monitor our progress in tackling it, we will also need more information on the scale of the problem.

Dogs Trust has highlighted that issue, pointing out:

"By working to better understand the problem, we believe it will be possible to undertake targeted proactive measures that aim to result in the prevention of worrying, therefore protecting the welfare of livestock more robustly."

Stakeholders from a range of backgrounds also highlighted how underreporting and inconsistent data collection make it difficult to get a clear idea of just how common the problem is. That will need to be addressed if we are to ensure that the new laws and any related measures are working as intended.

Finally, although I am pleased that this particular issue is now being addressed, I am disappointed that it is not happening as part of a wider review of dog control laws. A comprehensive review of such laws is badly needed and I hope will be progressed in the next parliamentary session.

I am pleased to be voting in favour of the bill. I congratulate Emma Harper on her work in getting it to this point and also everyone who has been involved in developing and improving it throughout the process. That is a welcome change, which has seen cross-party support that will provide farmers and crofters with reassurance that the issue of livestock worrying is being taken seriously by all parties. It is also another small step in progress to improve Scotland's animal welfare regime. However, there is still an awful lot more to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mike Rumbles, who will be making his final speech in the Parliament.

16:49

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I, too, congratulate Emma Harper on introducing the bill. It will be good to get it passed before the session ends. It will be at the last minute, but that will still be good.

My one major concern about the bill has been addressed. It centred on the initial intention to give the police the power to search non-domestic premises without a warrant. That was the second time in this parliamentary session that that idea had appeared in legislation; the first time was in the Government's UEFA European Championship

(Scotland) Bill. I thank in particular the minister, Ben Macpherson, for looking at that in this second bill. Thankfully, on both occasions it was recognised that the provision would have overridden historical safeguards in our common law that were designed to protect people by not allowing authorities to search people's property without first obtaining evidence of a crime. Thank goodness that common sense prevailed, but it shows that vigilance is always required from MSPs when they examine legislation from the Government, from committees or from individual MSPs.

Presiding Officer, if you will indulge me for a moment, considering that this is my last speech in Parliament, I will make a general comment on the work of MSPs. Since I was first elected some 22 years ago, I have seen a marked change in, if I may say so, the independence of mind of my MSP colleagues—across the board; I am not leaving anybody out—when it comes to voting in the Scottish Parliament. We have collectively become far more tribal and more “My party, right or wrong”. I would urge those colleagues who are returned at the election to consider this. It is fine when the following three elements are aligned—your own values and beliefs, the interests of your constituents, and your party's leadership decisions. Unfortunately, in politics, those do not always neatly align.

For me, the most important of those three elements is remaining true to the values and beliefs that brought you to Parliament in the first place, especially when considering which way to vote at decision time and it is everybody's decision. The one example that I will give of what I mean is when we had the vote on closing our churches during the pandemic. Today's judgment from Lord Braid ruled that the move was unconstitutional, disproportionate, and consequently unlawful, yet how many colleagues voted against their better judgment? Only five of us voted against our own parties' position on it, and every party's decision was to support the Government's position on closing down the churches. Therefore, my message to returning MSPs is simply this: value your own judgment, and always do what you believe is the right thing.

Presiding Officer, you can see why my party leaders over the years—Jim Wallace, Nicol Stephen, Tavish Scott and now Willie Rennie—have not had an easy time from me. I thank them for their forbearance. On that point, I end my 17 years of contributions to parliamentary debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rumbles. I call John Finnie, who is also making his final speech in Parliament.

16:52

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Like others before me, I would like to thank everyone who has brought us to this point in the bill, and to congratulate Emma Harper, who has worked extremely hard over four years, as we have heard. Success will arrive in a very short time—the bill will achieve the success that it deserves.

Within the past fortnight, in Sutherland, just north of me here, there was a serious incident in which five sheep were killed and other beasts traumatised, as would be the owners, the neighbours and the police who are investigating the incident. As a young police officer in the 1980s, I was called to a scene of carnage, in which many sheep were killed and numerous others were injured and required to be humanely destroyed. At the request of the dogs' owners—good folk, whom I knew—I assisted the good vet, whom I knew, to put down dogs that I knew, so I am acutely aware of the wider implications of an incident like that in a rural community.

As has been said, legislation on its own will not stop livestock worrying, but this enhanced legislation, which includes new protection for my dear friends the camelids—I am a big alpaca fan—is needed and will help. Education is the key, so I welcome the recent Scottish Government social media campaign that the minister alluded to. This is entirely about responsible ownership. Scottish Greens will support the bill at decision time tonight.

I hope that the Presiding Officer will indulge me, as she did Mr Rumbles before me. Tha mi às na Cluainean, baile beag snog air taobh Loch Lòchaidh faisg air a' Ghearsdan. For that reason, it has been a real honour to represent the Highlands and Islands in the Parliament. I thank the constituents for the privilege to do so.

The day after I was elected in 2011, I arrived at the Parliament building for the very first time with my former colleague Dave Thompson MSP. We were greeted with a smile by the security officer and we immediately met Paul Grice, the chief executive, and had a blether. From that day to this, that is the way that engagement has been with the parliamentary staff. I take this opportunity to thank the present chief executive, David McGill, and each and every one of the parliamentary staff for their courtesy and assistance, and likewise the Scottish Government officials.

I have enjoyed my parliamentary work and particularly helping constituents. To that end, I could not have been better served than by Linda Wilson in my constituency office throughout both sessions. Linda's courteous and engaging manner has been invaluable in our helping countless

constituents, and she can be very proud of the support that she has given the communities of the Highlands and Islands. Thanks, too, to past employees Richard, Pauline and Gary, and to Kevin and more recently Liam, both real wordsmiths, who have been of great help to me.

My long-suffering office manager, Steven Dehn, has been with me since the start in 2011 and has tirelessly kept me on course with all things parliamentary. Steven was pivotal in the progression of the Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill into law and we are both very proud of being part of the big team behind the bill. I value my staff and will be for ever in their debt.

I value our Parliament, too. In the relatively short time for which it has been in place, it has brought great progress to our country. I always want to be forward looking and positive. However, I must say that I have been dismayed and indeed angered by those, particularly of late, who have sought to undermine our Parliament and our institutions for their own shabby ends.

Fortunately, session 5 of the Parliament will be remembered not for their wrecking crew's activities but for progressive legislation such as the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, the Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Bill, the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 and many other pieces of legislation including—dare I say it?—my bill that became the Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Act 2019, without which the historic United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill would not have been possible.

Soon, I hope, our Parliament will have to raise its horizons even further, our magnificent chamber resonating to new voices and wider issues, with debates about Scotland's foreign policy, Scotland's defence policy and all the powers that are in the meantime held elsewhere. I believe that it is a matter of when, rather than if, Scotland takes its place at the United Nations as an independent nation and rejoins our European friends.

Like many, I have spent the past year working entirely from home. I thank my wife of 45 years, Bernadette, for her endless support and forbearance. Perhaps there will be one final debrief for her after today's events, following which I promise that there will be no more running commentaries on the political business of the day.

In a year like no other, I thank all those who have helped our communities in whatever capacity, and I pay tribute to the Presiding Officer, Ken Macintosh; the Deputy Presiding Officers; the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane

Freeman; and our First Minister for their leadership.

I thank my dear Green colleagues and our super Green staff. Indeed, I thank colleagues across the chamber, past and present, for their camaraderie. I wish those who are standing down healthy and less-demanding days ahead. New members are coming, and I am delighted that our Parliament will welcome more women. I hope that my successor as lead candidate, the talented Ariane Burgess, my dear friend Gillian Mackay, and indeed my daughter Ruth Maguire, of whom I am very proud, will be among that growing number.

However, no matter how the next Parliament is configured, I wish everyone well in discharging their sworn duty of public service. Presiding Officer, one last time, mòran taing a-h-uile duine agus tioraidh.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mòran taing, Maighstir Finnie.

We move to the open debate. I ask for three-minute speeches, please.

16:58

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I can see people around the chamber timing me before I even start. [*Laughter.*] I wish John Finnie and Mike Rumbles well, and I particularly thank the cabinet secretary, Roseanna Cunningham. I believe that this will be her final speech. A few of the '99ers are left. I am struggling on and I hope to be returned. They will need to shoot me like an old horse. [*Laughter.*]

Anyway, I am pleased to speak in this debate on Emma Harper's bill, not only as convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare but as someone whose constituency straddles farms in Midlothian and the Borders, and as a colleague who substituted for Emma Harper on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee during the evidence sessions. I commend Edward Mountain for trying to chair me. It is a difficult job.

I also speak as someone who has introduced members' bills in previous sessions, sometimes with success, such as with the bill that became the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. Therefore, I know how tough it is for a member to get this far and how long it takes, even with the excellent expertise of the non-Government bills unit. The fact that Emma Harper has, I think, been progressing her bill since 2017 shows that it is a very long gestation.

The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill addresses the horrendous issue of the worrying and savaging of farmed livestock by unattended or out-of-control

dogs. Worrying carries a high welfare risk for livestock, and there are fatalities. The impact on farmers is not only financial, in the form of veterinary costs and the cost of replacing lost animals; perhaps the most significant effect is the emotional impact of having to deal with half-dead and mutilated dying animals.

The dog is not to blame, and the majority of dog owners walk their animals responsibly in all environments. A farm is a working environment. As usual, it is the minority—either through ignorance or wilfully—who let their dogs run wild. The proposed increase in the penalty available to a maximum fine of £40,000 and/or up to 12 months' imprisonment is long overdue. Indeed, with the upsurge in dog ownership during Covid, the bill could not be timelier. Its penalties are important, and I hope that, as well as reflecting the culpability of the dog owner, they will act as a deterrent. The bill should be a vehicle to educate dog owners on their responsibilities in the working countryside.

I have two asks of the Scottish Government in the event that the bill is passed, as I hope it will be, at decision time: first, that the bill receives from the Government the publicity that it gives to its own bills—I have been banging on about that for years; secondly, that we at last have a national database that is linked to the existing microchip data on Scotland's dog population, which brings together dog control notices and offences under the bill. In that way, serial offending owners will not be able to dodge being identified.

Finally, I offer many congratulations to my colleague Emma Harper on what I hope will be a well-earned success at decision time.

I have five seconds left, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was a very timely contribution.

17:02

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I have been frantically trying to cut my speech from four to three minutes, Presiding Officer; I will do my best.

I thank Emma Harper for introducing the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill. What a lot of work for all involved! I am keenly aware of how necessary the bill is. Much of the South Scotland area that I and Emma Harper represent is rural, so the worrying of livestock by dogs is an issue that is regularly raised by many constituents, especially those who are members of the farming community.

I regularly meet the NFUS, and the issue is never far from the agenda. Jen Craig, who is the chair of the National Sheep Association Scotland

and the NFUS Clydesdale branch, farms in my region and has expressed real concern about the situation. She said:

“Dog worrying and attacks on livestock is a problem that is becoming more frequent and in many cases more severe. Not only are the livestock suffering but so are the farmers and stockmen and women who care for them and have to witness these incidents.”

She added that it is not the dog's fault—I completely agree with that—and went on to say:

“It's the 5 second decision that the owner makes to not put their dog on a lead that can lead to these horrific incidents.”

Tom French, a former chair of the NFUS in my region of Forth and Clyde, who is a good friend and a farmer in Crawfordjohn, told me:

“very often the distress caused to the animals themselves, as they are chased can be overlooked, and not appreciated or even recognised by those whom the dogs are supposed to be under the control of.”

He has also heard of people who think that their dog is just “having fun” as an attack is under way. He added that such behaviour is irresponsible and is one of the reasons that some farmers are understandably cautious and worried about the anticipated increase in the number of members of the public who will take access in the future.

However, the benefits to wellbeing that the outdoors brings should be encouraged, and I fully support the work of organisations such as Paths for All and Healthy Valleys in Clydesdale, which runs successful dementia walks in my area. Those organisations provide wonderful opportunities for people to experience the pleasures that walks can bring, and the people who go on those walks often take their well-behaved pets with them—they are very welcome.

I am proud of Scottish Labour's introduction of the bill that became the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, which gave people the statutory right to roam, but that right comes with public responsibility. If Emma Harper's bill is passed, as I am sure it will be, it will serve as a tangible reminder of that responsibility to all concerned.

17:04

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): On their final day, I offer congratulations to all members who are leaving and to Mike Rumbles and John Finnie in particular for their contributions. I offer a special thanks to the Lanarkshire lassies. In 2011, I joined a very elite group that included Linda Fabiani, Christina McKelvie, Aileen McLeod and Aileen Campbell—formidable women, one and all. They have been my mentors, friends and support, and I wish Ms Campbell and Ms Fabiani the very best for the future.

I move from the Lanarkshire lassies to our Galloway lass, Emma Harper. I congratulate her on the bill's progress, which demonstrates the commitment to animal welfare that she has shown throughout her time in the Parliament. There was a timely reminder today of the important work that she has done in conjunction with the SSPCA after another family was left devastated by a pup dying within six days of being purchased from a puppy farm. I note that the SSPCA has been involved with work on the bill from the start. That has been a great partnership, which Ms Harper established. I thank the SSPCA for its contribution to the bill.

I thank Mr Macpherson for his comments about dog ownership. Owning a dog is a wonderful experience—it is one of the most wonderful things that a family can do—but it comes with the huge responsibility of ensuring that our dogs are under control at all times. I have been struck many times by the number of people I know who are surprised by their dog's behaviour. We have to educate people about that. Dogs are animals and they have an instinct when they engage with wildlife, whether that is in our countryside or gardens or even on our shorelines—I note the recent attack on a seal, which the dog owner did not expect to happen. That is why education is key, and I thank charities such as the SSPCA, the Dogs Trust and Battersea Dogs & Cats Home for the support that they give dog owners.

I thank Mr Halcro Johnston for noting that we live in a shared environment: what is, for some, a walkway for an afternoon stroll may be owned by a commercial organisation, and those spaces have to be respected.

It is important to note that the bill covers all our livestock, including llamas, sheep and alpacas, which Ms Harper mentioned earlier. I will finish by saying that if my good friend and colleague Rob Gibson was still an MSP, I am sure that he would say that it even extends to the buffalo on the farm in Achiltibuie.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: John Scott will make a brief contribution before we move to closing speeches.

17:08

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Thank you for your indulgence, Presiding Officer. I have very little to say except to welcome the passage of the bill and declare an interest—*[Interruption.]* I thank the cabinet secretary for her sedentary intervention.

I declare an interest as a sheep farmer and I give a heartfelt welcome to Emma Harper's bill, having twice had my in-lamb ewes worried by dogs. There is no worse sight than ewes with their throats ripped open and stomachs burst and dead lambs lying around. Owners of dogs do not appear

to care or understand the damage that they have done, not just to the dead and dying animals but to the whole of the surviving flock, leading to subsequent abortions and hypoglycaemic ewes.

I am delighted that the bill has been introduced by Emma Harper and I wish it every success.

17:09

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Like others, I congratulate Emma Harper on introducing the bill. I pay tribute to Mike Rumbles and John Finnie on their final speeches, and to you, Presiding Officer, as this is also your last meeting in the Parliament.

I am really pleased that Emma Harper introduced the bill. Even this short debate has shown the devastation that can be caused by dogs chasing animals such as sheep. Pregnant ewes can abort their lambs, as Emma Harper said.

Livestock worrying is absolutely distressing to animals. Claudia Beamish talked about owners thinking that their dogs are just having fun—that it is just what dogs do. However, the livestock are being absolutely terrorised. If the owner saw another animal terrorising their dog, they would see the distress that can be caused. There is no hierarchy of animals.

Dogs can kill sheep, as John Scott said. He painted a very vivid picture of what a farmer or crofter sees during sheep worrying incidents. It is devastating and absolutely heart-breaking, because such incidents involve somebody's animals—animals that they have cared for. It can also be costly, with people losing a huge amount of money.

Colin Smyth told us that most dog owners do not know that their dogs are likely to attack sheep. They are quite often shocked and disturbed by that, and they cannot understand how their dogs will react in such situations. As Clare Adamson said, some dogs have a built-in instinct to immediately start chasing sheep when they see them, which can lead to animals being bitten and killed.

Claudia Beamish highlighted that a lot more people are going out into the country, which means that sheep worrying is becoming a lot more common. As Colin Smyth mentioned, the NFUS said that 72 per cent of their members—a huge number of farmers—are affected by sheep worrying. The NFUS also said that the average cost is £700. If we add up each incident, we can see that it comes to a huge sum of money—money that is lost not just to individuals, but to the rural economy.

I support what Colin Smyth said about data. We will not be able to see how the bill is working

unless we gather the data about the incidents that occur and how they are dealt with.

Many members spoke about the important issue of awareness raising. The Government has said that it is taking that on and is making good investment in it, and that needs to continue. We need to make sure that people understand how their dogs will react in such situations. There needs to be education for those using the countryside, to make sure that they keep their dogs on a lead while out in the fields. Those fields might seem just to be wide open spaces in which their dogs can run, but people need to be very careful about what is being farmed in them. Fields can also be dangerous for dogs: cattle can turn on dogs and their owners, which can be absolutely terrifying not only for the dog but for the owner. People could be putting their own lives in danger.

I welcome Police Scotland having the role of policing livestock worrying. It should not be down to individual farmers.

I very much welcome the bill. I pay tribute to Emma Harper. I know that it is not easy to introduce a member's bill—it takes a lot of hard work, so I say well done. The bill will make a difference.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Peter Chapman, who is also making his final speech.

17:13

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): Let me remind the chamber for the last time that my entry in the register of interests states that I am a member of a farming partnership. As you say, Presiding Officer, it is the last time that I need to say that because, as most folks know, I am standing down from Parliament. As such, I beg some latitude from you, Presiding Officer, for my closing remarks, and maybe a wee bit more time.

I must address Emma Harper's Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill. Of course, I welcome the bill and the extra protection that it gives our farmers from attacks on their livestock by out-of-control dogs. Emma deserves a great deal of credit for successfully driving the bill to completion before recess, and I have no doubt that it will become law at decision time. Normally I would say much more, but as the bill has cross-party support and this is my final speech, I would like to cover some other issues that are important to me.

It is important that I say thank you to the many folk who have supported me in the past five years. My loyal staff here and in my Aberdeen office have been tremendous, and so have all the people who are sometimes forgotten but make such a difference to our lives and our ability to do our

jobs. I am talking about the folks in the Scottish Parliament information centre, our committee clerks and their teams, the information technology support staff, the security staff, the canteen workers, and the people in human resources and allowances. The list goes on. They all, without fail, do their jobs professionally, politely and with a smile. They are a great bunch of people, and they should be proud of their dedication to doing their best.

I wish that I could be equally complimentary about other people and other things that go on in the Parliament. Of course I cannot, because there is something sinister and worrying going on that is undermining the very credibility of the Parliament. It is, unfortunately, being perpetrated by the Scottish National Party—the very party that likes to tell us that we should respect Parliament.

We have a First Minister who is determined to hang on to power and whom we know has misled Parliament. If she had a shred of self-awareness or honour, she would already have resigned, but she will not. *[Interruption.]* Our first First Minister, Donald Dewar, was a truly honourable man—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will stop you, Mr Chapman. There is a little disorder in the chamber. I encourage you to confine your remarks to the usual finishing remarks in a final speech.

Peter Chapman: I hear what you say, Presiding Officer, but—as I said—some of these issues are, to my mind, very important, so I wish to make the points, as I have stated I would.

Donald Dewar must be turning in his grave seeing the damage that the Administration has done to the integrity and standing of our Parliament. The Parliament was launched with such high expectations that we would do politics better. The Sturgeon-Salmond scandal has discredited our Parliament and highlighted a fatal weakness in our ability to hold the party in power to account. We have seen the SNP Administration wilfully ignore a series of votes that it has lost and wilfully ignore requests for information that was promised by our First Minister to the investigating committee at the outset.

Democracy is a fragile flower. Without proper scrutiny and the ability to hold a Government to account, our democracy is at risk.

The Administration is mired in scandal and failure on many fronts. No issue is more serious than the decline in our education system. Our education system was once the envy of the world. After 14 years of SNP rule, it is but a shadow of its former self. Nicola Sturgeon has said on many occasions that we should judge her on education. We have, and she has failed miserably.

On a lighter note, one of the maist memorable speeches I hiv delivered in the last five years was the ane I did in my ain north-east tongue—the Doric. Fin I pit it on the Facebook, it wint viral, an I hiv hid about twa hunner an sivinty thoosan hits fae aa ower the world. At jist gings tae show hoo important the Scots language is tae sae mony folk an foo important it is tae wir heritage an wir culture.

I wid love tae see wir Scots language pit on an equal fittin wi Gaelic an get the same level o support an fundin as Gaelic gets. In my mind, it is jist as important. It wid be great if the mony fantastic poems written in the Doric, for instance, cwid be taught in schools, bit thankfully wir Doric winna be forgotten fin I leave becis Mark Findlater is fechtin the Banff an Buchan seat instead o me, an he is a native spicker an jist as passionate about it as I am.

In conclusion, I have had only five years in my role as an MSP. It has been a great experience, and I have made many new friends but, frankly, I leave disillusioned with what the Parliament has become, and concerned about the future of my country.

Another five years of an SNP Administration with an overall majority, and without the ability to hold it to account, fills me with dread. Another divisive independence referendum is the last thing that this country needs just now, and I passionately hope that we can prevent that from happening. I promise that I will be doing my bit up to election day to return as many Conservative MSPs as possible, because a balanced Parliament will be a better Parliament.

17:20

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): On the last day of the current parliamentary session, it seems fitting that we are considering a member's bill that has strong cross-party support and addresses a matter that is of serious concern to everyone who has an interest in animal welfare. I warmly congratulate my colleague Emma Harper on her successful initiative.

Improving the lives of Scotland's animals is something to which I am strongly committed. Despite having to deal with the extreme pressures of European Union exit and the Covid pandemic, this Government has still been able to deliver many groundbreaking and innovative improvements in that area. Therefore, I am happy to commend the bill to members.

This will be my last speech in the chamber—well, my last in my elected capacity. This time comes to us all, sometimes without warning, so I

count myself lucky to have been able to make the decision to retire at a time of my choosing.

I confess to the occasional bewildering thought about how it all came to this. In 1967, as a 15-year-old living in Australia, I wrote to the SNP after the Hamilton by-election, and the party wrote back. I still have the package of booklets and leaflets, although they are a little out of date now. Approximately five minutes later—or so it seems—I am standing here making a valedictory speech in a Scottish Parliament. It has been the most extraordinary experience, a great privilege and, of course, a matter of some pride. Only the achievement of independence itself will top that for me.

I say this in the spirit in which I hoped all valedictory speeches would have been made. Not everyone knows about it, but in the early years of the Parliament, there was an informal cross-party back-bench dining group. In those years, some enduring friendships emerged, including my friendship with John Scott. John was an active diner and will remember the great fun we had. The ease with which he and I have been able to negotiate our way through some tricky policy issues in the intervening years is, I suspect, a consequence of that early period.

Tavish Scott, who left us during the session, was also an enthusiastic diner. When Liam McArthur was elected, Tavish pulled him into the same relationship—usually assisted by prosecco, it has to be said—although Liam's cross-chamber texts are not quite as wicked as Tavish's were.

I have to apologise to Anas Sarwar. Pre-lockdown, I said that I would make him a rhubarb and ginger cake, which I have singularly failed to deliver, thereby allowing him to say with authority that nationalists do not keep their promises.

There are many others whom I could have named—members who were here in the early years and who have left before now. However, I hope that the point that I am making is clear: the capacity to forge relationships in this place should not be confined to party groups.

I give huge thanks to all the people who have worked for me over the years, up to and including my current constituency staff—Emma, Carroll, Sheena and, of course, Calum, who has been with me from the very start. I also thank all the officials and staff, both parliamentary and Government, who have supported me, including innumerable members of my various private offices over the past 12 years.

I give a special shout out to all the wonderful Government car drivers, who provide ministers with mobile offices and/or decompression chambers on a regular basis.

Most of all, I give my thanks and abiding love to all my amazing SNP colleagues throughout those years—everyone from the best First Minister that Scotland has ever had, whom I first met when she was 17 years old, to all the newer members who came in after 2016.

However, I have special words for my very good and long-time pal John Swinney, who cannot be in the chamber today. He was 19 when I first met him. We have been the Perthshire double act for so long that it seems strange to bring it to a close. I make the point that Perthshire is the most beautiful part of Scotland. I sneaked into the House of Commons a few years before John, and I am sneaking out of the Scottish Parliament some years before him, too. He has been a friend and, often, a confidant for decades, throughout which we have fought for, and continue to fight for, independence for Scotland. That is what motivated the 15-year-old me, and it motivates me still.

I believe that I am right in saying that I am currently the longest-serving parliamentary representative in Scotland. As I leave, I pass the baton to John, and I wish him so well in the next years of his career.

With that, Presiding Officer, I bid the chamber farewell. [Applause.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Harper to respond to the debate and to wind up.

17:26

Emma Harper: In closing, I have additional people to thank. More than 600 people responded to my consultation in full, and I appreciate the time and input from members of the public. Many organisations have been involved, as well, including the National Sheep Association in Scotland. Claudia Beamish mentioned Jen Craig, who has been helpful in giving evidence to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, as well as away from the committee—as has the previous chair of the association, John Fyall. Those organisations also include NFU Scotland, the Scottish SPCA, *The Scottish Farmer*, Scottish Land & Estates, NatureScot, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, the Dogs Trust, OneKind, the Scottish Outdoor Access Network, the Kennel Club, Blue Cross and many others.

I give special thanks to Inspector Alan Dron, who is the national rural crime co-ordinator, and his team, which includes Willie Johnstone, Allan McKean fae Dumfries, and Constable John Cowan from Police Scotland in Dumfries and Galloway. The support from the Scottish partnership against rural crime has been phenomenal, and its knowledge and input have been gratefully received.

I welcome what the minister, Ben Macpherson, said during the debate as he announced a modernised statutory framework for livestock worrying and a simple protocol that will support veterinarians in their work.

I agree with Colin Smyth that prevention and education are key—as with the Government's responsible owner advice that I have been seeing on the internet in the past few days. We know that increasing awareness is needed to accompany the bill. However, Police Scotland has said that the current law does not provide sufficient deterrent that could influence an owner to act with greater responsibility. Christine Grahame said that nobody takes their dog out with an intent to attack sheep, alpacas, llamas, buffalo or whatever livestock is in our Scottish fields these days. I thank everyone who spoke in the debate.

I appreciated Jamie Halcro Johnston's amendment at stage 2; we just needed to tweak it a wee bit today.

Clare Adamson also spoke in the debate, as did Mike Rumbles and John Finnie—both of whom I wish well for the future, as those were their last contributions.

Work will continue. We know that the Scottish partnership against rural crime is continuing to engage and that Scotland's Rural College has sheep fitbit technology that can alert farmers when livestock are disturbed. It disnae just stop here.

I welcome the fact that Roseanna Cunningham has closed the debate on behalf of the Government with her valedictory speech. Again, I am chuffed that that was about my bill.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: Of course I will.

Gail Ross: It would be remiss of me not to personally thank Emma Harper for all the hard work that she has put into the bill. It is a fitting end to our parliamentary session, and I have been privileged to work with her on it. I thank her on behalf of people such as Joyce Campbell, Sally Crowe and all my constituents in Caithness, Sutherland and Ross.

Emma Harper: I thank Gail Ross for that. It is very fitting that she mentions Sally Crowe and Joyce Campbell. I know that they will be keen to hear that we are—as I hope—passing this bill tonight.

Again, I thank everyone who has contributed to this updated legislation to support oor farmers—including Joyce, Sally and other farmers in Dumfries and Galloway—and crofters, to protect livestock and to support responsible access to oor bonnie countryside when folk are oot wi their dogs.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): We will move to the vote on the bill. Before that, however, I suspend the meeting for a technical break to allow members to access the voting app.

17:31

Meeting suspended.

17:35

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We will go straight to the vote. The question is, that motion S5M-24270, in the name of Emma Harper, on the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Members may cast their votes now. This will be a one-minute division.

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)
 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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 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)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 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)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)

Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote is: For 120, Against 0, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: As the motion has been agreed to, the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill is passed. [Applause.]

I hand the chair to my Deputy Presiding Officer, Linda Fabiani, for the next item.

Motion of Thanks

17:38

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is consideration of motion S5M-24442, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on a motion of thanks.

All our party leaders will speak in the debate, and then we will take a vote. I hope that our last vote of the session will be unanimous. You are not to run off at that point, however, because we will then have a few words from our esteemed Presiding Officer.

I will take advantage of my position just now, as this is the last time that I will be able to speak in the chamber as an elected member. I thank the lovely people of East Kilbride for having given me the opportunity to represent that fine town for so many years. East Kilbride was once known as Scotland's most successful new town, but it has a very bright future, in its older age, as smart, sustainable East Kilbride. Over the past 20-plus years, it has been an absolute honour and a privilege for me to work both in East Kilbride and here in our Parliament, and it has brought me much joy in both places, so I thank you all—thank you very much.

I ask all those who wish to speak in the debate—we know who they are, so they should not chance their luck—to press their request-to-speak buttons.

17:40

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I begin by paying tribute to you, Presiding Officer. You have been an outstanding representative of your constituents in East Kilbride, a wonderful Deputy Presiding Officer and a great friend. I wish you all the best in your retirement from the chamber.

I begin by acknowledging with great appreciation the work of all MSPs across this session, and particularly over the past 12 months. Amid the stresses of the past year, MSPs have served constituents, scrutinised Government decisions and passed legislation that will benefit Scotland for the future. All that and more has been done in circumstances that none of us could have imagined five years ago—or even just one year ago. My thanks go to everyone.

I pay particular tribute to the 34 MSPs from across the chamber who are standing down at the election. Among them are former party leaders, cabinet secretaries, committee conveners and ministers. Four of them—Jeane Freeman, Mike Russell, Roseanna Cunningham and Aileen Campbell—are members of the current Cabinet,

so, on a personal level, I want to thank each and every one of them for their service. Roseanna Cunningham, who has just made a wonderful valedictory speech, is one of my oldest and dearest friends, as is Mike Russell. Just as they met me when I was very young, I first met Aileen Campbell when she was very young. I really hope that we see Aileen Campbell back in front-line politics in the future. She is a rare talent and has a great contribution still to make.

Jeane Freeman and I have spent more time in each other's company over the past year than either of us has spent in the company of our own partners. She has been an outstanding health secretary and, to me, over the past year, she has been an absolute rock. I could not have got through it without you, Jeane, and I offer you my grateful, heartfelt thanks.

Each of the 34 MSPs who is stepping down has served their constituents and this Parliament with distinction and I sincerely and genuinely wish each and every one of you all the very best for the future.

Of course, our Presiding Officer is one of the 13 MSPs standing down who were elected to the first session of the Parliament in 1999. We are, indeed, beginning to feel like an endangered species.

Over the past five years, as Presiding Officer, Ken Macintosh has led the Parliament through quite exceptional circumstances, from the Brexit referendum to the trials and tribulations of Covid. However, his willingness to innovate and respond to changing needs has served us all well. Remote sittings and voting were necessitated by circumstances that we would never have envisaged five years ago, but they may, I hope, have an enduring value. I am conscious that three members who are leaving this place are doing so because they found that the Parliament had a detrimental impact on family and personal life. I hope that the innovations that have resulted from Covid can be used to ensure that no MSP in future feels that they have to make that choice. If so, that would be a fine legacy for our Presiding Officer. Ken, thank you for your service. All of us wish you well.

I know that Ken would want me to point out that he has been ably assisted at all times by our Parliament's staff and, indeed, by his Deputy Presiding Officers, and I wish to add my personal thanks to our Parliament staff. This has been a difficult period because of Covid, obviously, but also because of some difficult issues that I wish that they had not had to deal with over the past number of months. Our Parliament staff have done a superb job, all of them: the clerking team, broadcasting, the official report, security, catering staff, our posties—I have just been told that Jimmy the postman is retiring in a week's time; let us

thank him for all his service, too. *[Applause.]* To each and every one of you, I say that you keep us going and you have kept us safe, and we are deeply grateful to you.

As I am sure that we all do, I want to record my thanks to my constituency office staff. Personally and on behalf of Government colleagues, I wish to place on record my thanks to the civil service and to my private office in particular, who are a source of never-ending support.

The past year has shown that in times of crisis people look to this chamber and expect it to respond to their needs, hopes and dreams. In the past five years, in immensely difficult circumstances, MSPs from all parties have risen to the challenges. This has been one of the busiest sessions since 1999. I know that I am running out of time but, as well as dealing with Covid and Brexit, the Parliament passed the first Social Security (Scotland) Bill, incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, established the Scottish National Investment Bank and passed climate legislation that will see us become a net zero nation. I do not think that that is a bad legacy for this parliamentary session.

When the Parliament reconvenes in May, it will be renewed by fresh faces, fresh thinking and new attitudes. I think that we should all listen to Roseanna Cunningham's words of wisdom about the value of forging friendships across party boundaries.

The new Parliament will be able to build on this Parliament's legacy. For those MSPs who return, I hope that that is a spur to further progress. For the 34 MSPs who are standing down, that legacy should be an enduring source of pride. The Parliament is grateful to them all for their service and I convey my deep thanks and appreciation to every one of them.

Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officer, it is with great pleasure that I move the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament expresses its thanks to its Presiding Officer, Ken Macintosh, for his service to the Parliament and pays tribute to all of those Members who are standing down at the end of this session.

17:46

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): Presiding Officer, I put on record my support and that of the Scottish Conservatives for the First Minister's motion and wish you well as you retire from Holyrood.

While I am not a class of '99er like the Presiding Officer or the First Minister, I have been here for more than a decade, first as staff and then as an

elected member for Glasgow and for Edinburgh Central. For most of that time, I led my party, and one of the many misunderstandings about being an Opposition leader is that we have much to do with a Presiding Officer. Aside from small talk at ceremonies, line-ups and receptions, there are perhaps only half a dozen sit-down meetings a year, so it was not until after I stepped down from party leadership and was elected to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body that I saw the full responsibility of the office and the immense work that you, Ken, and the top team do.

What an extraordinary time to be involved. When Covid hit, and the first lockdown was announced, I watched you, David, Michelle and the team transition Holyrood from a campus where up to 1,800 people could be present on the average sitting day of the average year, to a legislature that could still function with barely 100 people on site. I saw how unflappable you were and how, with your even-handed nature, you were absolutely insistent that those who were needed in here would be protected and those who required to work from home or be furloughed would be supported. You insisted that everybody—clerks, civil servants, information technology, cleaners, mail room staff, security, catering, facilities management, reception, guides, crèche—whether they were staff, contractors or subcontractors, would be supported practically and financially, and that the Parliament would use its might to ensure that other companies that held contracts here behaved ethically too. You were insistent that we would see our people right, just as they see us right every day. I was proud of us as an employer, and that stemmed from your leadership.

I was slightly perturbed when you confided with the SPCB on a Teams call that, despite all six of your children returning home for lockdown, you were welcoming a new arrival, but I was delighted when you brought your new puppy on to the call.

Presiding Officer, in the past 10 years, I have often pushed my luck when it comes to speaking time, and I beg your indulgence today, because this is also my last speech in the Parliament. I do not know whether it has been mentioned that I am not standing at this election. [*Laughter.*]

I have to bring forward many thanks to my office staff down the years: Lawrie, Andrea, Nick, Dan, Ben, Ed and Elaine; the close team that supported me as leader—Eddie, Adam, Marek and Kevin—Mark McInnes and his team at the Conservative Party central office; and, of course, my colleagues in the Parliament. I was the only new Tory elected in 2011 and I was catapulted to the leadership within six months. I will always be grateful to the members of that 2011 group for all that they taught me. After that great night when we doubled our

number, the team that came in here in 2016 will always be my team.

From both groups, we are losing good servants from this Parliament: Margaret Mitchell, Adam Tomkins, Alison Harris, Peter Chapman, Tom Mason and Bill Bowman. Of course, earlier in this term, we lost the last of our class of 1999, with the passing of Alex Johnstone—a big broth of a man with a personality to match.

I also thank those from other parties who have extended the hand of friendship down the years: the incorrigible gossip of Alex Neil, the Lycra dash of Willie Rennie as he passed my office when we shared a floor, and the affectionate chastisement of Johann Lamont, my Labour auntie, who calmed my wilder outbursts during the referendum period in the better together campaign.

I thank Jenny Marra, who came in in the same intake as me. Our occasional catch-ups down the years have migrated from involving wine and Chinese to a lovely play-date with Adam, Sidney and Finn last summer, between lockdowns. She will be a miss to the Parliament, which likes to talk the talk on being family friendly but, given her loss and the loss of others such as Gail Ross and Aileen Campbell, perhaps needs to rethink how it chooses to walk the walk.

For my part, I will miss this place. When I announced in August 2019 that I was standing down as leader and would not seek re-election, I always knew that leaving would be a wrench. It is so consuming. It is not just the sitting days, but everything else that goes along with them that is so absorbing, that makes it hard to carve out proper time for the ones you love.

I do not know how you managed with six kids, Presiding Officer, as I am run ragged by one. However, I am looking forward to a change of working practice—when I am away for a few days a week, it will be hard to be away, but when I am home, I will be able to be properly present with Jen and Finn. Well, that is going to mean worlds.

Thank you, Ken, for all that you have done as Presiding Officer. I give my warmest regards to all the returners and my very best wishes to all 33 other members who are standing down.

I support the motion in the First Minister's name.

17:50

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I, too, support the motion in the First Minister's name.

I echo the First Minister's comments about Linda Fabiani. She is a fierce but kind politician with whom I have had the pleasure of spending the past five years. There were lots of nice gossips and chats along the way.

I pay tribute to all the MSPs from across the chamber who are either pursuing new challenges or going on to, I hope, a happy and peaceful retirement. I say a particular thank you to my colleagues Iain Gray, Johann Lamont, Elaine Smith, Lewis Macdonald, Jenny Marra, Dave Stewart, Mary Fee and Neil Findlay, who are stepping down from Parliament. Each and every one of them has made an enormous contribution to the Parliament and to public life. They have represented the very best of our party and, more important, the best of our country.

Four of our retirees—five, if we include the Presiding Officer—are from the '99 intake. Although I am sure that they will not thank me for saying it, it is testament to their length of service in representing the Scottish people that they all entered the Parliament before I was even old enough to vote. I am sorry, First Minister, but that includes yourself—I could see the glare that I was getting from the First Minister; I imagine that I will get a few more over the coming weeks.

Of course, members are retiring from across the different parties. There are too many to mention individually, but each and every one of them have their own achievements. However, I want to recognise two parliamentarians in other political parties.

The first is Ruth Davidson, whose last day in the chamber is today. I can genuinely say that I like her as a human being and as a friend. She is good company and, undoubtedly, a conviction politician, and she has been a key personality and figure in Scottish public life for the past decade. She will be a great loss to Parliament, and her successor has a very hard act to follow.

The second is our health secretary, Jeane Freeman. Spending your last year in Parliament as the health secretary during a pandemic can hardly be described as easing yourself into retirement. I know that, at times, I have been challenging with her, particularly on all things relating to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, but I cannot thank her enough for the openness and kindness that she has shown throughout, so I pay tribute to her and thank her for that. I know that all the families thank her for that, too.

Finally, Presiding Officer, I pay tribute to you. You have presided over the most turbulent period in our Parliament's relatively short history. You and your team have kept our Parliament running amid the largest national crisis since the second world war. For that, you and your team deserve a huge amount of credit. You genuinely are one of the nicest people in politics—there are still nice people in politics, and you have proved that.

You have been unflappable and kind as we have changed to our new environment as a result

of Covid. I can only imagine how you have kept your cool while a number of our colleagues have struggled to either log in or vote through this period, but you have been unflappable, understanding and patient as we got to learn our new environment.

You have also been a reforming Presiding Officer. You have opened up our Parliament and opened up opportunities for members on the back benches and Opposition members, which has offered greater scrutiny as a result.

More important, on a personal note, it has been a pleasure. I am proud to call you a friend as well as a colleague. At First Minister's question time today, Jackie Baillie informed me that you share a birthday with her. She told me that, surprisingly, you are actually older than her. That will get me into trouble.

You have tenaciously represented the good people of Eastwood and West Scotland and I am sure that all of them would want to thank you for all your efforts over the years. It is hard to imagine that, as the father of six children, you will have a quiet retirement, but I hope for your wife's sake that you finally have a Netflix account.

I thank you and all the parliamentary staff for all the immense work that has been done in the past five years. To the chief executive and all the staff from top to bottom, I say thank you so much for everything. We hope to return after 6 May to say thank you again.

17:55

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): A most unfortunate juxtaposition.

I have found the most rewarding moments of the parliamentary session to be when we have put aside the usual tensions and knuckled down to make life better. Over the past year, the pandemic has forced us to do exactly that. I have found working with various ministers and other members particularly rewarding in fixing problems that are all new to us, for the betterment of our constituents and the country.

I praise the enormous efforts of the parliamentary staff—especially the cleaners and the security staff. I commend the patience of the information technology staff in putting up with our endless grumbles about bits of the voting system. In opening and closing the Parliament at a moment's notice, which included disrupting their Christmas and new year period, the chief executive and all his support staff deserve particular appreciation for what they have put up with in the past year.

Presiding Officer, your genial and generous style has been extraordinary in the past year. You

have been unflappable. Despite the pressure that you have been under, you have done the job proud and done yourself proud.

My constituency staff and the parliamentary pool have been exceptional. To be honest, I do not know how they put up with me.

I, too, will mention Alex Johnstone. When I first entered the Parliament, his office was along the corridor from mine. I still miss his thunderous laughter—with Jim Millar, he would bang the table in hoots and howls for hours on end. Alex Johnstone was a joy to be around and was my one-man cheerleader in the previous parliamentary session. I will always miss him.

On many, many occasions, my colleague Mike Rumbles and I have disagreed and voted in different ways. However, throughout all that time, and despite the effect on my blood pressure on occasions, his challenge has been invaluable. I know that we do not want to admit it, but Mike Rumbles is often right. I am pleased that, on the last day, we managed to vote together in exactly the same way.

I am sure that a bit of all of us is a little jealous of those who are retiring and is attracted by the time that could open up in their lives—hours in the day that they did not know existed.

I say to those who wish to return that I wish them well on the campaign trail. I wish them fun and a rewarding time in the election campaign, because democracy can be a beautiful thing.

17:58

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I associate myself with colleagues' remarks. I thank Linda Fabiani, and I, too, fondly remember working with Alex Johnstone in committee.

I am pleased to support the motion that is in the First Minister's name. When the parliamentary session began in 2016, we could not have imagined that it would end a year into a pandemic and the day after a national day of reflection to remember all those who have lost their lives.

On behalf of my Green colleagues, I thank each and every member of staff in the Parliament—from our cleaners to catering staff, security staff, mailroom staff, those on the chamber desk and beyond. I also thank our own staff, who we work with day in, day out.

The Scottish Government has had to respond to the unprecedented challenge of the pandemic and the Parliament has worked hard to scrutinise that response. By and large, that scrutiny has been constructive and the Government has accepted it as such.

Many colleagues in the Parliament and the Government who have been responsible for that important work are not seeking re-election, and I pay tribute to colleagues across the chamber who are standing down today. Many of them were elected in 1999. I have learned a great deal from all of you about what to do and sometimes about what not to do. I thank you all and wish you the very best for the future.

I am pleased to be able to thank my dear colleague John Finnie for his work, wisdom, hospitality and great chat. His legislation to afford children in Scotland the same legal protection from assault as we adults enjoy is one of most important pieces of legislation that the Parliament has passed in this session.

The incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a significant step that we should celebrate. We must build on that work to protect and respect the human rights of children and young people in Scotland. They have been remarkable during the pandemic. They have engaged with Parliament, calling for action on the climate and nature emergencies. I am also proud that Parliament can learn from the collective wisdom of the citizens assembly.

The Presiding Officer is one of the class of 1999 who is standing down today. Ken Macintosh's determination to enable and improve scrutiny has made a great difference. His drive to ensure that more members from across the chamber are better able to represent their constituents and are afforded greater opportunity to hold the Government to account has borne fruit. That is an important legacy and that work must not be seen as finished.

It seems wholly appropriate that a Presiding Officer with a strong and genuine commitment to ensuring that more voices are heard was the bearer of that office at a time when our ways of doing business were transformed almost overnight. He has calmly, courteously and, when required, firmly guided us through this session and this most challenging of years, chairing hybrid sessions with ease, even when our information technology skills make that difficult. His calm when the chamber was momentarily plunged into darkness was remarkable—he did not miss a beat.

I have sometimes had the pleasure of bumping into the Presiding Officer at tennis events across the country. Although we both enjoy tennis, it is fair to say that the Presiding Officer's family deem him a worthy partner in competitive doubles.

Although Ken Macintosh is not seeking re-election, I know that the years ahead of him will be action packed. His family will see to that, as will the many other interests that call on his attention.

Along with colleagues across the chamber, I thank Ken Macintosh for his service. He leaves Parliament with the very best and warmest wishes of the Scottish Green Party.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the motion of thanks.

Decision Time

18:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): There is one question to be put as a result of our business. The question is, that motion S5M-24442, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on a motion of thanks, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament expresses its thanks to its Presiding Officer, Ken Macintosh, for his service to the Parliament and pays tribute to all of those Members who are standing down at the end of this session.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is a relief. Decision time is concluded and I hand over to our Presiding Officer, Ken Macintosh.

Presiding Officer's Closing Remarks

18:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Thank you, colleagues. I thank Richard Lyle for voting for that motion single-handedly.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Any time.

The Presiding Officer: You can rest easy. I will not use my remarks to settle old scores, real or imaginary, despite encouragement from some mischievous colleagues. I am here to thank you. I have so many people to thank that I am at something of a quandary as to how to go about it.

Many of us are stepping down today. I am grateful to the party leaders for naming them all, because there are too many for me to list. Those who are stepping down will be full of emotion, as I am today. I remind those of you who want me to go full Gwyneth Paltrow at the Oscars that I am far too buttoned-up to do that. Having said that, to hear both Ruth Davidson and Willie Rennie mentioning the passing of Alex Johnstone tested me. I was also reminded of my predecessor Alex Fergusson. I had very kind letters from both their widows in recent weeks. We still grieve their passing.

What struck me during the past few weeks is how many powerful and moving valedictory speeches there have been from colleagues who are leaving at the election—just this afternoon, we heard from Roseanna Cunningham, Aileen Campbell and more—so I thought that I would ask fellow members for their suggestions about who and what to thank today.

I begin by thanking you all for being such good-looking and handsome colleagues. Good-looking and handsome—yes, it is true. It might not have been the first quality or attribute that I would have singled out, but I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for his selfless suggestion.

Alongside our public servants, I have also been asked to thank the marvellous men and women of the Second Platoon Black Watch Third Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. That suggestion came from Maurice Corry, of course.

Mike Rumbles, Alex Neil and Oliver Mundell asked me to pass on their thanks to the party whips, although I think that the word “thanks” should be in inverted commas.

I also have two further, rather election-focused, requests. One is from James Kelly, who asked me whether it is too late for me to shout at him and have him thrown out of the chamber. The other is

from Anas Sarwar, who said, “Things are worse than I thought. Could you use your powers to delay the election by a month or two?” [*Laughter.*]

I thank you for your indulgence, colleagues. After the past few days, I was not sure that we would all be on speaking terms, let alone able to laugh with each other, and I really am grateful to you all.

When we all stood in the well of the chamber five years ago with our hands raised to swear our oath of office, looking forward with excitement and anticipation to what lay ahead, little did we know that, in a matter of weeks, the Brexit referendum would change the political landscape and dominate the agenda for the next four years, itself only to be overtaken by the global pandemic that has devastated our economy and brought grief and misery to many tens of thousands of fellow Scots.

In such circumstances, it is only natural to feel frustrated or thwarted, but I want to thank you for what you have achieved despite, as well as because of, the circumstances. I thank you for the families that you have helped, the children with additional support needs that each of you has fought for, and the care for those who have dementia that you all have witnessed at first hand. I often feel that the greatest privilege that an MSP can have is to be invited into people's lives, asked to share someone's difficulties, and to know the upset and unfairness that they are wrestling with. Even if we cannot solve the problems, to be asked for our help is reward in itself.

The voters will not necessarily tell you that during the next few weeks. You are more likely to be cynically portrayed as in it for yourselves, but I know how hard you work and how committed you are to your constituents. I thought that Bruce Crawford had it right when he said that it is all about service. Bruce has served the Parliament with distinction in nearly every capacity, and I often think of him as the best Presiding Officer that we never had.

Here in Parliament, politics can be a robust business—confrontational even—but even in the midst of the difficulties of recent weeks, colleagues have come together around the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, the Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Bill, and the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Bill.

It is worth remembering that most of what we achieve, we achieve by working together. I do not just mean by working across party lines; I mean, for example, the teamwork that is at the heart of the constituency office. For most of us, I imagine that there are three or four people who get

everything done. If you want to be an accessible and caring MSP, or if you sound intelligent and knowledgeable, that will be because your office manager, your researcher and your case worker are caring and accessible, and they are intelligent and knowledgeable.

I just want to say to my constituency team and, on your behalf, to all the staff who work for us in every part of Scotland right now, thank you for everything that you do and for at least trying to make us look good.

I extend that appreciation to everyone who works at Holyrood. Most of us know how committed, approachable and diligent our staff at the Parliament are, but, as Presiding Officer, I have had the opportunity to see that in spades. In fact, I have been doubly blessed as, alongside my constituency staff, I have a private office that looks after me in Edinburgh, and I genuinely cannot thank them enough for all that they do.

I was going to name and pay tribute to the many individuals, departments and services that we have in the Parliament. I noticed that several colleagues tried to do that, but I was conscious that as soon as I named one department, there would be many others that I could not go on to list. What I know is that, as MSPs, we may, unfortunately, come and go, but the Scottish parliamentary service, under the exemplary leadership of our chief executive David McGill, is there to support us in all circumstances. The staff remain committed to the principles of accessibility, openness, transparency and sharing power with the people of Scotland. When I think of how the Parliament has grown to take its place at the centre of public life, so much of that is founded on the effort, enthusiasm and dedication of our parliamentary staff. I, for one, owe them an enormous debt of gratitude.

My final thanks should, of course, be to my family, who have already had several mentions. I hope that you will excuse me, as I know that they will, if I do that privately. None of us could achieve anything in politics without the support and understanding of our family. However, I promised earlier not to choke up, and I would not be able to do that if I did my family justice, so I will speak to them later.

Colleagues, it can be difficult in any one session to see what you have achieved, but for those of us who have been here for 22 years—I include the First Minister and my fantastic, supportive Deputy Presiding Officers—this Parliament, and the joint efforts of everyone who has served here, has changed Scotland.

We have changed from a country with the worst cancer record in Europe to the first country in the United Kingdom to ban smoking. We have

changed from a country that battled to repeal the prejudice of section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986 to one where we celebrate the pride march leaving the doors of this very institution. We have changed from a country scarred by sectarian division to one where the Scottish Muslim community provides us with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the leader of the Scottish Labour Party.

There is much more to do, and there will be more frustration, but I have no doubt whatsoever that Scotland is undoubtedly a more diverse, tolerant and self-confident country because of this Parliament and because of the work that everyone here does.

When I bang my gavel shortly, it will not just be to end the session and to say thank you to all those who are stepping down. It will be to mark the start of an election campaign and to wish good luck to all of you who are standing again. I will be here on 13 May to welcome you back, alongside perhaps 40 or 50 new faces, refreshed, reinvigorated and ready to work together for the benefit of our country. For that most of all, I want to thank you all.

I close the meeting and this session of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:12.

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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