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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place. Face coverings should be worn as you move around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Father Jim Duggan, parish priest, St Charles Roman Catholic church, Paisley.

Father Jim Duggan (St Charles RC Church, Paisley): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for inviting me to lead time for reflection.

Recently, I was making a choice between two good but different possibilities for my work. In discerning what might be the right choice to make, I spoke with a few people: my best friend; a colleague who runs NET Ministries Scotland, a youth ministry that we founded; and my spiritual director, a Franciscan friar of the renewal, who, daily, at the friars' soup kitchen, helps people whose life circumstances are extremely challenging.

It struck me how good it is to be part of a community of people who have different perspectives and who support and inspire me, and how amazing it is, after almost 30 years as a priest, still to have various interesting and exciting opportunities ahead.

This makes me grateful for the choices that others have made and which benefited me and let me have dreams and aspirations.

As an adopted child, I am grateful for my birth mother, who made an extremely difficult choice for the good of her son. I am grateful for my mum and dad, who gave me a loving home, nurtured me and supported me always. I am grateful for the educators who saw where my talents lay and guided me.

I am grateful for the church that helped me to see, in the words of St John Henry, Cardinal Newman, that

"God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission."

And I am grateful for the choices that, I believe, created a person-centred, high-quality education system and supported the opportunities that arise

from such a system, enabling people from a modest background like mine to grow up with dreams—and with the hope that those dreams can become the reality.

I am really saddened when I see young people who are without hope, who have no notion of their own goodness and what they have to offer, and who do not live in an environment in which they can aspire to the kinds of thing to which I could aspire when I was growing up.

However, I am heartened that having the Scottish Parliament means that our country has a committed community of people, with different perspectives, who are working to support, inspire and encourage those young people, and all people in our country, to have dreams and to strive to fulfil them. *[Applause.]*

Topical Question Time

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is topical question time. To enable me to get in as many members as possible, I would appreciate short and succinct questions, and responses to match.

Ukraine (Refugees)

1. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to prepare for refugees arriving in Scotland as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (S6T-00553)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Scotland has a long history of welcoming refugees and people who seek asylum, from all over the world. We must all stand ready to offer refuge and sanctuary, where necessary, for people who may be displaced.

Asylum is reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament and is handled by the Home Office. That includes operational decisions about the UK asylum system and refugee resettlement programmes.

The United Kingdom Government has not yet confirmed any arrangements for the resettlement of refugees from Ukraine. However, the Scottish Government is engaged with our key partners, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Refugee Council, to ensure that we are ready to support any refugees who may arrive in Scotland.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Scenes from over the weekend have been horrific, and I know that all of us in the chamber stand in solidarity with those fleeing their homes as a result of Russian aggression. It is crucial that we ensure that Scotland is a safe, supportive and welcoming place for people who come here, and we need to be ready for that.

We also need to make sure that people get advice and support on their rights, including through helplines run by the third sector. That is particularly important for disabled people. There are 2.7 million disabled people in Ukraine and they face a disproportionate risk of abandonment, death and a lack of access to safety, relief and recovery support. The European Disability Forum has heard that the situation is appalling. Shelters are inaccessible and disabled people are being forced to stay at home, not knowing where they can go to be safe.

It is vital that political leaders across the globe ensure that disabled people are included in the response—we cannot leave them behind. Can the cabinet secretary set out what plans he has put in place to do that, what discussions he has had with COSLA on Scotland's preparedness for refugees, and what support will be given to the third sector?

Angus Robertson: The issues at hand have already been subject to discussion in the resilience settings in the Scottish Government, in meetings that we held over the weekend, and they will be discussed in the meeting that we will hold this afternoon. Those meetings include representatives of COSLA. Our conversations with the third sector are on-going.

Pam Duncan-Glancy raises specific issues relating to support for disabled people in Ukraine. We have already been providing material that has been requested by the Ukrainian Government and we will continue to do so. I will look at what has been requested by the Ukrainian authorities, to satisfy myself that what is being asked for and provided will be of assistance to people with disability in Ukraine. I will highlight, in our on-going discussions, the issues that the member raises.

I am happy to write to Pam Duncan-Glancy in detail to answer any of her questions that I was unable to answer in the curtailed time that we have available today.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I know that this Parliament will also stand ready to support Ukrainian children and their families. The children's commissioners for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have written to the Prime Minister highlighting the need to protect children as far as possible from conflict. It is vital that the 7.5 million children in Ukraine are also factored into the preparedness, which means ensuring that all four nations are ready to provide much-needed safety and hope.

Children in conflict zones have made clear over the past eight years how important it is for them to continue their education. We must do what we can. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that those fleeing Russian invasion are able to find suitable accommodation—accessible when needed—and proper support services, and that children are able to get the education that they are so desperate not to miss out on?

Angus Robertson: I will, if I may, highlight something that perhaps gets a little bit missed in this context—people from Ukraine have to get here first. In preparation for that, we have to follow all the steps that are requested, including in this topical question session. At present, though—shamefully, in my view and that of the Scottish Government—the United Kingdom is not offering a visa waiver for people from Ukraine seeking

sanctuary. It is possible for countries right across the European Union, including for our neighbours in the Irish Republic, to do so.

The UK is saying that it is prepared to allow people to come here to work if they have family members already resident in the United Kingdom. Apparently, humanitarian pathways are set to be opened if someone is sponsored in the UK. That is not good enough. People need sanctuary and we should be taking them in. We should be making the necessary preparations, as highlighted by Pam Duncan-Glancy. We need to get everything in place for when people arrive. I really hope that the UK Government reconsiders its approach, which, to my mind—and, I am sure, for the majority of people across the chamber—is frankly not good enough.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Skyrora, a rocket launching company with a base in Midlothian, has Ukrainian employees here in Scotland but also has 44 employees in Dnipro in the east of Ukraine. It is asking what contingencies there will be for its employees. The cabinet secretary mentioned sponsorship. Does he consider that corporate sponsorship should be introduced by the UK, which would allow those employees and their families, if they so wish, to come to Scotland to be employed?

Angus Robertson: Christine Grahame highlights something that should be part of a broad and welcoming package of measures by the United Kingdom Government. The Home Secretary, Priti Patel, has been outlining some changes, which may allow companies to play a role in bringing people out of Ukraine. We have to see how that will operate in practice. If that is indeed what it is, it is welcome. However, it is still not enough.

May I also take the opportunity to say to colleagues in the chamber, because this will have impacted on quite a lot of us, that we will have become aware of offers from companies and third sector organisations. I would encourage those companies and third sector organisations to get in touch. We are in a fast-moving situation, and if we are able to co-ordinate those offers, not only can we ensure that we get aid to people in country—in theatre—but we will know whether there are people who may be able to come to the UK. Hopefully, that will be far more than the UK currently has in mind.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the cabinet secretary for his reply. In the main, I agree with what he is saying. We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine in resisting brutal aggression.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is vital that we show our united support for the people of

Ukraine? Does he welcome the role that the United Kingdom is playing in shaping the international response by providing military hardware and developing meaningful financial sanctions? He mentioned co-ordination. What steps will the Scottish Government take to provide co-ordination support for those community-based responses, given that people want to show their support for the people of Ukraine?

Angus Robertson: There was much in Stephen Kerr's questions. Again, if there is something that I do not touch on, I will be happy to write to him with more detail.

In general, I think that the United Kingdom response on the economic front and in supporting the Ukrainian armed forces is commendable, as has been the response of countries right across the European Union. Sadly, however, there is much more that the people of Ukraine require from us, whether that is in terms of the economy, military support or the diplomatic response that we all need to be a part of. The Scottish Government is co-ordinating with the UK Government and the other devolved Administrations across the United Kingdom. An example of that is the provision of immediate aid, which is being flown out to Ukraine at some point today. Co-ordination is already taking place.

In looking forward, how do we make sure that we capture all the information? That is exactly the point that I made in an earlier reply. We need to make sure that we are getting all those details. If members across the chamber have examples of such work, I ask them to please get in touch with the Scottish Government to make sure that we are fully sighted on them, and they will be included in the response that we are pulling together with partners in the third sector and further afield.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): A freedom of information request last week revealed that 300 Afghani refugees are still languishing in hotels and bridging accommodation. We need to be ready for what is coming. We hope that the UK Government will waive the visa requirement so that more Ukrainians can reach here. We have also witnessed a tremendous outpouring of support from the Scottish people, who are saying, "Open our borders and we will open our homes".

First, will the cabinet secretary urgently refresh the new Scots strategy, which is due to expire this year? Secondly, will he make sure that funding is available to local authorities to house Ukrainian refugees? Thirdly, will he make it easier for Scottish people who are willing to give their own accommodation to Ukrainian refugees to do so?

Angus Robertson: I am pleased to agree with everything that Alex Cole-Hamilton has just said.

At the heart of his question is an important point. Ukraine is a massive challenge at the present time, but we must not lose sight of what is happening in other parts of the world. There are terrible developments in Afghanistan in particular, but in other countries as well. We must not see the response that we require to get in place for Ukraine displace what we also need to be doing for other parts of the world.

Alex Cole-Hamilton asked a number of questions. We need to be speaking to local authority partners, but I stress to him that, at the present time, Ukrainians who will be able to get here will be people who have family members here, whom they are expected to stay with. The people who he is talking about, and who I and the Scottish Government are concerned about, are all those who do not have contacts or family members here. To be frank, they have every right to be here, just as every other refugee does.

We need to unify our voices, as has been appealed for across the chamber. I appeal to all colleagues: let us please be united in calling for visa restrictions to be waived in order to allow people to come to the United Kingdom. Most will want to stay close to Ukraine, in central Europe, but we should welcome with open arms those who wish to come to the United Kingdom.

UK Ports (Sanctions)

2. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government about using the sanctions regime to prevent Russian Government-owned tankers entering ports in the UK, including in Orkney. (S6T-00537)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): The unprovoked aggression by the Russian Government against a sovereign, democratic state is wholly unacceptable and we are committed to ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to ensure that any support, however indirect, for Russia's unjust war is prevented.

The First Minister met the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, on Sunday evening to discuss concerns about the Russian-owned oil tanker the NS Champion, which at that time was heading towards Orkney to pick up a cargo of crude oil at the Flotta terminal. In line with the agreement that all efforts should be made to prevent the tanker from docking, Scottish Government officials have been working collaboratively with a range of stakeholders, including Department for Transport officials and the Joint Maritime Security Centre, to pursue all options.

More generally, we have been working collaboratively with stakeholders to make it clear that vessels that are owned, controlled, chartered or operated by individuals or companies connected to Russia are not welcome in Scottish ports or to undertake business here at this time.

Members will wish to be aware that an amendment to the UK sanctions regime that prohibits the entry into UK ports of vessels connected to Russia and the registration of such vessels in the UK, and which allows for the detention of such vessels that are already here, in certain circumstances, enters into force at 15:00 today. The Scottish Government will continue to work closely with the UK Government to maximise the effectiveness of the regime, to share intelligence and to prevent unacceptable Russian vessels from taking part in business activity here.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for his engagement on the issue over the weekend. It was the right thing to do to cancel the contract with Sovcomflot and to prevent the NS Champion from berthing at the Flotta oil terminal in my constituency. It is a victory for the people of Orkney, who have been steadfast in their determination to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine. Through their defiance, major oil companies have had to act. As a result, money that would have flowed into supporting Putin's bloodthirsty regime has been prevented from doing so.

The decision to prevent Russian vessels from entering UK ports, which was announced by Grant Shapps yesterday, is in keeping with the spirit of the sanctions regime. Is the cabinet secretary confident that the measures that are being taken in Westminster today will have the effect of converting a request into a legally enforceable ban?

Michael Matheson: I thank Liam McArthur for his engagement over the weekend and for the intelligence that he provided on the particular vessel. I also record my thanks to the people of Orkney for standing united with the people of Ukraine at this difficult time.

I believe that the regime that is being put in place by the UK Government, which will come into force at 3 pm today, is sufficient to address the issue. There are some challenges with the sector, because some vessels operate under a flag of convenience and have complex ownership structures that can make it challenging to identify connections with Russia and whether those vessels provide some benefits to Russian stakeholders. However, I assure Liam McArthur that I have asked my officials to prioritise their work with the UK Government to ensure that we share intelligence in the area and identify any such vessels at the earliest possible point, so that they

are not able to operate in Scottish ports and Scottish waters.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that further response—particularly what he said about the complexity of the sector and ensuring that the ban applies where it needs to apply but does not necessarily impact on other vessels.

Given that harbour authorities will be on the front line in enforcing the new restrictions, will the cabinet secretary confirm that they will be fully consulted on how the measures will operate in practice? What work is being done by the Scottish and UK Governments to assess the impact that the measures will have on the wider oil and gas sector in the UK?

Michael Matheson: I assure Liam McArthur that there will be communication with Scottish ports and that there has been already—I believe that the UK Government’s transport secretary communicated with them yesterday. There will be on-going engagement with Scottish ports, which will allow for further clarification on any issues, if that is required.

I also assure Liam McArthur that Marine Scotland officials are actively tracking and monitoring all Russian vessels that are exercising the right of innocent passage, under international law, in Scottish waters. That will continue to be the case in the days and weeks ahead.

I recognise that the sanctions will have some economic impact on our ports and harbours. We stand ready to engage with them and to discuss any challenges that they experience as a result of the sanctions that are being enforced.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The international community is right to take strong actions to cut off resources to Vladimir Putin. What is the Government doing to ensure that Scotland plays its part in enforcing formal sanctions and in ceasing trading outwith the sanctions regime? Does he agree that the full range of sanctions that are imposed on Russia should be extended to Belarus, given its despotic president’s backing for the invasion and the fact that Belarus is being used as a launch pad for the assault on Kyiv?

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Government has made very clear our view that the United Kingdom Government and the international community should impose the severest sanctions possible on Vladimir Putin and other interests in Russia. We stand in complete solidarity with the people of Ukraine. As my colleague Angus Robertson has outlined, we are taking a range of steps, including providing financial support and wider support to the Ukrainian Government and support organisations in dealing with refugees who are now having to leave Ukraine and go to other

European countries. We stand ready to play our part in helping to deal with that humanitarian crisis.

If reports of Belarusian troops joining the illegal invasion of Ukraine are correct, it would follow logic that Belarus should be subject to the same severe sanctions as Russia is. The international community must be prepared to take that action if necessary.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As an Orcadian whose home overlooks Scapa Flow and the Flotta oil terminal, I, too, congratulate local people in Orkney on their efforts to ensure that our community’s opposition to the visit was very clear. I also thank the office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, with which I was in contact over the weekend.

The cabinet secretary will be aware of the concerns relating to a Russian-chartered private flight to Moscow, which took off from a Scottish Government-owned Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd airport, with NOTAM—notice to airmen—guidance in place. There appears to be some confusion, and claims and counter-claims from various bodies, over notifications and procedures. Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment to investigate that situation to establish precisely what happened and to ensure that there are no loopholes by which Scottish ports and airports can be used to evade sanctions?

Michael Matheson: We have already looked into that matter. The member is correct in saying that a notice to airmen order was issued. However, there was a delay in the information being provided by the Civil Aviation Authority to airport operators—it was not provided on Friday. On looking into the matter, I have found that the flight was given clearance by NATS as complying with the sanction regime that was in place at that particular point. Therefore, the proper procedures were followed at that point. However, there is obviously a lack of clarity on some aspects of the sanction regime. We will continue to pursue those matters with the UK Government to ensure that everyone has clarity on the details of how the sanctions should be applied, so that agencies can then enforce them sufficiently.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I understand that there was a Russian tanker in Shetland last week, much to the consternation of the community there. There was also a Russian transporter vessel anchored in Broadbay in Lewis for a number of days. I understand that it has just left this morning. What restrictions can be placed on Russian vessels entering Scottish waters and anchoring if they are not berthing at a harbour?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the concerns that the member raises, but the member will also recognise that, under international law, there is a

right of passage for vessels going through international waters, including Scottish waters. I assure the member that we want to ensure that Russian interests that seek to profit from bringing vessels into Scottish ports and harbours are unable to do so. The new regulations will ensure that that cannot happen from here on in.

**Scottish National Investment Bank
(Recruitment of Chief Executive Officer)**

3. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures have been put in place to recruit a new chief executive officer of the Scottish National Investment Bank following the resignation of Eilidh Mactaggart. (S6T-00534)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): The Scottish National Investment Bank plans to recruit and appoint a new chief executive, and the process has begun. To ensure continuity in the bank in the interim, the chief finance officer, Sarah Roughead, is taking on additional responsibilities, including accountable officer responsibilities. The bank has experienced board members who continue to provide leadership and direction for staff and bank customers. The bank's recruitment of a new chief executive will follow the Scottish Government's guidance on the recruitment and employment of chief executives of public bodies. Ministers agree all executive and non-executive appointments to the bank's board, including for the chief executive.

Liz Smith: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response. Could she advise Parliament as to the exact reasons for Eilidh Mactaggart's resignation?

Kate Forbes: I recognise that there is significant interest and that there are questions around the chief executive's resignation, given the seniority of her role and the importance of the Scottish National Investment Bank to Scotland's economy. The reasons for the former chief executive's resignation are a matter for her and for the bank's board. The board has kept ministers up to date with all matters relating to the chief executive, and the executive team and board members will continue to provide strong leadership and direction for staff and bank clients.

Liz Smith: Since the bank's inception, in November 2020, the cabinet secretary has said in the chamber on several occasions that the Scottish National Investment Bank is a very important financial institution that is critical to future long-term investment in Scotland. As members will know, £200 million has been committed since 2020, and it is projected that £2 billion is to be spent in the next 10 years. Those are significant sums of public money. Does the cabinet secretary accept that there should be full transparency in the operation of the bank and that

the public has the right to know the full details of the current situation and the reasons why Ms Mactaggart resigned?

Kate Forbes: I echo the comments that I made previously, which Liz Smith has just quoted. Since its launch, the bank has made significant progress. It has built up an operational structure, recruited 50 staff and delivered £200 million of investment to 13 projects. It continues to build its investment portfolio, and we expect further announcements on investments over the coming weeks. The bank will continue to support our recovery.

As I said, I know that there is public and political interest in getting answers and ensuring that there is transparency. However, I say once again that matters relating to the former chief executive's resignation from the bank are very much for the former chief executive and the bank's board.

Scotland's Climate Assembly

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement on an update on Scotland's Climate Assembly by the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Michael Matheson. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): I am pleased to provide an update on Scotland's Climate Assembly, which held its eighth and final weekend session in February.

The assembly has been a truly historic process that has brought together people from across Scotland. More than 100 people gave their time and commitment over a 16-month period to consider the question of how Scotland should change in order to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way.

The process resulted in 81 recommendations, which have already played a pivotal role in shaping Scotland's journey to becoming a net zero nation. It was particularly encouraging to see so many areas in which the Scottish Government and assembly members were in absolute agreement, which reflects our shared ambitions.

It is clear that the assembly's members have considered a broad evidence base to inform their recommendations. In December 2021, the Scottish Government published a detailed response to all the recommendations, drawing from a wide range of portfolios and ensuring that we have a whole-Government response in order to support the scale and nature of the change that is required.

The process of the assembly itself has been highly innovative—not least in that it is the first national citizens assembly to have taken place entirely online. It is also the first to have fully integrated the voices of children, thereby providing a clear platform for them to share ideas and priorities for tackling the climate emergency.

We are clear on the urgency of the climate emergency and the need to act decisively while ensuring that we focus on the areas that will have the most impact. We were pleased to be able to support the vast majority of the assembly's recommendations. As I mentioned, some of those have already helped to shape work that was under way or in development. However, we must do more, and the assembly has rightly led us to go

further and to increase our ambition in a number of areas.

We are working to ensure that we translate the recommendations into rapid action. For example, we are rolling out support for a new network of sharing libraries across Scotland, which will enable people to borrow, rather than buy, certain items, and we will ensure that those services are accessible for communities.

We are working to update and strengthen our "Learning for sustainability: action plan" to take full account of the recommendations from the assembly and of the calls to action from the children. We have committed to a feasibility study to investigate the assembly's recommendation on food carbon labelling and to explore the potential impact of such a scheme.

We have increased our target for annual native woodland creation from 3,000 hectares to 4,000 hectares for the next two years, and we will explore opportunities to go further.

We have committed to developing a career pathway and volunteering opportunities for people who are economically inactive to develop green nature-based skills. We are considering the assembly's recommendations as we develop our volunteering action plan with stakeholders.

We are supporting the creation of new and existing local work hubs across Scotland to support local living. That has already begun for Scottish Government staff. We have commissioned an additional piece of work with the Scottish Futures Trust to scope existing and planned local work hubs and to understand how they support better local outcomes.

More broadly, the work of the assembly has influenced the evolution of Scottish Government policy. Not only did it help us to refine our policy positions ahead of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—but it influenced the Bute house agreement between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party parliamentary group, as well as the new "Heat in Buildings Strategy—Achieving Net Zero Emissions in Scotland's Buildings" and the development of the new economic strategy.

Members will have seen that, at the eighth weekend of Scotland's Climate Assembly, members drafted a statement of response to the Scottish Government. The statement commends the Scottish Parliament for establishing the assembly. We all agreed that the process must challenge us all to do things differently in the future; it has certainly done that. The statement also sets out some of the areas where assembly members want us to go further, and it outlines some new actions that assembly members are urging us to consider.

We understand that some of the assembly's members will be disappointed that in a few areas we have been unable to support individual recommendations in full. That reflects the need to consider the limits of current devolved powers, technological feasibility and the feasibility of timescales. Where matters are reserved, we are calling on, and will continue to call on, the United Kingdom Government to match Scotland's level of ambition. We will continue to work collaboratively with the UK and the other devolved Administrations to secure progress. To mention just one example, I note that since we published our response we are now part of a cross-Administration group on eco-labelling to help us to take forward the assembly's recommendations in that area.

In Scotland, we understand the benefits of citizens' assemblies and other forms of participation, but there is always more to do. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of Scotland's Climate Assembly, we have all learned a lot, and we now have an even stronger foundation for tackling the climate emergency.

Although the legislative requirements of Scotland's Climate Assembly have now been fulfilled, members of the assembly have made several suggestions about how we in the Government could continue to engage with assembly members in the future; we are looking at those suggestions now. We want to continue to hear from the people of Scotland, and our "Net Zero Nation: Public Engagement Strategy for Climate Change", which we published in September 2021, sets out our vision: that all of Scotland understands the challenges that we all face and that we all embrace our role in the transition to a net zero and climate-ready Scotland. We know that achieving net zero emissions requires us all to collaborate across all sectors and regions of Scotland, as well as internationally.

Like many of my ministerial colleagues, I have had the pleasure of personally meeting a number of assembly members and some of the children who were involved in the process. The level of dedication and commitment to tackling the issues that we in Scotland are facing was impressive. I therefore reiterate our thanks to the members of Scotland's Climate Assembly and of our Children's Parliament.

I reassure Parliament and members of the assembly that although the official process is complete the assembly's influence and legacy will continue. We will continue to draw on the assembly's recommendations as we develop our policies, and we will continue to re-evaluate opportunities to go further, faster.

It is clear that the assembly process has been transformative for all who have been involved. I am sure that, as a Parliament, we will want to embrace that commitment to doing politics differently in the future.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to ask a question would press their request-to-speak buttons or put an R in the chat function.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. It is extraordinary how members of the Climate Assembly dedicated themselves to Scotland's role in addressing the climate emergency, particularly in an especially challenging period for collaborative working. What is concerning is the disconnect between the warm words and self-congratulation that we just heard from the cabinet secretary and what the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee heard this morning—that the assembly feels that the Scottish Government focuses more on what it cannot do than on what it can do and that

"Members ... overall are disappointed ... the Government's response"

fails

"to recognise the urgency"

of their report.

Assembly members are also frustrated at their inability to check on delivery. The assembly called for the Government to create a scorecard for Scotland, with 10 key performance indicators—measurable targets for holding the Government to account. Will the cabinet secretary commit to developing such a scorecard in the form that the assembly suggested?

The assembly recommended a whole-government approach, which includes local government. According to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, next year's budget will cut £100 million from local authority budgets. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that local authorities have the funds and resources that are required to achieve the assembly's ambitions?

I have twice asked the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, Lorna Slater, how a French-style ban on plastic packaging for most fruit and vegetables could work in Scotland to reduce plastic use, as the assembly would like. She has twice avoided giving me a substantive response. Does the cabinet secretary have thoughts on how such a ban could work here?

Michael Matheson: I will deal with a number of the issues in the member's questions. As I did in my statement, I acknowledge the disappointment that some assembly members had about our response to the assembly's 81 recommendations. It is worth keeping it in mind that, of the 81 recommendations, we have accepted in full or in part 75. We rejected some not because we do not have the powers to deal with them but because they are not feasible—for example, decarbonising aircraft by 2025 is not feasible, because of technological limitations.

We have sought to meet the challenges that assembly members set to stretch us as much as possible within what is feasible. I am sure that Liam Kerr recognises that the expert group, which assessed our response, commended the Scottish Government's approach in responding to many of the points that were set out in the assembly's report and acknowledged the areas that are extremely difficult, such as taxation, where we do not have the powers to pursue some of the assembly's recommendations.

On marking our progress, if there is one policy area that has greater scrutiny and has annual accounting for the progress that the Government makes, it is climate change policy. We have our climate change plan, which is evaluated every year. We have our climate change adaptation programme, on which we must report every year. We are also committed to updating those plans regularly.

Alongside that, we have the work that is undertaken by the Committee on Climate Change, which carries out independent assessments of the progress that we are making. We are considering the assembly's proposal about how we ensure greater transparency on how the Government is or is not making progress so that we are open and honest about where we are not making sufficient progress on the matter. I hope that that reassures Liam Kerr that we are seeking to ensure that we are held to account, challenged and transparent on the progress or lack of progress that we are making.

On the plastic ban, Liam Kerr will be aware that we have recently introduced regulations to deal with some of the most problematic single-use plastics that blight our environment. We need to take robust action to deal with them. I am more than happy to take away the point that he raised and has raised with my colleague Lorna Slater, but I hope that he will also support the Scottish Government's position that the UK Government should not use the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to dilute the impact of the regulations on single-use plastics, which could undermine the regulations' environmental impact.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement.

I declare an interest, because I recently became Labour's representative on the assembly stewarding group. Even in the short time that I have been a member, I have seen the commitment, passion and wealth of ideas that assembly members have. I place on record my thanks to each one of them for the ambition that they have shown in our collective fight against climate change.

In its response, the Government has not shown the same ambition. The assembly speaks for Scotland when it talks about the lack of affordable, accessible public transport, the lack of proper smart ticketing and the concerns that the cost of retrofitting homes could fall on the shoulders of the people who can least afford it. The assembly was clear that there is a lack of urgency from the Government. There are too many pledges to consider or explore but not enough pledges to do.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with the assembly that we still do not have the detailed route map that we urgently need to take us on the journey to net zero? Does he also agree that we need to continue to harness the talents of assembly members, in particular the Children's Parliament, which played a very important role in the final recommendations?

Surely, nine months after the assembly set out its recommendations, the cabinet secretary has a bit more to say about them than simply that he is looking into suggestions for further engagement. When will he set out what that engagement will be? Crucially, how will he assess the assembly's recommendations—particularly the ones that he says he is still exploring and considering—in the months ahead? Assembly members want to continue to play their role but, more importantly, they want their work to be implemented.

Michael Matheson: Colin Smyth raised a number of issues. I am grateful for his questions on the matter and recognise his interest in the issue in representing his party in the assembly process.

On free transport, in the past few weeks, we extended free bus travel to under-22s, which is a significant expansion of free bus travel for young people in Scotland. Of course, we would always like to go further if there is the financial provision to do so, but we are certainly moving in the right direction and are keen to make further progress in the years ahead.

On the point about heating in buildings, one of the responses that we have made to the assembly members' report is that there is a danger that, if we require the retrofitting of domestic heating

systems, we could unintentionally create greater levels of fuel poverty. The delivery plan that my colleague Patrick Harvie is taking forward is focused on ensuring that that does not happen. That has been influenced by the assembly's recommendations.

The climate change plan is the clear route map that we have set out for achieving our net zero targets of 75 per cent by 2030 and 100 per cent by 2045. That process has been gone through in great detail in the Parliament and in Government policy development.

In relation to ensuring that we harness the talents and interests of assembly members, although the formal part of the assembly process is complete, that is only the first part of the process, and we are engaging and looking at what more we can do going forward. We have agreed to establish an assembly members network, which will be independent of Government. How it will operate will be for the network itself to determine, but we will provide support to it and we are considering other measures.

Engaging the Children's Parliament in the process as well has ensured that children's voices are at the heart of the recommendations that came from the assembly and how they feed into Government thinking. I have just come from the children's Cabinet meeting, which is hosted once a year and where young people were discussing the issues relating to the assembly and had an opportunity to feed into that process. Given the importance that our young people place on our environment, we want to make sure that they are at the heart of our thinking and involvement in designing policies to tackle climate change.

The Presiding Officer: As members would expect, there is a great deal of interest in the statement and many members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. From this point on, I will insist that we have short and succinct questions and responses.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of the stewarding group of the Climate Assembly.

Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the work of Scotland's Climate Assembly has attracted international interest, not least because of its response, follow-up, dialogue and challenge to Government? At the last formal planned meeting of the assembly in February, concerns were raised about how to maintain momentum and accountability once the assembly has ended in its current form. Will the Government commit to the assembly's proposal for a simple and widely publicised annual scorecard on its work, and will it

support and possibly fund a recall of the assembly in the future if that is what the assembly wants?

Michael Matheson: Fiona Hyslop is correct that there has been significant international interest in the assembly. During the course of the many bilateral meetings that I had with ministers from other parts of the world during COP26, an issue that they often raised was the experience of the assembly and its work, and we have offered to share our experience with other countries.

In relation to Fiona Hyslop's question about our helping to provide a network to keep assembly members together, as I mentioned in my response to Colin Smyth, we are prepared to support the network and how it could operate. However, I am open to the possibility of recalling the assembly at some point in the future. Certainly, I will ensure that we consider all the options that can help to support the assembly's work.

On the final issue that the member raised about a scorecard, as I mentioned in my response to Liam Kerr, we are actively considering that issue alongside all the other measures that we have on climate change policy.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Climate Assembly has, quite rightly, called for a decline in ferry emissions. In 2015, the Scottish Government commissioned the procurement of two low-emission ferries for that very purpose. However, almost seven years later, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has received correspondence from outgoing director Tim Hair to say that there would be another delay to both ferries, this time because of cabling problems. Can the cabinet secretary confirm when exactly those two ferries might be finished, and can he provide an update on the latest cost estimates for the completion of those ferries?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the Committee on Climate Change's determination to see decarbonisation of our transport network, including the ferry network. I am conscious that an update has been provided to the committee and that my colleague Kate Forbes has also provided an update to the Parliament on that matter. I am more than happy to ensure that Mr Lockhart is provided with an update on the latest timescales and I am sure that my colleague Kate Forbes would be more than happy to provide that.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government for an update on plans to protect low-income families, including the working poor, from being pushed into fuel poverty when we are decarbonising homes.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary may address that briefly, but I remind members that the statement is focused on the Climate Assembly.

Michael Matheson: The work on the decarbonisation of domestic premises is one of the key things that has been identified in the Climate Assembly. The committee's work fed directly into our heat and building strategy, which my colleague Patrick Harvie published a number of weeks ago. A key part of that is making sure that we not only drive down our emission levels but work in a way that helps to reduce fuel poverty. I assure the member that, as we take forward further work on our fuel poverty strategy and our heat and buildings strategy, the key focus is to reduce the overall level of fuel poverty in Scotland.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of his statement. He mentioned the limits of devolved powers, but that does not excuse the lack of ambition shown by the Scottish Government over the powers that it has, including in relation to land use planning.

On land, Scotland's Climate Assembly has recommended that community right-to-buy legislation be enhanced to empower communities "to take ownership of unproductive land for climate action".

Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the Government will include that practical suggestion as part of its proposed land reform bill? If not, why not?

Michael Matheson: I very much support local communities having the ability to purchase land, and the member will be aware of the provision that the Scottish Government already makes to support communities to do exactly that. We want to consider how we can explore and develop that further through our forthcoming land reform bill.

I am sure that the member would also recognise that, at this stage, it would be inappropriate for me to give the details of a piece of legislation before it is introduced in Parliament, but she can be assured that we intend to take a very ambitious approach to land reform in that legislation.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary give an update on banning single-use plastics and non-recyclable packaging, particularly plastic bags, as called for by the Children's Parliament and by local pupils hosting COP26 events across Lanarkshire?

Michael Matheson: That important issue was identified by the assembly—*[Interruption.]* I am not sure why Stephen Kerr thinks that it is a funny issue—*[Interruption.]* That important issue was raised by the assembly and, in particular, by young people in the Children's Parliament. I am sure that Mr Kerr would want to respect the views of our young people on these important issues.

As I have mentioned, we have introduced regulations to tackle problematic single-use plastics. Those regulations could have a significant impact on dealing with the issue, but they could be impacted by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which could undermine their operational effectiveness. It is important that we do not allow the UK Government to do that.

Stephanie Callaghan should be assured that we will continue to look at what other measures we can take to reduce the impact of plastic on our environment.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I add my thanks to all those involved in the assembly. The assembly rightly underscores the urgent need to decarbonise transport and recognises that we cannot achieve our ambitions without disincentivising air travel and making more sustainable transport options available. Is this not finally the moment for the Scottish Government to rip up its contract with Heathrow airport in support of a third runway, given that we know that that will lead to an extra 75,000 flights between Scotland and London, and an additional 600,000 tonnes of emissions being added to the atmosphere by 2040?

Michael Matheson: In all fairness to the assembly, I do not recall that being one of its specific recommendations, although I recognise the point that the member has raised.

We are already progressing a range of actions, including supporting research, to reduce carbon output from aircraft, including in Orkney. The member will be well aware of the Ampaire programme that is being taken forward, which is being supported by Highlands and Islands Airport Ltd and others, and which will look at the use of zero-emission aircraft.

Clearly, that is an area in which technology must still be developed, and part of the recommendations are difficult for us to implement because the timescale that has been set does not match technological development yet. However, I assure the member that, as a Government, we will continue to look at what measures we can take to support the decarbonisation of the aviation sector. That includes encouraging people to make journeys using alternatives where those are available.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Many of the areas highlighted by the assembly are reserved and require UK Government action. How does the Scottish Government intend to work with the UK Government to ensure that Scotland can reach her full emissions-reduction potential?

Michael Matheson: There are a number of areas in which devolved powers run up against

reserved areas in tackling climate change in Scotland. The challenge is partly that the UK Government's approach to tackling climate change does not match the Scottish Government's level of ambition, which causes consequences for some of our targets. A very good example of that would be the decision by the—*[Interruption.]*

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): That is laughable.

Michael Matheson: Mr Kerr thinks that the issue of the environment and the negative impact of the UK Government's policies on it is laughable. If anything is laughable in the Parliament, it is probably Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I point out that the tactic that the cabinet secretary is using is very childish. In actual fact—*[Interruption.]* Members can make as much noise as they like, but the reality is that the cabinet secretary is using a tactic. He needs to be aware that we are laughing at him making such outrageous claims about ambition. Ambition has to be matched with action that results in outcomes. This Government is bereft of any of that.

The Presiding Officer: In response to Mr Kerr's point of order, I would say that I have noticed several members shouting across the aisles to one another during the statement. I have, perhaps, heard one or two voices more clearly than others. I would be grateful if, at all times, all members of this Parliament treated one another with the courtesy and respect that the code of conduct demands.

Now, are we moving on to the next question? Are you content—

Michael Matheson: I did not finish my answer to the question that I was in the middle of answering before I was rudely interrupted.

The Presiding Officer: Okay, you may complete your response, cabinet secretary.

Michael Matheson: Thank you, Presiding Officer. Of course, it will be a surprise to most of us that the pantomime season now runs into March each year. *[Laughter.]*

Anyway—

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I remind you of my addressing of that point of order. Can we just focus on the business in hand? Thank you.

Michael Matheson: A very good example of UK Government policy not matching the ambition of the Scottish Government in tackling climate change is the decision by the UK Government not to proceed with the Scottish Cluster on carbon capture and the Acorn project. That was an example of a policy that the Climate Change

Committee says is absolutely essential in order to achieve our climate change targets.

I am afraid that that is the type of approach by the UK Government that, if it does not start to align its level of ambition with that of the Scottish Government in tackling climate change, will undermine our ability to reach our targets. That is why it got that decision wrong. It is also why we continue to engage with the UK Government and why, through the interministerial group for net zero, energy and climate change, I am pursuing it to make sure that it responds on the reserved areas on which the Climate Assembly has said that it needs to take action.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): One of the recommendations is to improve recycling in Scotland. An important step towards that will be to finally meet the 2013 household recycling target that is now almost 10 years late. When will that target be met?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware of the very ambitious proposals that we are taking forward alongside the record level of investment that we are making in recycling. Some £70 million is being invested in recycling infrastructure to support local authorities to meet the challenges that they face. We are making the investment that is necessary to meet our climate change ambitions and investing in areas of recycling as a priority. Some £20 million has already been committed and I can assure the member that that investment will help to make sure that we drive forward and meet the targets in the years ahead.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): In recent months, we have seen successive warnings from the UK Climate Change Committee, the Government's energy advisers and now the Climate Assembly about the urgent need to cut air miles. The assembly has made a clear recommendation that air departure tax should be raised for frequent flyers. Will the Government square up to that climate reality and make demand reduction for non-lifeline flights a central objective in its new aviation strategy?

Michael Matheson: One of the main areas that could have a positive impact and reduce the need for regional flights, in particular, is greater investment in our regional rail network to speed that up. Greater electrification of the network could play an important part in that, for example, as could extending high-speed rail into the north of England and Scotland. That would have a significant impact and reduce the need for regional flights.

That is the approach that we believe should be taken to transport investment, reducing journey times in a way that is sustainable and compatible with becoming a net zero nation. That is why, as

part of the work that we are taking forward, we are looking at how we can improve and speed up connectivity between our seven cities through further electrification programmes and why we have made representations to the UK Government to look at electrifying parts of the network in England. That would also help to speed up journey times and, as a side issue, increase freight capacity. If that happened, it could help to reduce demand for some regional flights.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Young people have been inspirational in their campaigns on the future of our planet. The decisions that we make now will have a huge impact on their future and that of subsequent generations. Will the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government will keep dialogue open with children and young people as we work towards net zero, so that they can help to shape decisions?

Michael Matheson: During COP26, some of the most powerful testimony that I heard was from young people, at events that they hosted, on their ambition and determination that we should do everything that we can to protect our environment and tackle climate change. The First Minister and I are very clear that young people must be at the centre of our thinking about how we take forward climate change policy and how we go about tackling climate change in the years ahead.

In the discussion in which I have just taken part at the children's Cabinet meeting, young people put to us the issue of ensuring that their voices are heard. I assure Collette Stevenson that, as we move forward with our climate change plan update and wider climate change policies across Government, we are determined to ensure that young people's voices are at the heart of that work and of our thinking on how we take those policies forward.

Veterans (Mental Health and Wellbeing)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-03381, in the name of Keith Brown, on a Scottish approach to the mental health and wellbeing of our veterans in each community. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons or place an R in the chat function.

15:02

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): I am delighted to open the debate, as we emerge from the pandemic. The mental health of the whole population is a fundamental consideration for the Scottish Government, but we must be particularly mindful of the mental wellbeing of veterans, who have sacrificed so much for us all. Our veterans and their families have unique experiences that will have impacted on their mental health in numerous ways. We are truly grateful for their service.

I thank my colleague Kevin Stewart, the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care, who proposed that we hold this joint debate, and I acknowledge the excellent progress that has been made in delivering the "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan", which was produced by NHS National Services Scotland's Scottish Veterans Care Network.

In the process of delivering the plan, veterans have told us that veteran mental health services are not available throughout Scotland—access currently depends on where someone lives—that veterans are sometimes unclear about what services are available and about where to go for help, and that some statutory services are aware of the needs of veterans and their families, but that is not universal.

I will use some of my time in the debate to describe how we will go further to make a difference for people who need help and support, and how lived experience will play a fundamental role in shaping that.

We are acutely aware of the challenges that the charitable sector has faced over the past two years and of the impact that the pandemic has had on the sector's ability to deliver support. The response from our statutory bodies and third sector partners has been outstanding. An example of that is the move to delivery of innovative therapeutic services and counselling online. In addition to the pressures that have been caused by the pandemic, the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August last year affected veterans across the

UK, and we know that veterans mental wellbeing services in Scotland experienced a significant increase in demand from veterans and family members who were concerned about their loved ones.

We continue to engage with charities and other service providers to ensure that veterans get the help that they need for their mental health. The Scottish Government has continued funding specialist mental health organisations for veterans, such as Combat Stress and Veterans First Point.

A number of priority areas are important to me, as the cabinet secretary with responsibility for veterans. I will touch on some of those.

In a visit to a drop-in centre last year, I heard first-hand from a female veteran who had continued to struggle with her mental health because of her experiences in the service. I was also able to hear about the benefit of having a local veteran-led service that understands the unique experiences of female veterans.

As well as our female veterans, we must also be aware of the specific needs of individuals from the LGBTQ+ community and of early service leavers. I support the UK Government's recent commitment to an independent review of the pre-2000 treatment of LGBT veterans. That also includes a commitment to understanding better the support needs of female veterans and veterans from ethnic minority backgrounds. I look forward to the Scottish Government being able to contribute to and support delivery of those commitments. Through the Scottish veterans fund, the Scottish Government is funding the work of Fighting With Pride—a charity that supports the health and wellbeing of LGBT veterans. All our veterans need services that address their particular needs. To do that, we need providers that understand their experiences.

The United Kingdom Government has undertaken a consultation exercise on a proposal to waive the fee of £2,389 for non-UK service personnel who apply to settle in the UK at the end of their military service. That waiver would be based on their having served for 12 years, or having been medically discharged for reasons relating to their service.

In its response, the Scottish Government raised an issue that we had raised before the consultation process began: the excessive cost of immigration application fees and the need for a more flexible immigration system that meets Scotland's specific needs. We are talking about people who have served in this country's armed forces, but who are not being given the ability for them or their families to stay in this country, without paying a substantial fee. In our view, a requirement for 12 years' service is too long. I do

not believe that we should charge settlement fees to people who have served this country. We should not be excluding people because of their inability to pay; we should be including those who can contribute to our country. We want Scotland to be a country where our veterans are welcomed and their service is valued.

In its response to the consultation, the UK Government agreed to decrease the fee waiver stipulation from 12 to six years. Fees will be waived for those who have been discharged due to an injury or illness that is attributable to their service, irrespective of how long they have served. That is a welcome step in the right direction, but it is disappointing that the UK Government did not go further and align the fee waiver with the four-year reckonable service requirement that has been imposed by the Home Office.

Unfortunately, the UK Government chose not to make any changes to arrangements for the dependants of non-UK armed forces personnel. A more generous and compassionate approach to family migration policy is still required to ensure that our valued veterans, and their families, are able to settle and make their lives in Scotland.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In the motion, the cabinet secretary mentions veterans and their families. Will he, in his speech, talk about the support that is aimed at veterans' families as well as at veterans themselves?

Keith Brown: I will. Martin Whitfield will find references to families throughout my speech. I am sure that the minister, too, will mention families, when he speaks.

The "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan" highlights the need to look at what makes a good life in order to have good health. To underline the point that I have just made, I note that a veteran's mental wellbeing is inextricably linked with the mental wellbeing of their family.

I am also acutely aware of the link between good mental health and having a warm and safe home, a job and a loving relationship. Members will be aware of our commitment to work collaboratively with stakeholders to improve services and support in those areas. That work includes the veterans employability strategic group and the veterans Scotland housing group. I have often thought that there is a tripod of support that can ensure that veterans can reintegrate into civilian life. That includes housing, health and employment. If one of the three is missing, that can cause major problems.

We commissioned the Veterans Scotland housing group to develop a pathway to prevent homelessness for veterans. I am pleased that its report was published earlier this year. I know that that issue is very close to the heart of the Minister

for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care, who previously had responsibility for that matter. That was a collaborative process, and we want that spirit of collaboration to be mirrored in other contexts. We will continue to work closely with partners, including the armed forces community and the housing sector, to consider implementation of the 24 recommendations in the report.

Let me touch on employability. Most service leavers and veterans in Scotland enter work and are successful in the labour market, but we know that some face barriers to employment and that some, although they can get a job quickly, do not secure work that is commensurate with the skills and experience that they have gained from their time in the armed forces. At a time when so many sectors are reporting labour and skills shortages, it is more vital than ever that people who have skills and experience have access to the help that they need.

For those who need to reskill, a wide range of employment and skills support is available. However, despite the availability of advice and support, we know that some veterans are still unable to access the help that they need, so I acknowledge that we need to go further. We will continue to work with partners across Scotland to change that and to ensure that every service leaver and veteran who is able to enter sustained and fair work has the opportunity to do so.

The armed forces personnel and veterans health joint group is a key part of improving access to healthcare, and will continue to prioritise mental health. Other significant work that the joint group is progressing is to do with better identification of veterans in our healthcare system, to enable veterans to be signposted to, and to access, the support services that are most appropriate for their needs.

The joint group recognises that living with long-term physical health conditions as a result of military service can have a substantial negative effect on mental health. We are exploring how we can establish a service that will provide a comprehensive pathway and connect veterans to the right help for their physical and mental health needs, in recognition that the two are often linked.

I thank NHS National Services Scotland's Scottish Veterans Care Network for recognising the issues that veterans raise and for producing a number of principles that are informed by those issues, in its "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan". The Government endorses the proposals that veterans should be able to access services easily and at the right time, and that people who provide services to veterans should understand their needs. The Scottish Government will continue the work of the

Scottish Veterans Care Network, putting veterans at the heart of the implementation process.

If we are to deliver services at the right time and in the right place, it is vital that we have the right information. I am pleased that our understanding of veterans' needs will be enhanced by the results of the 2022 census. We will also have access to the information on veterans that will now be included in Scotland's three primary household surveys.

I have talked about some of the issues that veterans face when it comes to good mental health—housing, employability, pathways to help and support, early identification by the system, previous issues to do with a lack of good data, and stigma. Only through the cross-policy approach that I described, and with a focus on improving all those areas and more, will we be able to ensure that veterans can enjoy good mental health.

As we move to the next stage of the plan, we will establish a veteran-led implementation board, to lead on the plan's delivery. I am pleased to announce the appointment of Mr Charles Winstanley as chair of the action plan implementation board. Charles is a veteran of impeccable standing, who has led delivery of services in the national health service and the third sector, as well as having experience of mental health research. The implementation board will report on its progress to me and to the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care. It will oversee the work of the Scottish Veterans Care Network and it will advise on the structural and funding requirements that will make the principles in the action plan a reality.

For many years, the Scottish Government has supported veterans and their families through the innovative work of Veterans First Point and Combat Stress. We have funded both organisations to provide mental health services for veterans and their families—none of that funding is recognised in terms of consequential or money coming from Westminster specifically for that purpose, but that has never stopped us allocating funding and increasing it where we can.

I am pleased to announce today that we are providing further funding in the next year to the six Veterans First Point centres, which are in Tayside, Lanarkshire, Ayrshire and Arran, Fife, Borders and Lothian. Funding of £666,000 will enable the centres to provide mental health support to veterans and their families in the transition phase.

I can also announce further funding of £1.4 million for Combat Stress, so that the organisation can continue its important work. Combat Stress is relocating services to Glasgow and Edinburgh, thereby providing more accessible routes to support.

Before I conclude, I want to mention that the veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace, will publish his final report later this month. His advice and recommendations on veterans health are another vital set of tools to inform our work. I place on record my sincere thanks to Charlie for his contributions during his 10-year period as commissioner, which will end in late March. On behalf of Scotland's service personnel and veterans, and their families, I wish him well for the future.

I should say one or two things about the amendments. First, on the Labour amendment, I agree that, as we develop our new suicide prevention strategy, we should engage with organisations that represent veterans' interests, thereby ensuring that we capture the right outcomes and actions that will be required to further mitigate suicide risk among veterans. The minister will say more on that, but I should say that we are happy to accept the Labour amendment, in that regard.

On the Conservative amendment, I looked at veterans debates in this chamber over 10 years or so and have never seen an amendment like it. The amendment would completely gut and fillet the Government motion, then reinstate some of the points in it. I do not know whether that signifies a departure. We have had a remarkable degree of cross-party consensus in veterans debates, which I know is appreciated and valued by the veterans community, but the Conservative amendment marks a departure and shows us how much Maurice Corry is missed.

I welcome the point in the amendment about the UK Government's veterans recognition scheme and the support for the implementation of the action plan. It is important that veterans have, should they choose to do so, the ability to easily identify themselves as veterans when accessing services, so I welcome the UK Government's plan to undertake a scoping study for provision of digital verification of veterans. However, I cannot support the Conservative amendment and regret the fact that the Conservatives have sought to undermine the debate.

I wholly endorse the key principles of the "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan". There is cross-party consensus on the importance of that, at least, so I look forward to working with members across the chamber on supporting the mental health of all our veterans, their families and service leavers in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of supporting veterans and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make in Scotland; notes the NHS National Services Scotland publication by the Scottish Veterans Care Network, *Veterans Mental Health*

and Wellbeing Action Plan, setting out how it will take forward key principles to improve veterans' mental health and wellbeing in Scotland, and understands that this action plan highlights the need to take a holistic approach that takes account of housing, employment, education and other needs, and work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors and with the UK Government to ensure that veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can inform the chamber that the time that we had available across the afternoon was exhausted earlier, so I will have to ask members to stick to their time allocations and accommodate any interventions within those allocations, if at all possible.

15:16

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for his opening remarks. I am very pleased to open the debate on behalf of my party. The Scottish Conservatives believe that veterans must be able to secure the right help, at the right time, through access to mental health and wellbeing services that are timely, high quality and right for them as individuals. We recognise the importance of supporting veterans and greatly value the significant contribution that they make in Scotland today.

The Scottish Conservatives will always stand up for our armed forces, some of whom, today, are headed to eastern Europe to support NATO as it reinforces its eastern flank. Today, we thank each and every one of them for their service, as well as remembering those who have paid the ultimate price in defence of our freedoms. We owe them a debt of gratitude that must be realised by more than words and ceremonies, important as those are. That debt must be repaid by a commitment to look after veterans and their families throughout their lives—something that Administrations of all parties have, all too often, failed to do.

When we hear of a veteran who is homeless, we should feel a sense of collective shame. When we hear of a veteran who is struggling with alcohol or drug addiction issues, we should be ashamed. When we hear of a veteran struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder or facing mental health challenges, we should all share a sense of collective shame. When we hear of a veteran who takes his or her own life, we should feel more than shame. It is simply not acceptable that people who were willing to lay down their lives for us then go on to take their own lives because of the adverse experiences that they faced. That is why, today, I will support the Government. We must answer a collective call for action, which is why the Scottish Conservatives welcome the 30 recommendations and principles in the "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan".

We need to come together across Parliament to tackle those problems once and for all, and to do so in a timely way. That is why the Scottish Conservatives propose an armed forces and veterans bill, mirroring a similar move at Westminster in December. The bill would enshrine into law the armed forces covenant for devolved public bodies such as the national health service and local government. The covenant focuses on supporting members of the armed forces, their community and their families. It will support them to access education, secure a home, start a new career and access healthcare or financial assistance, and it will provide them with discounted services. The bill would deliver specific provisions to enhance the benefits and support that are available to veterans as they transition into civilian life.

Let me be clear that, while the vast majority of veterans leave their service greatly enhanced by their time in the military, the extent of mental health problems for those who have served in our armed forces remains unclear. The Scottish veterans health study shows that veterans with long service histories are, in fact, less likely to suffer a range of health-related conditions compared with the general population. Rates of mental illness among UK ex-service personnel are generally lower than rates in the general population, at one in five, compared with one in four in the general population.

However, the Ministry of Defence still reported 1,578 medical discharges in 2020, of which 34 per cent were on mental health grounds. Roughly 50 veterans a year declare a mental health difficulty at the point of discharge, although there are many reasons why difficulties might not be declared at that point. I am therefore pleased that the Scottish Parliament agreed that the 2022 Scottish census should include a question on previous service in the UK armed forces. The information that we get from that will provide a far more accurate picture of the geographical spread of veterans in Scotland, and it will overcome the limitations that mean that it is difficult to estimate the numbers and locations of veterans in Scotland, let alone to explore their mental health.

We must be committed to getting veterans the help that they have earned and the support that they deserve. I commend those organisations that work with our service personnel and veterans. They include the Scottish Veterans Care Network; Combat Stress, which provides a range of community, out-patient and residential mental health services; the Royal British Legion; Poppyscotland; and Forcesline, which is a free, confidential helpline that is completely independent of the military chain of command.

We know that a significant group of service leavers are more at risk of poor mental and physical health because of a number of factors. They include veterans who are younger; veterans who are unemployed; veterans who are unable to work due to long-term illness or disability; service personnel who identify as LGBTQ+ and were forced, shamefully, to hide their sexuality; those personnel who, because of institutional homophobia, faced dishonourable discharge; veterans who are single or divorced; female veterans, who are highlighted as an at-risk group for suicide; black and minority ethnic service personnel; early service leavers, who show higher rates of heavy drinking, suicide and self-harm; and deployed reservists, who are at higher risk of mental health problems. We also know that veterans who present to mental health and wellbeing services in Scotland may have experienced a wide range of issues.

Based on that information, there is clearly a case for highlighting veterans as a priority group. There is a need for the Governments across the UK to develop specific, tailored mental health services for veterans. It is important that we take a four-nations approach, so I welcome “The Strategy for our Veterans”, which has the backing of all four Governments. Although delivery will look different across the country, all parts of the UK, by signing up to the strategy, are committed to a shared vision. The collective ownership of the strategy has been welcomed by the third sector. Chris Hughes of Veterans Scotland has spoken of how that approach puts veterans’ needs before party politics, which is of course where they should be.

I support the “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” and I call on the Scottish Government and its agencies to assess and, wherever possible, implement its 38 recommendations. As our amendment makes clear—I hope that the cabinet secretary will reflect on the fact that it is meant to be constructive—we want a timeline to be put in place so that veterans do not have to wait for five or 10 years for the issues to be addressed.

The measures that we want to be put in place include the expansion of telephone support services, the creation of a Scottish veteran community online resources hub, the development of quality outcome indicators to support mental health and wellbeing services for veterans by enabling them to demonstrate outcomes and enhancements, and the development of an all-important anti-stigma campaign to encourage veterans to seek support where it is required. I say to the minister that, without deadlines, there is no effective plan.

According to Veterans Scotland, there are currently more than 30 organisations that provide

health and wellbeing support to veterans, and they run a multitude of projects in their respective communities. We should support them, and I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of additional funding out of the record £41 billion settlement that we have from the UK Government.

It is sobering to consider the young brave Ukrainians who are returning to their country to take up arms against Putin's revolting regime. Those brave individuals are willing to die for their country and to put themselves in harm's way for a greater good. Our young servicemen and servicewomen have shown the same sense of selfless commitment at home and abroad for generations.

Let us be in no doubt that the bombs and missiles that accompany the drumbeat of war in mainland Europe today will affect many of our own veterans. It will reawaken past trauma and open old wounds. Those who have served in our armed forces have earned our respect and a debt of gratitude. Their mental health challenges can no longer go ignored. Their welfare is our responsibility. They served to keep us safe. We owe them their safety, and we cannot allow their welfare to be overlooked for any longer.

I move amendment S6M-03381.1, to leave out from "recognises" to end and insert:

"believes that veterans must be able to secure the right help at the right time through access to mental health and wellbeing services that are timely, high quality and right for them as individuals; recognises the importance of supporting veterans and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make in Scotland; notes the NHS National Services Scotland publication by the Scottish Veterans Care Network, *Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan*, setting out how it will take forward key principles to improve veterans' mental health and wellbeing in Scotland; understands that this action plan highlights the need to take an holistic approach that takes account of housing, employment, education and other needs, and work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors and with the UK Government to ensure that veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to services across Scotland, and, while recognising that the plan suggests timelines for delivery on the principles will vary across Scotland, believes that the Scottish Government and partner agencies should aim to assess and implement the 38 action plan recommendations within 24 months, and, furthermore, welcomes the introduction of the Veterans' Recognition Scheme by the UK Government, which will ensure that veterans can more quickly, easily and securely prove that they served in the UK Armed Forces, and access the services that they need."

15:25

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I begin by sharing the sentiments from across the chamber of solidarity with the people of Ukraine, who are showing such immense bravery in the face of continued aggression from Putin's barbaric

regime. I extend my solidarity to many of the Russian conscripts, who are clearly caught up in a situation that they did not expect to get caught up in. That exploitation is also worthy of condemnation.

Members of our veterans community are owed a huge debt of gratitude for their service to our country. Whether they served in European conflicts many decade ago, in conflicts in the middle and far east or in the Falklands war, each and every one of them should be immensely proud of their commitment to defending our country, often in the darkest of times.

As someone who has been a member of the Army reserves for more than a decade, I know on a deeply personal level the sacrifices that members of our armed forces make. Their role is a vocation; it means spending huge periods away from their family and friends, and it often leaves them isolated from civilian life. That is why I am delighted that the Scottish Veterans Care Network report and recommendations have finally been published. I am particularly pleased to see the emphasis that is placed on mental health and wellbeing services, which feature prominently in the report.

Poor mental health is incredibly prevalent in the veterans community, for obvious reasons, and I have concerns about the pandemic having exacerbated the situation in recent years. We know the particularly stark impact that isolation had on our veterans community. In 2021, the number of veterans who died as a result of suicide was at its highest level since 2005. The issue has been a cause of huge concern for a long time. That is why our amendment calls for veterans who are at risk of suicide to be specifically considered in the Government's new suicide prevention strategy for Scotland. The strategy has, to be frank, taken too long to be developed, and its publication has been delayed until September 2022. Nonetheless, the strategy is welcome, and I thank the cabinet secretary for indicating that he will support our amendment to the Government's motion.

I welcome the recommendations in the Scottish Veterans Care Network report that veterans should have equal access to mental health and wellbeing services, regardless of where they live, and that each NHS board, in collaboration with health and social care partnerships, should have a dedicated community-based mental health and wellbeing service for veterans. The report highlights the significant geographic variation in service provision and the lack of clarity on who to contact initially for help. When veterans ask for help, they often get lost in a fragmented and unresponsive system. Concerns were also raised about the lack of co-ordination between NHS

community services and broader third sector provision. The situation has the potential to prevent veterans who are seeking support from accessing it, and that can often be catastrophic. That cannot be allowed to happen, and I hope that the steps that I have outlined will ensure that it does not.

The recommendations on providing support at the right time are also warmly welcome. We know that support is most effective when it is sought out, and our services require significant flexibility to be able to react at short notice. It is fair to say that, currently, the system around support services is incoherent, the services are variable in quality and not all veterans who seek help are able to access it quickly enough.

I welcome the suggestion that UK support services should have access to information on Scottish services and to other sources of information. Our veterans community is often highly mobile, which means that continuity and consistency of information, regardless of where people are located, should be of paramount importance. Ultimately, we are seeking to simplify a complex system, and small improvements such as that could make a huge difference to saving and improving lives.

I welcome the general points in the report about developing an anti-stigma campaign while improving public awareness, knowledge and understanding of veterans' needs. Most of us will know someone who is classed as a veteran, but we might not always be aware of their needs or the type of tailored support that would be helpful to them. In combat situations, disinformation can be rife, and it is easy for public perceptions to become clouded and for veterans to be stigmatised as a result. I therefore warmly welcome the recommendation on an anti-stigma campaign. It is an honourable thing for people to serve their country.

Overall, there is much to be welcomed in the report, although there are some wider points that could and should have been included. For years, stakeholders in the sector have been warning of an information vacuum. To fully understand the needs of the community, we need to understand the community itself, but data on veterans is often scarce, disjointed and outdated. The community is traditionally difficult to define, and we have no definitive or conclusive understanding of the size of the community or its other characteristics. The report mentions the collation of increased data, particularly through the new census question, and intelligence to improve our understanding of the community. I welcome that, but I remain concerned with the pace of progress.

Martin Whitfield: When we talk about the community, we are talking about not just the

veterans but their families. One challenge with using the census data is that additional data mining will be required to identify the spouses and families of veterans. It might have been easier to encompass that in the first phase and to capture the information straight away.

Paul Sweeney: My friend raises an extremely important point about data interdependencies. That metadata will be critical to building a network of understanding about dependants of veterans and some of the wider implications of that—they are often people who have lived in service accommodation.

I am concerned about the report in that sense, although it seeks to address the perceived gaps in the system. When veterans and their families fall between the cracks, that has real-life consequences. Just this week, I was contacted by the daughter of Donnie Watt, an 85-year-old veteran from Glenrothes in Fife. Donnie was an intelligence officer for the Royal Air Force in Berlin during the cold war and was diagnosed with dementia in 2017. Since then, he has been confined to hospital wards in Fife and, in the past five years, has spent just five months at home with his family. Donnie's daughter Jane feels that veterans' complex medical needs, as in Donnie's case, are being overlooked in a stretched national health service.

The health and social care partnership that is responsible says that Donnie's case is complex and that veteran-specific needs are difficult. I do not think that that is good enough. That does not mean that Donnie and other veterans like him are not worthy of the bespoke time and care needed to make them comfortable. The problem is that we do not know how many people like Donnie are out there. Until we collate and analyse all the data that is available to us, we will never know, and veterans such as Donnie will continue to suffer diminished quality of life.

Keith Brown: I agree with the member's point, but will he recognise that we have tried for years to get information on veterans in Scotland from the United Kingdom Government without any success, and that the first opportunity that we have to do that is through the census?

Paul Sweeney: I recognise that complaint, and it is certainly one that I made frequently when I was a member in the House of Commons. I accept that we have made a breakthrough, but let us exploit that to its full potential.

I urge the Government to take those points into consideration.

I move amendment S6M-03381.2, to insert at end:

“; acknowledges the recommendation in the action plan that veterans who are at risk of suicide should be considered in the Scottish Government’s new Suicide Prevention Strategy for Scotland; notes that this strategy is now not due to be published until September 2022, and calls for the Scottish Government to update the Parliament, in advance of its publication, on the action taken to develop and deliver veteran-specific suicide prevention training, and improve access to mental health support for veterans.”

15:33

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I apologise to members, as I will have to leave the debate early.

I am privileged to speak for my party in this important debate, and I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for securing parliamentary time for it. In recent days, we have been served with a grim reminder of the horrors of war and the horrendous toll that it takes on all those who are caught up in it, none more so than those who serve on the front line. As we look on in horror at the events in Ukraine, we see the actions of those who stand in defiance of the outrageous and barbaric actions of the Putin regime. No one could argue anything other than that those who are holding the line are exhibiting a staggering degree of heroism and sacrifice that is common to veterans the world over.

As a Quaker, I find the idea of armed conflict very difficult. I am repelled by it. However, one can hate war with every fibre of one’s being but still give thanks for the service and sacrifice of those who fight it. Those positions are not mutually exclusive. We are incredibly fortunate that thousands of our servicemen and women step forward in times of crisis so that the rest of us do not have to. Today, it is absolutely right that we recognise that bravery and honour their sacrifice.

My office has been in touch with the veterans mental health charity Combat Stress, which shared with me the compelling story of a veteran who served 12 years in the RAF. I would like to share his experience with members. He wrote:

“My problems started once I’d retired. I don’t want to talk about all I saw and what I went through in Northern Ireland but it’s definitely what caused my mental health issues. My wife saw that I was struggling to sleep, having nightmares and flashbacks. Loud noises really bothered me, so I avoided going into town as I had flashbacks of going out on patrol. I was always hyper aware of my surroundings. My mind felt locked ready to protect and defend. Everything came to a head when one day I was out and I heard a car backfiring, I just ran, I was crying, in a total panic. Luckily a policeman realised I was a veteran, understood my panic and got me home. I knew I needed help.”

Sadly, it is not uncommon for some service personnel who left the armed forces many years ago to still be struggling to adjust to civilian life. They are still fighting the wars that the world has long since left behind, and all too often they do not

know where to turn. The invisible scars that they bear can have a knock-on effect on their family relationships and employment. As we have heard in the debate, the incidence of homelessness and drug misuse among our veteran population is disproportionately high. Veterans sometimes face delays in accessing mental health treatment as a result of stigma or gaps in provision.

I am thankful to the many great organisations such as Combat Stress, Poppyscotland and Help for Heroes for stepping in to fill the void that has, sadly, been left by the Scottish Government in this area. I will give one example. Over the past 12 months, Combat Stress has carried out nearly 5,000 appointments with 526 veterans across Scotland. As wonderful as the work of our veterans mental health charities is, they are still reeling from two years of the pandemic and the massive impact that that has had on their ability to raise funds.

It is not the third sector alone that should be providing the support that our veterans so sorely deserve—the state has a duty, too. It is, after all, the state that sends servicemen and women into harm’s way, and it is the duty of the state to care for them on their way home and when they return. I am sure that we can all agree on that. It is vital that national health service boards, health and social care partnerships, local authorities and the third sector are appropriately supported to enable them to meet the needs of all veterans.

I am pleased that the “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” has been published, and that—as I understand it—veterans charities were given the opportunity to help shape it. Nevertheless, during the debate, I have received texts from a veteran who is angry at what he has heard. Although the cabinet secretary’s words are warm, we are still being outstripped by England. Last year, NHS England began the roll-out of Op Courage, its new scheme for supporting veterans’ mental health, which fast tracks veterans into mental health support. It would be very helpful to understand whether the Scottish Government has looked at that approach and at what aspects it can emulate up here, or whether it will simply adopt Op Courage in Scotland right now, because such a scheme is needed.

All veterans should be able to access the same high standard of support, no matter where they are based, and any wait for access must end immediately. In the documentary “Thank You For Your Service”, army psychologist General Loree Sutton said:

“We were not allowed to speak of the unseen wounds of war. We were not allowed to prepare for them.”

Our veterans deserve the utmost respect and acknowledgement for the sacrifices that they have

made while carrying out their duty in the service of this country. It is now our duty to ensure that they are given all the support and care that they need, so that there is the prospect that those unseen wounds might, in some way, begin to heal.

15:38

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I very much welcome the scheduling of the debate, both because of the importance of the subject matter and because it represents a potential sea change in bringing together the support that is afforded to those in our veterans community who require it, wherever they may live.

The “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” is a significant step forward in Scotland’s commitment to supporting those veterans who have paid a legacy price for their service. The fact that the recommendations are a co-production between people who know and understand what it is to operate in the armed forces, those who work with veterans and those who have expertise in health and mental health and service implementation gives them important added credibility.

I will go back a little in recent history, to offer credit where it is due for the position in which we find ourselves today, with the Scottish Veterans Care Network established and the plan being taken forward. First, the part that has been played by Eric Fraser, the former veterans commissioner, in all that must be acknowledged, as it was his report, “Veterans’ Health and Wellbeing: A Distinctive Scottish Approach”, that set us off in that direction.

At the risk of embarrassing him, I also acknowledge the role of the cabinet secretary, for it was Keith Brown, when he previously had responsibility in the Government for veterans, who established the post of veterans commissioner. Credit should also go to him for the part that he played in getting us to where we are today, and I wish to say how pleased I am to see him once again holding that responsibility.

It is widely recognised that, in many ways, Scotland does better by its veterans and their families than other countries, but that has never generated, nor should it ever lead to, complacency. We have always strived to do better, and the creation of the Scottish Veterans Care Network is proof of that. For me, the action plan is clear evidence of the network already proving its worth.

As was claimed by former MSP Mike Rumbles, who championed this cause in the previous session of the Parliament, there was, historically, a degree of postcode lottery about access to services for veterans, which, in my opinion, was

almost entirely born out of a lack of understanding, more than anything else, but it was there. Where services were good, they were very good, but where they were not, at the heart of the problem was a failure to grasp the point that veterans—at least, those who are in most need of support—do not always readily seek it, especially if they feel that they will be dealing with folk who do not understand them or what they have been through. Even when they want help, they may have little idea of how to access it. That is why the establishment of the care network and the implementation of the action plan are so essential.

We need all our veterans to have direct access—on their doorstep, where possible—to the services that they and their families require. Today’s announcement about the implementation board to oversee all of that is very welcome. As the action plan highlights, to deliver what we will need will require flexibility, depending on population size and rurality. In some places, we will need to establish a new and distinct mental health and wellbeing service. We will need to be creative around pathways and to make use of digital resources and technology. As others have noted, the 2022 census will be essential in helping us to better understand where our veterans are located so that we can shape and provide the services that they may need as best we can.

It is important to recognise that the vast majority of service leavers adapt to civilian life very well. However, MOD figures show that, of the 1,578 medical discharges from the forces in 2020, just over a third were on mental health grounds. We also need to remember that the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder is often delayed—sometimes by as much as 14 years. There is no doubting that a need exists, and will continue to exist, for mental health services and more—and the “more” really matters. As the plan highlights, a better joined-up and holistic approach is needed, where matters such as housing, education and employment are addressed and the needs of the wider family are taken into account.

There is no questioning the Scottish Government’s commitment to supporting our veterans community. There are many in that community who, while they might not necessarily share the politics of this Administration, would willingly attest to that. Most recently, that has been seen with the Scottish Government stepping in to provide financial backing for the unforgotten forces consortium and the creation of a £1 million fund to provide direct financial relief to those third sector organisations that support our veterans in Scotland. There has been a commitment to increase the Scottish veterans fund to £500,000 per annum from 2022-23, and the cabinet secretary’s announcement today on V1P—

Veterans First Point—and Combat Stress is hugely important.

There has been on-going, specific work in other areas—in housing, education, mental health and social isolation. However, there is more to be done, and the action plan points the way in that regard. I particularly welcome the recommendation that the community-based veterans mental health and wellbeing service should include peer support workers, and I also welcome the requirement for the planned regional implementation teams to include veteran navigators.

Of all the recommendations that are contained in the action plan, perhaps recommendation 2.3 is the one that best demonstrates how switched on the plan is, as is evidenced, in particular, by the specific call to

“Develop processes for Early Service Leavers with complex psychological needs.”

That is a cohort that we all know requires particular attention.

For me, the action plan represents a major step forward in the development of the kind of pulled-together support that ought to be available to our veterans, wherever in Scotland they reside. If we can deliver on it in full, then, alongside the excellent work that continues to be done by the veterans third sector, we really will have a truly holistic, first-class offering for our veterans.

There is much to be done to ensure that the plan’s ambitions are realised in their entirety, but its content and the cabinet secretary’s comments today leave me with a sense of optimism. On that note, I encourage members to support the motion in Keith Brown’s name.

15:44

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): An estimated 5 million veterans live in the UK at present, and a further 20,000 personnel leave the armed forces every year. When they leave, their healthcare automatically transfers from the military to the national health service. According to figures from HM forces, only around 0.1 per cent of regular service personnel are discharged annually for mental health reasons. Sadly, however, many veterans develop mental health problems after leaving the service. Many experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

Of course, ex-military personnel experience many of the same mental health problems as the general population, although their experiences during service and the transition to civilian life mean that their mental health may be adversely affected by factors such as PTSD, depression and anxiety. Tragically, only half of those who experienced mental health problems sought help

from the NHS—and those who did so were rarely referred to specialist mental health services. Worryingly, levels of alcohol misuse, overall, were substantially higher than in the general population.

Veterans’ mental health problems may be made worse or caused by post-service factors such as difficulties in making the transition to civilian life or marital problems and the associated loss of family and social support networks.

Young veterans are at a high risk of suicide in the first two years after leaving the service and are vulnerable to social exclusion and homelessness, both of which we know to be risk factors for mental ill health.

Paul Sweeney: Does the member agree that a particularly difficult cohort is those whose discharge is unplanned—for example, if they have failed a compulsory drugs test—and that they are often not given the necessary support into civilian life?

Finlay Carson: Absolutely. Our veterans can find themselves in different and unique situations. Those need to be addressed in a unique and proper way.

The position that many veterans find themselves in is unacceptable. It is vital that they are able to secure the right help at the right time, through access to mental health and wellbeing services that are timely, of high quality and specifically tailored for them as individuals, and not a one-size-fits-all approach.

It is important that servicemen and women who choose to settle in Scotland on leaving the forces know from the outset that they are settling in a land fit for heroes—a place that offers support for them and their families that is at least on a par with the support that is offered in other parts of the UK. I support the action plan, and I call on the Scottish Government to accept its recommendations and to fund it generously, so that our veterans can fulfil their potential and can access appropriate support when they face difficult times.

At present, Scotland has a range of quality services. Sadly, however, as we have heard, that support can be haphazard. The veterans commissioner concluded that it

“can be piecemeal on occasions and often quite limited for those with the most complex and difficult conditions.”

The commissioner has previously urged the Scottish Government to publish a mental health action plan. I hope that the minister will do that as a matter of urgency, because it is vital that the Scottish Government works with NHS Scotland to produce an action plan for the long-term delivery of services and support.

I know and appreciate that the UK and Scottish Governments have worked together in the past to publish a joint strategy for our veterans. That collaboration needs to continue in the future, for the good of all our ex-service personnel.

I will highlight a few things that involve veterans who live in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries—in particular, the wonderful Veterans Garden Dumfries, which provides a safe place for serving armed forces personnel, local veterans and their families to meet up for a cuppa and a catch-up, as well as to provide mutual support when needed. It is truly a wonderful example of how people can help one another in times of need. The garden is immaculately kept, and it helps to create a sense of wellbeing and togetherness. The men and women who look after it deserve great credit.

To put party politics aside, it would be remiss of me not to mention the tremendous work that is carried out by the region's armed forces champion, the Labour councillor Archie Dryburgh, who was awarded the MBE in the Queen's new year's honours list in 2019. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, Archie—a former Gordon Highlander—had to wait for more than two years before he was presented with his medal, which he was awarded in recognition for the way that he spearheaded the region's commemoration events for the first world war and the Quintinshill disaster.

Archie has always made the welfare of serving and ex-forces personnel and their families a priority. He is also heavily involved in organising another event later this month, after Dumfries and Galloway Council honoured the Royal British Legion with freeman status for its 100 years of service to veterans and their families.

I put on record the work of South West Scotland RnR, which the former veterans minister, Graeme Dey, visited. That charity works alongside First Military Recruitment and has trained more than 60 former forces personnel to become heavy goods vehicle drivers. Such schemes provide hope and help to many of our ex-servicemen and women.

The Scottish Conservatives will always stand up for our armed forces. We thank each one of them for their service, commitment and sense of duty, as well, of course, as remembering those who paid the ultimate price. We owe them a great deal of gratitude.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I call Paul O'Kane—I am sorry; I call Christine Grahame, to be followed by Paul O'Kane.

15:50

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thought that I had changed identity for a moment, Presiding Officer.

It is a bitter irony that, as we debate the issue, men and women on both sides in Ukraine are dying and being injured in a conflict that is entirely manufactured. It is an invasion of a sovereign, independent nation in Europe by a bellicose and expansionist regime that is led by a paranoid megalomaniac, Vladimir Putin.

In my lifetime, we have sent troops to the Falklands, to Iraq twice and to Afghanistan. Each war is horrendous and destructive for generations. Today, with mobile phones providing instant, local reporting, we are there with the people and soldiers who are risking life and limb. It reminds us—if we needed reminding—of the cost of conflict.

Representing Penicuik, with the Glencorse barracks nearby, and the Borders, which has centuries of tradition of army service, I have long held an interest not only in where we send forces into conflict and why, but what happens on their return.

In my time in the Parliament since 1999, the MOD has gradually recognised its duty of care to troops not only on the front line but on their return and for years afterwards. That is perhaps exemplified most by the armed forces covenant—a statement of the moral obligation that exists between the UK, the UK Government and the armed forces. It was published in May 2011, and its core principles were enshrined in law for the first time in the Armed Forces Act 2011. I quote:

“we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives.”

The 38 recommendations of the “Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” for veterans are based on three key principles, but I will focus on one:

“Veterans will have equal access to mental health and wellbeing services, regardless of where they live”—

I note the reference to the postcode lottery in previous times. That access should focus

“on keeping veterans and their families well by providing support for the wider determinants of mental well health and wellbeing”,

with services provided

“as close to home as possible”.

In 2014, the Scottish Government appointed a Scottish veterans commissioner—as colleagues have said, the current commissioner is Charles

Wallace, who had 35 years of Army service—to act as an ambassador for improvements in supporting veterans. Wales is announcing a commissioner this year. I am not aware of England announcing one, but I recommend that it does.

The Scottish veterans fund was initiated in 2008-09 and has received £1.7 million for more than 180 projects. Last year, the Scottish Government committed to increase the annual fund to £500,000 from 2022-23.

I will focus on the veterans employability strategic group, which has membership from the private sector for the first time. The Scottish Government is launching a public awareness campaign about it because, as the cabinet secretary said, health, a happy home, employment and helping families are interlinked.

I accept that many veterans return to civvies without any issues, but there are stresses in doing so. It is difficult to fit in with employment demands, although veterans' skills are often transferable. The mental health transition and recovery plan, which was published in October 2020, had a specific commitment to identify

“prevention opportunities in relation to veterans at risk of suicide”,

which other speakers have referred to.

Locally, we have the veterans centre in Dalkeith, which serves my constituents in Midlothian south. It is located in the heart of Dalkeith town centre and is primarily designed as a drop-in centre, with no appointments being necessary—at least, that was the case pre-Covid. The aim is to advise and support former members of the armed forces, reservists and their families throughout Edinburgh and the Lothians through any disadvantage that they have post service. It has a small team of dedicated staff, who are readily available to tackle any challenges that present, however minor or complex. I understand that the centre has bacon roll mornings every Friday—I fancy going to one of those. They are extremely popular, with a great atmosphere, and are, naturally, well attended.

There is also the Veterans First Point in Galashiels, and I note that the cabinet secretary announced further funding for Veterans First Point initiatives. Veterans First Point provides support and advice for ex-forces personnel, their families and carers. The team includes veterans as peer support workers, as well as clinicians and therapists, who listen and help.

For years, we have been aware that, due to the disconnect when they leave the forces, and perhaps their experience of conflict, some veterans go into a downward spiral, with relationship break-ups, addictions, homelessness and even criminality.

We have not always treated our veterans well, even when they were still serving in the armed forces. In Iraq, from 2003 to 2008, they had poor equipment, the wrong shoes and the wrong vehicles. Sadly, it is also the case that, following the 1990-91 Gulf war, veterans had to fight for recognition of Gulf war syndrome. As my colleague Graeme Dey said, post-traumatic stress disorder manifests itself in many ways and over a long period of time.

Finally, I say this: we politicians—although perhaps not those in this chamber—are the people who send our armed forces into conflicts, mainly because we have failed. Therefore, we have a huge duty to them once they have been discharged, whatever condition they are in when they are discharged.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul O’Kane, who joins us remotely.

15:57

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of colleagues on the unfolding horrors in Ukraine. Once again, I offer my solidarity to the Ukrainian people.

I thank Keith Brown for bringing the debate to the chamber. I know that veterans' affairs are close to the cabinet secretary's heart and to the hearts of many colleagues across the chamber—including, not least, the heart of my Labour colleague, Paul Sweeney.

It was great to hear Finlay Carson speak about Councillor Archie Dryburgh, who is a good colleague and someone with whom I worked very closely when I was at East Renfrewshire Council and we both served on the Association for Public Sector Excellence. The comments about him were well made.

When we talk about mental health, it is clear that enormous strides have been made in wider society in recent years. Whether it happens through having conversations with a loved one or with a stranger on the street, it is good to see the whole country moving along a more positive path and talking about those issues. To illustrate that point, my office recently held a time to talk day coffee and catch-up, when we all took a moment to support one another with conversations about our mental health. That brought home to me that, with regard to veterans, we need to think more about how we tailor our approaches and conversations to support people who have been involved in active service over many years. From all the contributions today, it is clear that we have more to do in that regard.

I commend the work of the Scottish Veterans Care Network, including the development of its

action plan for tackling veterans' mental health challenges. The report is to be welcomed, and I hope that all the recommendations will be not only accepted but fully implemented by the Government. It is vital that we ensure that we have adequate funding for that.

The third principle of the plan states:

"NHS Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Local Authorities and the Third Sector should be appropriately supported to meet the needs of veterans and develop and deliver Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Support and Services."

It is vital that the Scottish Government gives those bodies the right support and funding to ensure that the principles can be achieved. Alongside that, we in the Parliament must be able to track changes to ensure that they are fully implemented and that sustainable funding is provided over the years.

Accountability is incredibly important in ensuring that veterans feel fully supported when they retire from their service. We know the sacrifices that have been made—everything from risking their lives for our country to spending an unimaginably long time away from their families, which can cause anxiety and emotional strain. That should encourage us to do our very best for them, as they have done for us.

We also know what amazing assets veterans are to our communities and workplaces. Servicemen and women are adaptable and incredibly well trained, and have a work ethic like no other. We must ensure that we harness their potential and fully support them to transition smoothly into civilian life, wherever they choose to go.

Like colleagues, I will take a moment to highlight the amazing contribution of the third sector and charitable organisations. I am thinking in particular of Erskine, which is based in my West Scotland region, and the work that it does year on year to support people with housing and benefits issues or, indeed, to get them back into the workplace.

I, too, welcome the cabinet secretary's comments on LGBT+ veterans and the work that will be done to better understand their needs after long misunderstandings about their particular mental health challenges. I am thinking in particular of those who served prior to 2007, when the UK Labour Government ended the ban on LGBT+ people serving openly in our armed forces. It is clear that more work needs to be done to understand the needs of LGBT+ people coming out of our armed services.

It is also clear that tragic situations continue to unfold for veterans across our country. Indeed, throughout the pandemic, we have seen more veterans suffer from increased anxiety, isolation

and job loss, with services being either absent or perhaps slower to respond to their needs. We have heard previously from the Scottish veterans commissioner the call for strengthened strategic leadership and for an effort to be made to support partnerships across Scotland.

In some ways, it is regrettable that the new suicide prevention strategy has been delayed until September 2022, because too many lives are being lost and we need to take real and meaningful action as soon as possible. As Paul Sweeney has already mentioned, Scottish Labour is clear that the Scottish Government must update Parliament in advance of the strategy's publication and action being taken to deliver veteran-specific suicide prevention training and improved mental health support. We very much welcome the cabinet secretary's acknowledgement of our amendment in that regard.

Those who have sacrificed the most for our country deserve the best care possible. Although priority has been given to the healthcare of veterans, we cannot become complacent about the quality of services, including mental health services. My party and I will continue to call for greater access to and availability of support services for our Scottish veterans.

16:03

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a councillor on Aberdeen City Council.

Last week, a family member WhatsApped me with a link to a JustGiving page asking me to

"please donate to Scott's Ultra challenge".

That Ultra Challenge run was a 40-mile run that took place last weekend in memory of a promising young soldier who took his own life last year, following a long struggle with mental ill health. Scott was not a veteran, but when I read his story, I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss, which was perhaps subconsciously compounded by the events that are unfolding in Ukraine. I suspect that, for many, that is making the futility of conflict feel very real and frightening.

In recent years, the focus on the mental health of armed services personnel has increased. Media coverage and the work of armed forces charities has raised public awareness of the impact on our veterans of mental health conditions such as PTSD, depression and anxiety.

The perception that service personnel leave the armed forces mad, bad or sad is stigmatising and harmful. The majority leave having had a positive experience. The sense of community that the

military environment offers can make an invaluable contribution to their mental health.

Around 2,020 veterans live in Scotland. Understanding that community is essential to ensuring that, as Charles Wallace, the veterans commissioner, outlines in the new “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan”,

“no more veterans suffer due to gaps in service provision or lack of awareness of the help”

that already exists. Much of that service provision requires understanding the risk factors for veterans, including age, employment status, housing and homelessness, the pandemic and gender.

Recently, I spoke about female veterans in a debate, and highlighted the disproportionate challenges that women face from harassment, discrimination, sexual assault and other behaviours, which impact on their mental health and can place them at higher risk of self-harm and suicide. I note that Paul Sweeney’s amendment makes reference to the new suicide prevention strategy and the opportunity to consider veterans within that.

I also highlight the risk from extremism—far-right rhetoric, in particular, which can feel attractive and in line with the way that an individual might view the world, particularly following their experience of active service. That might seem to be a far cry from life in Scotland, which to a great extent it is, but it is nonetheless a factor that I consider requires on-going monitoring.

As has been highlighted, the Scottish Government has already made available £1 million in direct relief to support the armed forces community in Scotland. It has made available additional funding to organisations that provide support to veterans and serving personnel and has continued funding for the unforgotten forces consortium, which is a partnership of charities, including Combat Stress, that are already doing excellent work in Scotland. The Scottish veterans fund has provided more than £1.7 million to more than 180 projects, and the £120 million mental health recovery and renewal fund reflects the priority that is placed on improving mental health in Scotland.

In terms of services and support, the veterans’ mental health and wellbeing action plan sets out the key principles around equity of access to services, accessing the right help at the right time and ensuring that services meet the needs of veterans. At this point, I highlight the case of a constituent whom I supported—a veteran who was, during lockdown, experiencing extreme anxiety arising from the behaviour of neighbours. During a housing needs assessment, he was advised that

“any further negative impact on a pre-existing mental health condition caused by neighbours’ behaviour is not relevant to the housing assessment process”

and

“these mental health issues do not prevent you accessing or functioning in your home”.

There was no understanding of his vulnerability as a veteran. Therefore, I ask the Scottish Government to ensure that support for veterans is not undermined by local approaches that seem to be unintentionally process driven, rather than trauma informed.

The plan also highlights the important role of strong social networks. I give a nod to Chris and John at the Portlethen and District Men’s Shed in my constituency. They are both veterans and are compassionate, supportive and welcoming. Aberdeen South and North Kincardine is also home to the Gordon Highlanders Museum, which is a tribute to the men of one of the finest regiments of the British Army and a place for veterans to come together to reflect and remember.

Finally, I highlight the issue of veterans in custody and prison, who are often highly vulnerable and in poor mental health. As the cabinet secretary knows, the Criminal Justice Committee made, in our report “Judged on progress: The need for urgent delivery on Scottish justice sector reforms”, a range of recommendations on remand, problem drug use, rehabilitation and alternatives to prison, which are all highly relevant to veterans. I ask that progress on our recommendations be made at pace by the Scottish Government and criminal justice partners.

To conclude, and perhaps most importantly, I pay tribute to all serving personnel, veterans, their families and the people who are supporting them, and to Scott and others, whose struggle with mental health was lost too soon. We thank you, we will work for you and we will remember you.

16:09

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Like all members, the Scottish Conservatives want servicemen and servicewomen who choose to settle in Scotland on leaving our armed forces to know that they are settling in a land that is fit for heroes and that offers them and their families the most generous support in any part of the UK.

When I was out in my constituency last night, I met a veteran who, like all of us, wants to live and take an active role in their community. Members can imagine that we had quite an interesting discussion, given the current state of affairs in Europe. That veteran continues—as we all do—to be as patriotic as ever.

We support the “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan”, and call on the Scottish Government to accept its recommendations and fund it generously, so that our veterans can fulfil their potential and get the support that they need. The plan, which was developed with the Scottish Veterans Care Network and published in December 2021, aims to ensure that veterans can lead healthy and positive lives and reach their full potential by accessing timely and high-quality wellbeing and mental health services, no matter where they live.

The action plan has been developed through extensive engagement and collaboration, and it makes 38 recommendations, as we have heard. Contributors to the plan included but were not limited to 80 veterans, integration joint boards, NHS colleagues, third sector veterans organisations, mental health and wellbeing services, the Ministry of Defence and national NHS boards. Although we recognise that the plan suggests timelines for delivery on goals, those will vary across Scotland, which is why we believe that the Scottish Government and partner agencies should aim to assess and implement the action plan’s 38 recommendations within 24 months.

As well as supporting the plan, the Scottish Conservatives have proposed an armed forces and veterans bill, in order to stand up for our soldiers. The bill would enshrine in law the armed forces covenant for devolved public bodies such as the NHS and local government. The armed forces covenant focuses on supporting members of the armed forces community in accessing education, having a home, starting a new career and accessing healthcare, financial assistance and discounted services. That is important to me, living where I live, in close proximity to Dreghorn and Redford barracks.

The Scottish Conservatives fought for our service personnel to be exempt from Scotland’s higher tax rates. The Scottish National Party broke its 2016 manifesto promise not to raise taxes. Its higher taxes were set to target more than 7,000 of our armed forces personnel. After my Scottish Conservative MP colleague John Lamont raised the issue in the House of Commons, the UK Government stepped in to provide a Scottish income tax mitigation for personnel earning more than £28,443.

Keith Brown: Will Sue Webber give way?

Sue Webber: I will not. Thank you.

That means that members of the armed forces will receive the same income, regardless of where they are domiciled in the UK.

We called for the introduction of a specific veterans help-to-buy scheme, to give veterans and their families more support when buying a home in

Scotland. That idea to help people to get on the property ladder was shot down by the SNP. We would help to reinstate help to buy, and we would set up a specific element of the scheme to support armed forces veterans to step on to the property ladder and build their lives and homes in Scotland.

Paul Sweeney: Will Sue Webber give way?

Sue Webber: I will not at the moment, thanks.

Invaluable work is done by non-government organisations. I pay tribute to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen & Families Association—Forces Help, whose representatives I met in West Lothian prior to my election to the Scottish Parliament, because my sister was a volunteer with the charity. It is a UK charity that has groups across the country that provide lifelong support to serving men and women and to veterans of the British armed forces and their families and dependents. SSAFA helps the armed forces community in several ways, including with issues of addiction, relationship breakdown, debt, homelessness, post-traumatic stress, depression and disability.

As we have heard today, it is imperative that we recognise the stresses that families face when they support service personnel who are having difficulties. Partners often struggle as they support their loved ones, whether they are on active service or coming to terms with what they have faced. SSAFA focuses on rebuilding lives.

We want to make Scotland an attractive part of the UK for people who leave the armed forces to settle in. It is clear from what I have said today that the Scottish Conservatives continue to strive for that, day in and day out. The Scottish Conservatives will always stand up for our armed forces. Today, we thank each and every one of them for their service, and we remember those who have paid the ultimate price.

16:14

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):

One in 10 UK armed forces personnel was seen by military healthcare services for a mental health related reason in 2020-21. Although that represents a fall in numbers from 2019-20, that might be attributable to a reduction in routine and training activity during lockdowns.

As “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” states, the Ministry of Defence reported 1,578 medical discharges across the UK in 2020. It is estimated that 34 per cent of those discharges were on mental health grounds. If that is taken as a proportion of the size of the veteran population in Scotland, that would equate to approximately 50 Scottish veterans per year declaring a mental health difficulty at the point of being discharged.

Veterans therefore need access to mental health support and treatment, just like the rest of us, although, as others have noted, stigma is a specific factor. We must also acknowledge that veterans are exposed to stressors and experiences that most of the general population do not face, and that any mental health support must be person centred.

As we have heard, the action plan is based on three key principles. It focuses on veterans having timely access to well-planned mental health and wellbeing services, no matter where they live. It is vital that those principles be adhered to, so that no one slips through the cracks and is unable to access the support that they need. Some of the issues that we see are similar to those that we have previously discussed for the general population, but some treatment will be specific to veterans. As a party, Greens would always advocate for peaceful resolution, rather than armed conflict. However, we recognise that person-centred care is important for those who have been involved in conflict to ensure that they can deal with their experiences.

As the motion notes, we must deliver holistic care that takes into account the entirety of an individual's needs. That will include services such as housing and rehabilitation, where appropriate. That care should also take account of family situations, and of children in particular. It is hard not to refer to the situation in Ukraine while taking part in this debate. For those who have experienced armed conflict, the blanket coverage of the current war might be retraumatising. I encourage anyone who is experiencing deterioration in their mental health because of that to seek help.

I would also like us to consider how we can support the children of people who have been involved in war. I am sure we have all seen in the past few days children in the news who have been forced to flee Ukraine and who tell reporters that their fathers have stayed behind to fight. Information and pictures from war are much more available to young people than they were previously. I hope that we will be able to give the appropriate support to children of veterans and to anyone who comes to Scotland from a conflict zone. Where appropriate, that should be whole-family support.

There should also be an appropriate mix of treatment, including counselling and trauma support services, to provide support in the most appropriate format for individuals. As with health support for non-veterans, we must ensure that people are asked to explain their trauma or symptoms only as often as is necessary. Some current practices mean that people might have to repeat their story many times to various clinicians.

It is important to ensure that we can share data effectively. Any veteran who is disabled as a result of their deployment should not have to repeat their story every time they need physical support. That should be the same for mental health support.

We must also consider unmet need. The action plan highlights many reasons why individuals might not declare difficulties on discharge, including issues of discrimination and stigma. Studies have shown that stigma is particularly problematic for people in the armed forces, where physical and psychological resilience in the face of adversity are promoted and valued.

PTSD can develop years after a traumatic experience. Delayed onset PTSD might make it difficult to determine the true extent of mental health problems among veterans. A study that was published last year by researchers from the University of Glasgow highlighted that

“The risk of suicide among UK military veterans remains unclear. Few recent studies have been undertaken, and most studies found no clear evidence of increased risk.”

It is clear that we need more research into, and a better understanding of, veterans' mental health.

The action plan highlights many risk factors that can lead to veterans developing mental health problems, and rightly notes that LGBTQ veterans might be at greater risk of poor mental health due to the discrimination that they have historically faced in the armed forces. It also highlights older female veterans as a group who are at risk of suicide. It is vital that mental health services for veterans take the needs of at-risk groups into account and develop tailored support for people who might have experienced discrimination in the armed forces.

The action plan also notes:

“The intake of Black and Minority Ethnic service personnel increased by 110% between March 2019 and March 2020 in the UK. Mental health and wellbeing services should therefore be cognisant of this growing cultural diversity in the future design and development of services.”

As I said, we need person-centred services that seek to treat the individual and which do not view veterans as a homogeneous group of people with similar experiences. It is vital that that approach be supported by good data collection, not only on mental health outcomes for our armed forces personnel and veterans, but on the demographics of the armed forces.

I welcome the “Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” and the Government's commitment to support the mental health and wellbeing of veterans. Veterans have specific needs and need dedicated support that takes account of the unique stressors that they have faced. The action plan represents an important

step towards delivering truly person-centred care for Scotland's veterans.

16:20

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Veterans, service personnel and their families contribute a huge amount to our society. I welcome the great strides that the Scottish Government has made towards ensuring that our veterans and armed forces community receives the best possible support and care, including as we emerge from the pandemic.

While they served, veterans might well have been involved in operations that were integral to our safety, security and wellbeing. Their duties might have placed them in dangerous situations, which could have had a significant impact on their physical and psychological health. The current situation in Ukraine demonstrates that. We see the turmoil as people flee and families are split up as civilians stay behind and put themselves in harm's way. All of that will have consequences for wellbeing.

From the outset, I note the role of the third sector in promoting the importance of our veterans' health and wellbeing. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting the third sector as we move forward on Scotland's journey to becoming a wellbeing economy.

The Scottish Government accepted the recommendations in the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's paper, "Veterans' Health and Wellbeing: a Distinctive Scottish Approach", and commissioned the Scottish Veterans Care Network to draw up a veterans mental health and action plan.

The action plan's 38 recommendations are based on three key principles, which are worth repeating. Principle 1 is:

"Veterans will have equal access to mental health and wellbeing services, regardless of where they live"—

that includes veterans in rural areas, which is an important issue in my region of South Scotland. Principle 2 is:

"Veterans should be able to access the right help at the right time",

and principle 3 is:

"NHS Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Local Authorities and the Third Sector should be appropriately supported to meet the needs of veterans".

To meet those principles, the Scottish Government has made available £1 million to create a fund that will provide direct financial relief to third sector organisations and projects, including the veterans garden at the Crichton campus in Dumfries and Galloway, which I will talk

about a wee bit later. The Scottish Government has been able to continue to fund the unforgotten forces consortium, which is a partnership of 16 civilian and ex-services charities, and it has contributed £500,000 over the next two years to support those organisations' work to improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of older veterans in Scotland.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is working to ensure that all veterans and armed forces personnel have access to suitable and safe housing and do not end up homeless. Following consultations with the housing sector, including the Veterans Scotland housing group, the Scottish Government published "Housing to 2040", which is Scotland's first long-term housing strategy. It is welcome that, since 2012, more than £6 million has been made available to deliver more than 100 homes for veterans in Scotland. In the context of that work, I pay particular tribute to Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership, which has undertaken veterans awareness training and has been part of the veterans housing allocation scheme in Scotland.

Across my South Scotland region, fantastic individuals and organisations are committed to supporting our veterans and former armed forces personnel. At the Crichton campus in Dumfries, Mark Harper and his dedicated group of volunteers and local veterans run and maintain the Dumfries veterans garden. Their focus is on supporting ex-service personnel by giving them a safe space in which to socialise, learn, garden and access confidential advice and support services, with a focus on PTSD. The Veterans Garden Dumfries runs a monthly breakfast club and drop-in centre, which provides participants with access to relevant information and advice, with support from NHS Dumfries and Galloway and the Crichton Trust.

In 2021, I was able to support and work with The Veterans Garden Dumfries and NHS Dumfries and Galloway to secure endowment funding for the garden. It meant that a relationship could be solidified between NHS mental health services and the Veterans Garden—a relationship that has proven to be massively beneficial. That funding has also allowed Alcohol & Drugs Support South West Scotland to work with the Veterans Garden and to have a drop-in service for everyone. I thank the chief executive of NHS Dumfries and Galloway, Jeff Ace, and Mark Harper, the veteran who runs the garden, for their work. Mark Harper won the volunteer of the year award at the Scottish veterans awards. I ask the cabinet secretary to join me in congratulating Mark on the success of Dumfries veterans garden and invite him to visit it when his diary allows.

I also pay tribute to Robin Hood, who is a former veteran in Dumfries who has been instrumental in supporting SWS RnR and Nithcree heavy goods vehicle training. Graeme Dey will know what I am talking about, because he visited a couple of years ago, when he was the veterans minister. Nithcree Training, with funding from the Scottish Government, supports veterans to train to obtain their HGV licence and security licences. The charity has supported and funded more than 187 veterans not only to achieve their HGV licence but to enter into further employment. It is a great example of how local initiatives can be hugely successful in supporting our local veterans.

I welcome the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support our veterans, especially in addressing stigma. It seems that, in every mental health debate, we discuss the need to tackle stigma. I realise how important the issue is and have raised it in a number of debates.

I encourage the Government to continue to support the third sector, and I support the Government's motion.

16:26

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate, but it is right to echo the words about the situation in Ukraine, which brings so much of what we have talked about this afternoon very close to home. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for his comments about widening the debate. The debate needs to include our veterans' families. As the cabinet secretary said, it is almost a tripod situation whereby, if we cannot get right every part that surrounds a veteran, we fail not only the veteran but those around them.

Those who have served—our veterans—are part of our community. They are our brothers and sisters, our fathers and mothers, and, too frequently, our children, and they are a valuable asset in Scotland's workplaces and in Scotland's future. Only at the weekend, I was speaking to a major employer who had nothing but praise for veterans who came into their business, saying that veterans brought skills and a can-do attitude that that employer could not find elsewhere. Veterans were prepared to share with younger members of the team a way of doing things that perhaps those who had not served were unable to see.

It is important that, when those who have served come to the end of that career—be it through time, injury or choice—there is a smooth transition into their civilian life. I echo Graeme Dey's comments about an holistic approach being needed towards that group. Finlay Carson powerfully vocalised the fact that there needs to be a tailored transition into civilian life that reflects the individual service

personnel's experiences in the armed forces and the fact that such a tailored approach should continue for that individual in their civilian life.

I echo Christine Grahame's comments about the armed forces covenant and the importance of talking about families. I would like to discuss that issue, not to detract from the needs of our veterans as individuals but to highlight a group that surrounds our veterans and that, indeed, is often the first to notice a difference in those individuals. I pay tribute to the charities and groups that work with veterans' families. I had the great privilege of meeting Forces Children Scotland, which is the renamed Royal Caledonian Education Trust, which works not only with the children of serving families but with those of veterans.

It is a very hard group to identify. The Ministry of Defence does not appear to know even how many children of serving personnel there are, let alone how many children of veterans there are. The change in the census is welcome, because, unless we can quantify that group and identify their locations, we will not be able to offer the tailored help that those young people need and are crying out for. We need to help them to share their experiences and be part of the solutions.

I had the privilege of listening to some children of armed forces personnel as they talked about the difficulties that they have in civilian life. They talked about dealing with other children, who are sometimes more open minded than some adults, and the challenges that they find when they move to a new area, change schools and have to tell their story yet again and explain why they need different, specialised and individual help.

Forces Children Scotland has collected some quotes from young people. One that I would like to share is about the mental health of a young person, who said:

"I couldn't attend all CAMHS appointments as ... school couldn't provide travel to all the appointments. CAMHS then discharged me because of the length of time between appointments."

It is tragic that a young person who had got to the top of the child and adolescent mental health services waiting list should suddenly lose that place because they were unable to travel to the appointments. I find it unbelievable that an adult could treat a young person in that way and not, as we would hope people in Scotland would, take the extra step and find a way to help them.

My call on the Government has been partly answered with the reference to the data that is already being collected, but I will suggest another approach. If the SEEMiS computer system that is used across our education service could be used to identify young people whose parents or carers

are serving in the armed forces, are in the reserves or are veterans, we would be able to collate a central database of those young people so that they could be identified and an individualised, holistic approach could be taken, with support that meets their needs. It would also empower the adults who surround them to point out their almost unique position as a group of young people who require very specific, individualised help, which the young people are often only too keen to share with those adults.

I would be grateful if the Government took the opportunity to look at that, because, just as we have veterans champions who sit within our local authorities and some employers, it might be very good to have a young person's voice for the families of our veterans, serving personnel and reserve forces.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Kenneth Gibson will be the last speaker in the open debate.

16:33

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The shocking events that are taking place in Ukraine, where soldiers and ordinary Ukrainians find themselves in a situation where they have no choice but to take up arms to protect their homeland against the unprovoked and unjustified invasion by a foreign army, must serve as a reminder of the debt of gratitude that we all owe to those who, over the generations, put their lives on the line to protect this country. That gratitude extends to those who serve today.

I am sure that all members will agree that veterans, service personnel and their families contribute a huge amount to our country, often in difficult circumstances, and that the least that we can do to thank them is to provide adequate support and access to the diverse range of services that they may require on leaving the forces. That must include adequate provision for former personnel who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues.

Despite many financial challenges, the Scottish Government has increased direct investment in mental health support to £290 million a year while also taking action to support veterans charities and the important work that they do day in, day out.

Like colleagues across the chamber, I welcome the Scottish Government's acceptance of the recommendations in the Scottish veterans commissioner's "Veterans Health & Wellbeing" paper and the fact that the Scottish Government commissioned the Scottish Veterans Care Network to create the "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan". As the local MSP for two islands, I am particularly keen for progress to

be made with regard to principle 1, which underpins the recommendations. It highlights the need for veterans to have

"equal access to mental health and wellbeing services, regardless of where they live".

I thank the staff at NHS Ayrshire and Arran, which has been identified as one of six Scottish health boards that allow veterans to access NHS community-based and veteran-specific mental health and wellbeing services through first point centres, such as the one in Irvine. Organisations ranging from Combat Stress and SSAFA to Forces Children Scotland and Men's Sheds all help veterans with their mental health and wellbeing. Although most armed forces personnel do not have mental health issues during their service or, indeed, afterwards, we must be proactive in assisting those who do.

The armed forces covenant is important, but it does not appear to include one specific group. I wish to raise the issues that British nuclear test veterans have faced. I have spoken about that matter in the chamber in years gone by.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of operation hurricane, Britain's first atomic test, which was carried out in the Montebello archipelago off Western Australia. From 1952 to as late as 1991, many thousands of men, often when they were on national service, were ordered to take part in 45 nuclear weapons tests and 593 so-called radioactive trials in Australia, the United States and the south Pacific.

Many young men were ordered to sit on a beach, with their backs turned to the blast of the first explosion, and to cover their eyes with their hands. In most cases, due to the heat of the tropical sun, they were only lightly dressed, and they were not issued with any personal protective equipment. In fact, many nuclear test veterans report seeing the bones inside their hands like an X-ray negative before there was a flash of light and a giant mushroom cloud formed in the sky.

Several weeks later, many servicemen started feeling unwell, suffering the after-effects of radiation exposure and sickness. During the seven decades since operation hurricane, many reported developing cancer as a result and said that their wives had miscarried repeatedly and that their children had been born with physical and learning abnormalities. The impact on the mental health and wellbeing of such families as a result of their experiences is incalculable.

One test veteran, Ken McGinley from Johnstone, was sent, aged 19, to Christmas Island, where he was exposed to five nuclear tests, including the UK's biggest-ever bomb—codenamed grapple Y—on 28 April 1958. Like many other nuclear test veterans, he later became

sterile and developed a rare blood cancer, and he was recently diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer.

It is shocking that successive UK Governments have, time after time, refused to pay compensation to the many veterans such as Mr McGinley who suffered ill health as a result of taking part in the tests. The UK Government even resisted awarding those veterans a medal for their service, arguing that

“they were not exposed to the same imminent danger as those on active service.”

Ken McGinley did not give up. In 1983, he founded the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association to gain recognition and restitution for British personnel who participated in the British and American nuclear tests and clean-ups, along with scientists from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment and, indeed, civilians.

Last Thursday, on the morning that Russia invaded Ukraine, the UK Health Security Agency finally published the result of a new study that examined the mortality and cancer incidence among men who took part in the UK's nuclear weapons tests between 1952 and 1967. That latest research involved the study of a cohort of 21,357 servicemen and male civilians from the UK who participated in the tests. It was found that those test veterans were 3.77 times more likely than the control group to die from chronic myeloid leukaemia, which is a type of bone cancer that the report says is “radiation-inducible”. For example, half the crew of the destroyer HMS Diana, which was ordered to twice sail through the fallout plume following operation mosaic in 1956, died from tumours.

Sadly, the new research only confirmed what nuclear veterans had known for a long time, although most of them have unfortunately since passed away without ever having been given the respect that is owed to them by UK Governments that spent millions of pounds on trying to deny them compensation.

We owe a great deal to all servicemen and servicewomen who risk life, limb and their mental health to keep us safe. The Scottish Government is on the right track in ensuring that veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

I hope that the latest research on the mortality and cancer incidence among nuclear test veterans will encourage Scottish ministers to renew their calls to the UK Government for immediate compensation and a medallic recognition for such veterans, and to join the cross-party exhortations for a public inquiry into the injustices that so many veterans of nuclear testing have faced.

15:34

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): In closing for Scottish Labour, I thank everyone who has taken part in this very informative debate. I thank members for sharing the often heartfelt stories about constituents across Scotland. It is important that we discuss such matters in the chamber and that we thank people for their contributions to looking after us all. We know so much about the importance of that at this time.

I share the thoughts and wishes of members across the chamber as we pay our respects to those who have fallen in war or have suffered injury and particularly the often-hidden pain that is associated with mental health issues, which today is rightly receiving the attention that it deserves. As we have stated, Scottish Labour supports the action plan and feels that it is important that the actions in it happen as quickly as possible. As my colleague Paul O’Kane mentioned, it is important that we pin down on-going financial support to make the actions happen for people.

We have all watched the terrible scenes from Ukraine this week with increasing horror, and they have been an apt reminder of the brutal and unforgiving nature of war. Many people in our communities remain victims of war, and those who have served perhaps feel it most acutely, and will be doing so at the moment. As we have heard from many members, the struggles that follow can continue for decades. We know that a great many people who have left the military are at heightened risk of suicide because of their experiences and perhaps the lack of support that they have received. That needs to be a thing of the past and, as we have heard today, we can take steps forward.

I thank Finlay Carson for mentioning all the work that Archie Dryburgh has done. As an MSP for South Scotland, I, too, know Archie, who is a serving councillor. I will certainly take Mr Carson’s comments back to him to let him know that we appreciate all the work that he does for veterans in the area.

Like many other members, over the years, I have met and worked alongside members of our armed forces community during campaigns and outreach work and, in that time, I have been struck by their deep sense of commitment and dedication not only to their country but to those who went before them. They also have a great commitment to the places where they live, which Audrey Nicoll expressed very well.

Many of the charities and community groups that we all work with on a daily basis have people with a forces background at their heart who are using the skills that they have learned to improve the places where they live. If we can reflect that

sense of commitment and help them to get the fair treatment that they deserve, we will have given something worth while back to those people, who have done so much for our country.

With that in mind, my party believes that it is important that the Scottish Government includes considerations relating to veterans more prominently in the new suicide prevention strategy. I was glad to hear the minister make a commitment on that. Specifically, we want the strategy to deliver veteran-specific suicide-prevention training and to improve access to mental health support for veterans. Currently, the offer is far from adequate in many places. We have heard that the situation can be different around the country, but it is only fair that people receive a parity of service. That could save lives in the short term and in the years to come. I therefore reiterate the importance of supporting Scottish Labour's amendment and I join my colleagues in asking the Government to update the Parliament on that issue as soon as is practically possible.

Achieving those reforms will help us to recognise the significance of the physical and mental effects of war on those who fought and on their families. With that in mind, I support the action plan and believe that we should look more holistically at the situation for veterans and do more to ensure that they have better access to employment and health services, as many members and the minister have said. We all know that that has to happen to make things better for people.

Crucially, we need an understanding that many people who leave the forces face a very uncertain housing future. That is an important point that has been raised many times in the chamber previously and today. Uncertainty about housing has a direct and lasting impact on anyone's mental health. Of course, for our veterans, who have moved about so much, it is important that they have a sense of where their home is. I recognise and welcome the debate about housing, but I hope that we can have further clarity on how we will support people who face housing issues. The situation is not acceptable, and we should reflect that across the UK.

Reaching out involves giving veterans and their families a place to talk. I therefore welcome the work of groups such as Veterans First Point Ayrshire and Arran in my community, which helps people with a forces background to find jobs and housing while providing a supportive outlet for them to share their experiences.

Equally, in my area, there are many active chapters of the SSAFA—the armed forces charity—and the Royal British Legion, and we have heard about the work that is going on in

other constituencies. Those organisations do exceptional charity work for their own members and those in need across the region. All those groups play a massive part in helping to solve the issues that we have been speaking about today, and many members have mentioned and congratulated them. However, as with all things, decisive funding from central Government is required too, and I hope that we can ensure that funding for those important charitable organisations continues.

I close by drawing attention to a more recent struggle with which the armed forces have helped us. I refer, of course, to their vital role in the pandemic.

I am aware that I am out of time, Presiding Officer, but I thought that it was important to share that contemporary aspect—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have got that on the record, Miss Mochan, and you are indeed out of time.

Carol Mochan: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

16:46

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Keith Brown for bringing today's debate to the chamber. As an Opposition MSP who is responsible for the community safety brief in my party, it is my job to challenge and ask questions of the cabinet secretary. It is fair to say that that is not always harmonious, but in the debate today it is important for me to acknowledge loudly and clearly Mr Brown's past military service for our country as a Royal Marine, and I do so with absolute respect. I will come back later to the points that he made about my party's amendment to his motion.

As a new MSP, I had the privilege of laying a wreath at the cenotaph in Paisley on remembrance Sunday. When silence fell, I was overwhelmed by profound feelings of admiration and appreciation for all those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms that we often take for granted. I did so as a civilian, surrounded by men and women who have served or are still serving. I think that it is a reasonable assumption that civilians such as me, and indeed most of us, can never truly appreciate what it is like to fill the boots and shoes of our army, navy and air force personnel.

That realisation is even more pronounced today, as we watch with growing shock, sadness and disgust what is happening in Ukraine. The horrors of war have never been more visceral or more vivid, captured on high-definition smartphones and beamed around the world in an instant. The stories of heroism and tragedy can overwhelm us.

One that hit me especially hard was the murder of a 10-year-old girl called Polina and her parents, who were gunned down in the street by Putin's death squads.

While we pray for peace and for Putin to be brought to justice, it is humbling and emotional to witness ordinary Ukrainians taking up arms to defend their territory, their democracy and their freedom. That includes people from all walks of life, including parliamentarians like us. Few among us can imagine what that would feel like, but there are some who know. I have already mentioned the cabinet secretary, but we are fortunate that many other members, past and present, have also served. They include Paul Sweeney, who is sitting on the benches opposite, and my Scottish Conservative colleague Edward Mountain, who spent 12 proud years in the Blues and Royals and who would very much like to be here today. There is also the former Scottish Conservative member Maurice Corry, who devoted decades to the British Army and who still chairs the Parliament's cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community. I know that Mr Corry and the CPG have long championed the rights of veterans living in Scotland.

In his 2015 report, "Transition in Scotland", the first Scottish veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, talked about the difficulty that he experienced in transitioning from a life in naval uniform to being a civvy. We are familiar with stories of service personnel struggling to cope as they leave behind a military life of discipline and structure. Many years ago, I spoke with a man called Tom Howard—a former Parachute Regiment medic who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in the Falkland Islands. I was delighted to discover that Mr Howard's personal testimony has now been recorded and posted on a veterans video archive website. However, although he was fortunate to overcome his demons, others are not so lucky, as Mr Sweeney touched on in his very moving contribution.

While the narrative of the broken soldier has taken root, I will echo a very important point that was made earlier by Mr Hoy. The media giving voice to veterans in need of help can lead to a public perception that, as Mr Hoy put it, all veterans are broken—whereas, in fact, the vast majority of them make the transition to civilian life greatly enhanced by their time in the military. However, as Mr Hoy also said, it is a matter of "collective shame" whenever a veteran who has put their life on the line for us does not get the support that they need if they fall victim to homelessness, addiction problems, mental health challenges or suicide.

The main substance of today's debate relates to the "Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action

Plan", which has been jointly published by NHS Scotland and the Scottish Veterans Care Network. The Scottish veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace, provides the foreword for this substantial and detailed report, which contains 38 recommendations based on three key principles.

To summarise, the first of those principles is to ensure that

"Veterans will have equal access to mental health and wellbeing services, regardless of where they live";

the second principle is a guarantee that

"Veterans should be able to access the right help at the right time";

and the third is that they are supported by the NHS and a wide range of other organisations.

All of us here today are in agreement with each other about the contents of that document. However, my party has put forward a very sensible amendment to the motion that seeks to ensure that those shared sentiments are assessed and implemented within a defined timescale of two years. I am disappointed at the cabinet secretary's accusation that that is an attempt to undermine the Government motion. That is absolutely not the case. I am advised that parliamentary rules do not allow for multiple amendments in different places. We all know how, without an explicitly stated commitment on delivery, even simple and effective reform for which there is consensus can sometimes become tangled in red tape and withered by inertia.

Although I commend the amendment in Mr Hoy's name, my party agrees with the substance of both the Scottish Government motion and the Labour Party's amendment. I hope that, in the cause of mutual agreement in this important debate, they can support our amendment in the spirit in which it is intended.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Kevin Stewart, to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:52

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): I begin, as many other members have done, by talking about the horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine and the impact that it is having on the Ukrainian people, as well as the impact that it is having on people here. Gillian Mackay was right to point out that the situation in Ukraine may well be retraumatising people here and now. People can get help: they can contact Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87 if that is the case.

I thank members for their valuable contributions today. There has been a lot of consensus across

the chamber. As the cabinet secretary has already pointed out, we will support the Labour amendment—and I will talk more about that later.

Veterans continue their service in Scotland once they have left the forces. Veterans I know personally work as electricians or have been police officers, and the veteran to my left, Mr Brown, now serves as a cabinet secretary in this place. Last year, one of my officials had her car rescued by a veteran who was a support worker with the AA. When he heard that she worked in mental health policy, he recited this poem to her, explaining the sometimes devastating impact of mental ill-health. It is called “The Enemy from Within”:

“This is a warning to all former brothers-at-arms so they
know that they may still be at harm.
At harm from who I hear you say.
We left all our enemies in lands far away.

This enemy has many faces but none you will see.
He will whisper and taunt without reprise.
Filling every thought even in your sleep.

He tells you and shows things you never want to see
again
Making him stronger and bringing you pain

If not talked about and left in your head, he will take until
you have nothing left.
Before it's too late go look in the mirror, repeat in the
mirror,
I'm not the enemy he's called PTSD.”

I thank Brian Jackson, the poet, for that moving reflection on post-traumatic stress disorder.

In his opening remarks, the cabinet secretary made an important point that I will reiterate. Veterans and their families often face unique challenges in their mental health, but that does not mean that we should not think in terms of prevention and early intervention.

Recovery is possible, but achieving our aspirations will need a cross-policy approach, with a real and sustained focus on the stigma that veterans often experience. In Scotland, we have done a great deal to tackle stigma through the Scottish Government-backed See Me campaign. We know that veterans face particular stigma. I want to make sure that we understand the impact that that has on veterans and work to change the attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate it. Many members, including Mr Sweeney, mentioned stigma. I am pleased to announce that we will resource and work with See Me on a veterans campaign to better understand the issues. We will listen to veterans and we will address stigma together.

Mr Brown mentioned that housing and homelessness are an issue that is close to my heart, which is the case. I could sometimes be doing without the previous veterans minister, Mr Dey, who is—rightly—vociferous on veterans'

housing. We are taking forward crucial work in that area, together with work on employability and better data—many members mentioned that—and on the right pathways to help and support and many more issues

One area of work is meeting the needs of veterans in community-based approaches.

Craig Hoy: Further to the cabinet secretary's opening remarks, Mr Findlay confirmed that we could not amend the Government's motion in more than one place. Our amendment is based largely on the motion but includes the requirement for an assessment and action within two years. Will the minister agree to that and support our amendment?

Kevin Stewart: We will not support the amendment. I get that there is always a difficulty in writing amendments, but we can all do it. We can co-operate and talk to one another about how we can amend things to get what we want. That did not happen in this case, and we cannot accept the amendment. That is a great pity because, as Mr Brown pointed out, we have previously had consensus in the Parliament—particularly when Mr Corry was in the lead—to get things right for our veterans. I am sorry that we cannot accept the amendment but, if the Conservatives come and talk to us in the future, we can see what we can do.

I was talking about the needs of veterans in community-based approaches, including suicide prevention work. I will add to the cabinet secretary's opening remarks by touching on that and on the Labour amendment. As we develop our new suicide prevention strategy, we will engage with organisations that represent veterans' interests. Through our work to deliver on our suicide prevention action plan, NHS Education for Scotland and Public Health Scotland have produced a range of learning resources on suicide prevention. We will work with veterans organisations to tailor those resources to meet veterans' specific needs, to raise awareness of the resources and to encourage their uptake.

We need to do better at understanding and addressing issues that are faced by groups who are at heightened risk of suicide, including veterans. We must listen more to the voices of lived experience. Together with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we are developing a new long-term suicide prevention strategy for Scotland, which will be published in September this year. In developing that new strategy, we will ensure that veterans are at its heart. We also need to work with veterans organisations on developing our new self-harm strategy, on which Mr Hoy, Ms Mackay, Ms Baillie and Mr Cole-Hamilton have engaged with us.

The range of work that has been mentioned illustrates how important it is for us to continue to work collaboratively on the issues. There have been some outstanding examples of that, even during the challenges of the pandemic. Many members mentioned things that have gone on in their constituencies and regions, which are immense. Mr Carson mentioned Archie Dryburgh, as did Carol Mochan. I have met Archie on a number of occasions. He is a powerful force, which is a good thing.

Audrey Nicoll mentioned the Gordon Highlanders museum and the veteran volunteers who carry out work there. They are immense. I believe that Jackie Dunbar is still a member of the board of that museum and, at this point, she would probably want me to say “bydand”, so I do so to keep her sweet as we move forward.

There are also issues that, sadly, we have not really talked about in the depth that we should have done before. LGBTQ+ veterans have faced some real trauma, not only because of their service on the front line but because of being thrown out of the armed forces. Mr O’Kane talked about the misunderstanding of their challenges. He was being very diplomatic about that.

Christine Grahame never minces her words. She asked how we are going to do everything that is proposed and ensure that it reaches everybody nationwide. Graeme Dey also said that there should be no postcode lotteries.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask you to wind up.

Kevin Stewart: I will, Presiding Officer.

The Scottish structure that will emerge from the action plan will create a Scotland-wide, one-door approach to everything to ensure that we get it right for everyone. The Scottish Government values and appreciates the people who have served their country and recognises the myriad sacrifices made by many to protect the freedoms that we enjoy today. Some of the work that I have outlined today will play a key role in ensuring that the right mental health support is available across multiple levels of need and in recognising the unique circumstances that veterans and their families face.

Points of Order

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Today, the Scottish Government held an event in Dundee to launch a document that sets out a 10-year economic plan. Clearly, it is intended to be a document of significance that will shape Scottish Government decision making and spending on the economy in this session of the Parliament and the next. It is convention that the Government makes statements to Parliament if matters are significant.

Presiding Officer, do you share my disappointment that the Government chose to hold an event with private invitees rather than placing the document in the Parliament and announcing it through a ministerial statement, which I believe has been done for previous strategies? Did you or the Parliamentary Bureau receive a request for such a statement to be given prior to the launch and prior to the strategy’s being published and shared with the public?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Mr Johnson for his point of order. Government-initiated questions are one of the mechanisms by which the Government can make information available to the Parliament. However, the issue was discussed at the bureau earlier and, as I said there, I expect the Government to consider what the best mechanism is for each significant announcement, particularly on a day when the Parliament is sitting.

While the response to the GIQ states that there will be a debate on the strategy at a later date, I am sympathetic to Mr Johnson’s query about whether that was the most appropriate mechanism to use for announcing the strategy, for the reasons that I have outlined. At the bureau today, I asked the minister to reflect on the choice of that mechanism and he committed to look at that. I expect him to update bureau members at the earliest opportunity.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, in relation to your ruling on Daniel Johnson’s point of order, could you be more specific about when you expect the minister to come back on that? This is a vitally important policy announcement, and it has been made to a closed meeting in Dundee. It is vitally important that such matters are brought to the chamber and are discussed and scrutinised by members of the Parliament. Could I ask for your guidance on that, and will you intercede with the Government to insist that such a statement is brought to the Parliament—as early, even, as tomorrow, I hope?

The Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Kerr for his point of order. I am sure that he shares my view that the minister was in no doubt as to the strength

of feeling that was expressed by the bureau. The minister will take that seriously and will report to the bureau and me at the first opportunity.

We now move on to the next item of business.

Committee Announcement (National Performance Framework)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is an announcement by the Finance and Public Administration Committee on an inquiry into the national performance framework: ambitions into action. I call Kenneth Gibson, the convener of the committee, to make the announcement.

17:06

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North)

(SNP): Members will be aware that the national performance framework, which was introduced in 2007, sets out the strategic outcomes that collectively describe the kind of Scotland that it aims to create. The NPF also aims to guide the decisions and actions of national and local government, but how well does it do that? That is the subject of a Finance and Public Administration Committee inquiry that has been launched today.

Separately, a statutory review of the national outcomes of the NPF is planned for 2023. The Deputy First Minister has confirmed that engagement on that review will begin later this year. The NPF is a cross-cutting initiative of interest to the wider Parliament. Therefore, although the committee expects to lead parliamentary scrutiny of the review, other committees will wish to examine the draft outcomes and proposals that impact their portfolio areas.

In our pre-budget report, we pointed to the upcoming review as an opportunity to

“reposition the National Performance Framework at the heart of government planning, from which all priorities and plans should flow”

and to ask the Government

“to consider how the NPF could be more closely linked to budget planning.”

In his blog of 7 September 2021, “Christie 10-years on”, the Auditor General for Scotland noted that Scotland is suffering from

“a major implementation gap between policy ambitions and delivery on the ground.”

Our inquiry will build on that evidence rather than duplicate the work of the upcoming review. We want to look in more detail at how the outcomes shape Scottish Government policy aims and spending decisions and, in turn, how that drives delivery at a national and local level.

Therefore, the remit of the inquiry is to look at the current structures, processes, cultures and behaviours that are in place to help to deliver the

national outcomes. The call for views in our inquiry—the national performance framework: ambitions into action—is now live on our committee webpages. We encourage submissions from all those who are listed in the NPF as having a role in delivery of the outcomes: national and local government, businesses, voluntary organisations and anyone who lives in Scotland.

We will then hold informal sessions with organisations and groups that are at the heart of delivering the national outcomes to establish the picture on the ground. We will explore those issues more in oral evidence sessions, and we plan to report our findings in September.

The NPF aims to get everyone in Scotland to work together to achieve the national outcomes, so we would also welcome views from members and committees. Members might have heard about good practice in their areas, or heard views on how delivery can be improved, while during the course of their work committees might have received evidence on delivery in their portfolio areas. Either way, we look forward to receiving those responses.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:09

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-03409, on the referral of a Scottish statutory instrument, and S6M-03410, on the suspension of standing orders.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2022 [draft] be considered by the Parliament.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Professional Qualifications Bill (UK Legislation), Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.—[George Adam]

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

Decision Time

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-03381.1, in the name of Craig Hoy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-03381, in the name of Keith Brown, on a Scottish approach to the mental health and wellbeing of our veterans in each community, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:10

Meeting suspended.

17:14

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-03381.1, in the name of Craig Hoy. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Hamilton. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)

McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-03381.1, in the name of Craig Hoy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-03381, in the name of Keith Brown, on a Scottish approach to the mental health and wellbeing of our veterans in each community, is: For 50, Against 68, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-03381.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, which seeks to amend motion S6M-03381, in the name of Keith Brown, on a Scottish approach to the mental health and wellbeing of our veterans in each community, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-03381, in the name of Keith Brown, on a Scottish approach to the mental health and wellbeing of our veterans in each community, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the importance of supporting veterans and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make in Scotland; notes the NHS National Services Scotland publication by the Scottish Veterans Care Network, Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan, setting out how it will take forward key principles to improve veterans' mental health and wellbeing in Scotland; understands that this action plan highlights the need to take an holistic approach that takes account of housing, employment, education and other needs, and work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors and with the UK Government to ensure that veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to services across Scotland; acknowledges the recommendation in the action plan that veterans who are at risk of suicide should be considered in the Scottish Government's new Suicide Prevention

Strategy for Scotland; notes that this strategy is now not due to be published until September 2022, and calls for the Scottish Government to update the Parliament, in advance of its publication, on the action taken to develop and deliver veteran-specific suicide prevention training, and improve access to mental health support for veterans.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-03409, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the referral of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2022 [draft] be considered by the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-03410, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on suspension of standing orders, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Professional Qualifications Bill (UK Legislation), Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02886, in the name of Emma Harper, on eating disorders awareness week 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that Eating Disorders Awareness Week occurs on 28 February to 6 of March 2022 and this year focuses on the importance of Early Warning Signs in Primary Care; further notes reports that eating disorders affect 1 in 50 people across Scotland and the wider UK; understands that more people lose their lives due to eating disorders than any other mental health condition; further understands that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the number of persons with eating disorders, with a reported increase of 86% in referrals between 2019 and 2020; notes that the Beat eating disorders charity highlights that less than two hours of medical education leading to a medical degree is focused on eating disorder education; further notes calls from Beat for medical schools across Scotland, and the UK, and the General Medical Council, to ensure that eating disorder education is an important focus of medical degrees, including for those in General Practice training; welcomes the Scottish Government's reported commitment of £120 million for a mental health recovery and renewal fund, with a focus on additional support for mental health in primary care settings and enhanced community support; notes the May 2021 publication of the Scottish Eating Disorder Services Review, which it understands makes 15 recommendations on how eating disorder support services can be improved; further notes the calls for the Scottish Government to provide an update on current work to implement the recommendations and better support all those impacted by an eating disorder, and thanks all eating disorders interest groups, including Beat and the Scottish Eating Disorders Interest Group (SEDIG), for their work to raise awareness and understanding of eating disorders, as well as to support those impacted by them.

17:20

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to lead the debate on eating disorders awareness week 2022, which takes place from 28 February to 6 March. I thank colleagues on all sides of the chamber who have supported my motion, allowing the debate to go ahead.

For many years, this debate was brought to the chamber by the former MSP Dennis Robertson, who lost his daughter Caroline to anorexia nervosa in 2011. In speaking about his members' business debate in February 2012, he said:

"I want people to be aware of the symptoms and get help as soon as they can. I'm trying to ensure GPs and other medics become more aware of the dangers."

I agree with Dennis, and I know that the Scottish Government has taken action in that regard—I will expand on that in a wee bit.

Dennis Robertson now chairs the Scottish Government's lived experience panel on eating disorders, and he has undoubtedly played a part in putting the subject on the political agenda. I thank the eating disorders charity Beat for the excellent work that it continues to do to support those who are at risk of, and those who are living with, an eating disorder. That includes supporting families and friends.

It is great to have folk in the gallery again, Presiding Officer—that is a sign that we are emerging from the pandemic. [Applause.] I welcome the staff and the ambassadors from Beat. I invite members to join us for a photograph at the bottom of the stairs to the public gallery after the debate—everybody is welcome.

Around 1.25 million people across the United Kingdom, and one in 50 people in Scotland, currently live with an eating disorder, and the numbers have increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated the situation, with a reported increase of 86 per cent in referrals to specialists between 2019 and 2020.

Types of eating disorders include binge eating disorder; bulimia; anorexia; other specified feeding or eating disorder, or OSFED; and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, or ARFID. A very dangerous eating disorder is diabulimia, which occurs when people with type 1 diabetes deliberately omit their insulin in order to control their weight. It is extremely dangerous to do that.

Eating disorders have high mortality rates. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and one in six people with binge eating disorder have tried to end their life. People with eating disorders typically develop severe physical health problems, and their overall quality of life has been estimated to be as low as it is for those with symptomatic coronary heart disease or severe depression. Without early intervention, many people become unable to participate in education or employment, but recovery is possible. Access to the right treatment and support is life changing, and early intervention provides the best chance of recovery.

The key symptoms of eating disorders include excessively worrying about weight or body shape; avoiding social situations where food may be involved; frequently visiting the toilet after meals for prolonged periods; and not being up front about the food that you are consuming. It is important for family members, friends and colleagues to be aware of those signs. There is some speculation around what causes eating disorders, but research has shown that there is a

link between eating disorders and depression, low confidence and low self-esteem.

One of Beat's key asks is to ensure that healthcare practitioners are fully aware of eating disorders, and for eating disorder education to be improved across Scotland. I welcome the fact that Beat has had positive engagement with almost all medical schools in Scotland, including those at the universities of Dundee, Glasgow and Aberdeen. Beat continues to engage with the other medical schools; I urge all medical schools to work with it so that our next generation of doctors and healthcare professionals are able to identify eating disorders at an early stage and properly direct people to specialist services.

Another of Beat's key asks concerns social media, which we know can be a factor that contributes to eating disorders. We need to ensure that people use social media safely, and there are great tips on Beat's website.

In March 2021, the Scottish Government completed a national eating disorder services review. The "Scottish Eating Disorder Services Review—Summary Recommendations" document includes a total of 15 ambitious recommendations that are focused on ensuring that all those who are affected by eating disorders receive timely and appropriate care and support. The recommendations include better co-ordination of national activity and data collection; national availability of self-help resources, which should be available to everyone in Scotland at any stage of life; and a focus on early diagnosis, with the aim of prevention.

It is welcome that an implementation group has been set up to review timescales for, and the cost of, implementing the recommendations. Three sub-groups—a training group, a standards group and a data group—have been created within that group, although the data group has not yet met. I would be grateful if the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care could outline when the implementation group is likely to report and when the lived experience panel that is chaired by Dennis Robertson will meet.

This week, I contacted the dietetic team in NHS Dumfries and Galloway. The team has a dietician who works specifically with those who are living with, or are at risk of developing, an eating disorder. I heard from the team that, because of the rurality of Dumfries and Galloway, some people who are at risk of developing an eating disorder may not be picked up as easily, or they may be reluctant to access support because of the travel that is involved in attending appointments. Although the situation has improved with the move to virtual appointments, there is still an issue for people in rural areas who want to access eating disorder support services. That is especially true

for face-to-face services, which are required as part of the specialty. Again, I ask the minister to ensure that rural areas are included in the Government's approach.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment of £120 million for a mental health recovery and renewal fund, with a focus on improving support for mental health in primary care settings and enhanced community support. I also welcome the Scottish Government's increased investment in Beat.

This Saturday, I will be delivering the keynote address at PosiFest in Edinburgh. PosiFest is a positive psychology festival that aims to support positive health and wellbeing through providing a safe space to explore issues around mental health. There will be performances, music, comedy and a message tree, and everything will be centred on positive approaches to mental health. The event will have a resource hub, with two therapists and information on Beat and eating disorders that can be shared. It will also be live streamed, so people do not have to come to Edinburgh to participate. I congratulate Shalhavit-Simcha Cohen and all the other organisers on putting the event together, and I encourage anyone who is struggling with mental health issues to go along.

In conclusion, I welcome the debate and the work that the Scottish Government has undertaken to improve the outcomes of people who are living with eating disorders in Scotland. I look forward to hearing from my colleagues this evening.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I add my warm welcome to those in the public gallery, but I encourage them not to participate, much as they may be motivated to do so.

17:28

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I, too, along with other members on the Conservative side of the chamber, welcome the fact that we have visitors back in the public gallery. It serves as an important reminder, in this debate in particular, of how important face-to-face and in-person contact is and of the role that discussing such issues in public can play in breaking down barriers and stigma and in bringing what are often very personal and lonely challenges out into the open.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in tonight's debate and play a small part in our collective effort in the Parliament to break down those barriers and raise awareness. Eating disorders are a complicated area, and the number of conditions and disorders—as Emma Harper set out—along with the range of symptoms highlights

how complicated the issue is. It is sometimes easy to forget that.

I will come back to the substance of the debate in a moment, but first I thank Emma Harper for securing the debate and for the work that she does on the issue. That includes much work behind the scenes to highlight eating disorders at meetings of a number of cross-party groups at Holyrood, including the cross-party group on mental health, which we co-convene.

Emma Harper: I thank Oliver Mundell for mentioning the cross-party group on mental health which, as he said, we co-convene, as I forgot to mention it.

Oliver Mundell: Not at all. For completeness, I note that Beatrice Wishart co-convenes the group with us.

It is important to mention that the cross-party group on mental health has been looking at eating disorders. That is an issue that many people fail to consider when they talk about mental health, as they do not see it as part of the same remit and do not believe that eating disorders are at the same level of seriousness. We know from hearing about the mortality rates and the lived experience of many people just how wrong that assumption is, and it has to change if the services that support those with eating disorders are to change and fully meet the needs that exist.

Again, I pay tribute to Emma Harper for her persistence on the issue. Given its complexity, it is an area of policy and practice that requires persistence. We see the bravery of people such as Dennis Robertson and others who speak out on the issue, and they deserve champions in the Parliament.

More than 1 million people of all ages and backgrounds across the UK have an eating disorder. The condition can affect anyone—there is no one whom it cannot affect. We have already heard about the high mortality rates, which are the highest for any mental illness. That in itself should demand action.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I was a member of the Scottish Parliament—although Mr Mundell was not—when Dennis Robertson gave his speech on the issue. It is partly the reason why I am in the chamber today, as it was a profoundly moving occasion for us all—his speech was very courageous and brave.

I was struck by the fact that Ms Harper indicated that that debate took place 10 years ago. With regard to the advance that we have seen in the way in which mental health and its associated stigmas are appreciated, I wonder whether we feel that sufficient progress has been made in the understanding of eating disorders. I note that we

are here again, 10 years on, to debate the issue today and, although much has been done, the fundamental issues with regard to an appreciation of eating disorders and their consequences remain broadly similar to what they were when Dennis Robertson spoke in 2012.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am happy to give you the time back, Mr Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Jackson Carlaw makes a pertinent point. I think that that is one of the reasons why, as part of the awareness campaign this year, there has been a clear call for action through measures such as the “Worth more than 2 hours” campaign, which constituents have been in touch with me about. The campaign is about ensuring not only that front-line general practitioners receive more training and advice so that they can support those who ask for help, but that a future generation of doctors are equipped to identify the signs and symptoms of eating disorders. That will enable them to facilitate the type of early intervention that Emma Harper talked about, secure better outcomes and thereby avoid unnecessary pain and suffering, not just for individuals but—as has been said—for their families too. It is a huge burden for families to carry, in particular when they are struggling to access the level of support that they need.

There are examples of good practice, including at the University of Glasgow. I would be keen to hear from the minister about what has been done to ensure that such practice is replicated across all five Scottish medical schools, because that seems like a straightforward and clear ask. We have to remember that behind every one of the statistics that we hear in the debate, there are real people and families. In the past, they have included members of our own parliamentary community who have experienced the pain of this issue. Eating disorders can happen to anyone, and no one should be left to suffer alone.

I ask the minister whether we can hear more on what the working groups are doing to make real the promises that we make in the chamber. To anyone who is listening to the debate, I simply say: do seek advice, do seek help and do not suffer in silence, as there are a lot of organisations, charities and individuals out there who stand ready to help you.

17:34

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): How can I follow the powerful speeches by Oliver Mundell and Emma Harper? I will try.

I am pleased to participate in this members' business debate, brought to the chamber by my

colleague Emma Harper, highlighting eating disorder awareness week. I thank her for bringing this important subject for debate. Like her, I am pleased to welcome the guests in the gallery from Beat. I also take the opportunity to recognise the work that former MSP Dennis Robertson did in initiating the debates on eating disorders, which have been taking place for more than 10 years, and in raising awareness.

Eating disorders are incredibly challenging mental illnesses that affect one person in 50. They include but are not limited to binge eating disorder, bulimia and anorexia. People with eating disorders typically develop severe physical health problems and their quality of life can be severely impacted by those illnesses. Therefore, it is welcome that the Scottish Government is committed to carrying out a national review of eating disorder services to improve the support for people who live with an eating disorder. Recovery is possible with access to the right treatment and support. We politicians must do all that we can to raise awareness of eating disorders to ensure that people do not suffer in silence but are aware of the options that are available to them.

I note that the national review will provide a more complete picture of the current system of support for people with eating disorders and make recommendations about how services and the wider support system should be constructed to ensure that people have access to the right treatments so that support can be provided to all those who are affected by an eating disorder, whether individuals or their wider support network and families.

This year's theme for eating disorder awareness week is medical training. An average medical student receives less than two hours' training on eating disorders throughout their degree, with a fifth of medical schools offering no training on the subject. That lack of training for students must be addressed, and I am pleased to see that Beat and other eating disorder charities are engaging with universities to ensure that our medical professionals receive adequate training and have an understanding of the difficulties that face those with eating disorders. However, that training should not just be rolled out to medical students. All healthcare and social service professionals should have an awareness of eating disorders, know how to identify someone affected and know where to signpost them should they wish to receive treatment.

Emma Harper: The training does not have to be complicated. It does not aim to make people specialists. Does Jackie Dunbar agree that we want the simplest approach to raising awareness of trigger signs that would lead to further referral pathways, for instance?

Jackie Dunbar: Absolutely. Everybody should be made aware of the trigger signs and have the information at hand about where to get support so that they can pass it on.

In addition to the work that Beat undertakes to raise awareness of eating disorders, I have been made aware of an excellent support group in my area, North East Eating Disorders Support (Scotland), which is a self-help group that welcomes all adults who are affected by an eating disorder whether as a sufferer, partner, relative or friend. I believe that it continues to meet on the first Monday of every month at 7:30 pm. I will give the group a wee plug. It allows people who are suffering with an eating disorder to interact with others who are in a similar situation, share experiences in a safe and confidential setting and offer support to each other while looking towards recovery.

It is essential that anyone who is, or who believes that they might be, suffering from an eating disorder seeks help and support as soon as possible. I make that absolutely clear. Support is available and I encourage folk to reach out, take that help and begin the journey to recovery.

17:40

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Emma Harper for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Like other parties, Scottish Labour supports the aims and objectives of eating disorder awareness week 2022. I welcome the guests from Beat who are in the gallery—it is so nice to see youse here.

As we have already heard, eating disorders are not uncommon: one in 50 people in Scotland and the wider UK is affected by them. We know that, tragically, their impact can be fatal—more people lose their lives to eating disorders than lose their lives to any other mental health condition. That is shocking, but it acts as a reminder to us all that eating disorders are both prominent and serious. We must raise greater awareness of eating disorders, their treatments, causes and symptoms.

It is important to consider raising awareness from different angles. It is crucial that individuals are aware of the signs of having an eating disorder, so that they can make informed judgments and reach out for support themselves. It is also important—although very difficult—to be able to recognise an eating disorder in someone else, so that support can be offered and a conversation can be had. For the individual who is suffering, talking may be a challenge or even a step too far.

As is highlighted in the motion, the issues around eating disorders are wide ranging. As we have heard from Beat, an organisation that is

focused on raising awareness of eating disorders and providing support, the average GP student will receive less than two hours' training on eating disorders during their entire medical degree. That is less than two hours on a condition that impacts more than a million people across the UK—let us take a moment to take that in. It is of even more concern that, as we have heard from other members, a fifth of UK medical students are not provided with any training on eating disorders. That is simply unacceptable.

I spent many years working in the NHS as a dietician, as part of the allied health professions team, so I know only too well the importance of raising awareness of conditions and disorders, and of training future health professionals. When I speak in the chamber, I like to mention the allied health professions when I can, because they have an important contribution to make. Professionals in that group often discuss the importance of training and how we should ensure that people are aware of the various conditions across the spectrum. I give my full support to Beat, which is calling for more training on eating disorders to be provided during medical training at UK universities.

We also know about the struggles that Scotland's mental health services face. We know about the non-discriminatory nature of eating disorders. We know that, from children and adolescent mental health services to mental health support in later life, the Scottish Government needs to take more action. Looking to the future, although the 15 recommendations for improving eating disorders awareness and services have been accepted by the Scottish Government, it must also address the calls from the Royal College of Psychiatrists to go that bit further, including outlining how it will evaluate progress towards the delivery of the recommendations and ensuring that research into eating disorders in Scotland addresses our gaps in understanding the impact of such conditions on minority communities. I hope that the minister will give due consideration to those requests.

It is clear from the speeches so far that the research work and contributions made by charities, experts and others are important, but there is more to do. With cross-party support, that work can be done and we can start to address the real concerns of individuals, charities and others across the country.

17:44

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank my colleague Emma Harper for bringing this important debate to the Parliament.

Eating disorders remain one of the most taboo topics for discussion. I hope that this debate, in

eating disorders week, will shine a light on such illness. The focus of this awareness week is on ensuring that all medical schools provide adequate training on eating disorders and that doctors are equipped with the knowledge and training that will enable them to identify signs and symptoms and intervene, so that we can end the pain, suffering and often deadly consequences that eating disorders cause.

As we heard, eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, restricting food, binge eating and overeating, to name but a few. They are a serious form of mental illness, with serious medical consequences and the highest mortality rate of all mental disorders.

In recent days, I heard the story of Grace, who started dieting at 16 because she was overweight as a result of eating convenience food. Like many teenagers, she wanted to lose weight and started eating healthily at first but then began to cut corners, so that she would be able to eat what she wanted. Her mum spotted the pattern that Grace was falling into and took her to the general practitioner. The doctor put it down to a “thing that girls do” and sent her to a dietician.

That is a familiar story from people who have visited their GP, but what else can we expect when, in medical schools, it is often the case that less than two hours of training is dedicated to eating disorders? Indeed, one in five medical schools offers no training in the illness at all.

I acknowledge all the great work that is being done by Beat, the UK eating disorders charity, and through Scottish Government investment. In a survey conducted by Beat in late 2021, 60 per cent of patients with an eating disorder felt that they received poor care from their GP and 58 per cent felt that their GP did not understand eating disorders. Out of 93 supporters in Scotland who had lived experience, 51 felt that the care that they received from their GP was poor or very poor. That must change. The lack of training is having devastating consequences.

Let me go back to Grace. As she waited to be seen by a dietician, she found herself sitting in a waiting room with four other girls she knew. That is a sign of how common eating disorders can be. Grace recalls sitting with the dietician and feeling that the appointment was just a tick-box exercise in which she was asked questions such as, “What is wrong and why aren't you eating?” “How do you feel when you eat?” She was put on a diet plan and asked to write a food diary, but she lied and no one ever checked up on her. When she talked to the other girls, they all said that they had done the same thing: they lied on the forms, and not one medical professional ever checked or questioned them about that. Eventually, Grace stopped going to the service and fell off the radar.

Grace grew from a teenager into an adult, taking the eating disorder with her. At 23, she made a breakthrough with a doctor in Ayr. The young female doctor understood her, listened to her and wanted to help. What would have happened if her first doctor had been like that? Unfortunately, the doctor in Ayr did not remain at the practice for long, and Grace went back to square 1.

The Scottish eating disorder services review in 2021 recommended that there should be appropriate training for all professionals and that there should be a particular focus on early intervention, medical aspects of care, and support. It recommended that training should range from undergraduate healthcare training to specialist training.

There is good news: the University of Glasgow medical school has been an early trailblazer in delivering the new training package. We must lead the way by ensuring that all five medical schools and the foundation programme in Scotland deliver such training.

Oliver Mundell: Does Siobhian Brown recognise that the Scottish Government has an important role to play in ensuring that there is best practice across all five medical schools?

Siobhian Brown: Yes, I agree with Oliver Mundell. There is dedicated funding at the University of Glasgow, and the Scottish Government absolutely is aware that the approach needs to be rolled out in all five medical schools.

Let us fast forward from Grace at 23. She is now 29 and she talks quite openly about the struggle that she faced. Although the mental effects have subsided, the physical effects have not. She knows that she has caused herself damage, but the answer from the doctor is more pills and a diagnosis of irritable bowel syndrome. No one will listen.

We need to listen to people with lived experience. Recovery is possible—we need only look at Grace. The plea from people like Grace is that eating disorder is not just a thing that teenagers do but a serious mental illness with grave consequences. As such, it deserves to have money and resources ploughed into it, with funding for research.

The Scottish Government needs to ensure full implementation of the Scottish eating disorder services review recommendations, including on the allocation of sufficient funding, and workforce and staff training. We know that the pandemic has compounded the issue, made it worse for those who are battling the illness and affected others for the first time.

I will finish by repeating what my colleagues have already said: help is out there. People should

take down this number: 0808 801 0432. It is for Beat, whose trained advisers can offer one-to-one help. If talking is too hard, people can email Scotlandhelp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk. Please seek help.

17:50

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, will start by welcoming those in the gallery and by thanking Emma Harper for securing this important debate.

My thoughts are with everyone who is affected by an eating disorder. Lockdown was a lonely and distressing time for many people, and I cannot imagine how difficult it was for people with eating disorders who may have had to cope without access to their usual support systems. Research by the eating disorder charity Beat suggests that 61 per cent of adults who received care for their eating disorder had less contact with services as a result of the pandemic. As we recover from the pandemic, it is vital that that support is restored.

We must also tackle stigma. There are many misconceptions about eating disorders, one of which is that someone must be extremely thin or underweight to suffer from disordered eating. We are learning more all the time about the different ways in which eating disorders manifest, and awareness of less common eating disorders, such as avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder and orthorexia, is increasing.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I wonder whether Gillian Mackay shares my concern about the distorting effect of social media, particularly on young men and young women, who see unreal images that are filtered or photoshopped. Does she agree that influencers and celebrities have a special responsibility to be truthful in the way that they portray image in social media and on social media platforms? Does she agree that it would be a good idea if social media companies labelled images as filtered or unfiltered or photoshopped or unphotoshopped, so that people can know what is real and what is not real?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am happy to give Gillian Mackay her time back for that intervention.

Gillian Mackay: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

As someone who grew up in the early to mid-2000s, when diet culture was probably at its peak and pictures of very thin celebrities were rife, I think that it is incumbent on everybody to take stock of the fact that what they are portraying influences those around them. It is important that social media organisations look at how their content affects everybody around them. We probably need more research and more of a look

into that to assess some of the impacts that social media organisations are having, particularly on teenagers and young adults.

It is important to note that symptoms may not fall into neat categories such as “anorexic” or “bulimic” but may overlap and be classified as “other specified eating disorder”. A friend was kind enough to share her story with me. She did not menstruate for years because she was restricting to the extent that she was underweight, but her GP told her that she was fine because her body mass index was borderline. There is an argument to be made for greater inclusion of eating disorders in medical training. In this eating disorder awareness week, Beat has highlighted that, on average, UK medical students receive less than two hours of teaching on eating disorders in their entire medical degree course and that a fifth of medical schools do not include eating disorders at all in their teaching. Beat has argued that eating disorders are highly complex mental illnesses that cannot be adequately covered in two hours. I have a lot of sympathy with that view.

Like many others, I have received numerous emails from constituents this week who have asked me to write to the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care to bring that issue to his attention and to find out what is being done at the national level to ensure that all future doctors are equipped to identify the early signs and symptoms of an eating disorder. I would be grateful if the minister addressed that in his closing speech.

I am sure that everyone in the chamber would agree that eating disorders should form part of medical education. In its briefing for today, the Royal College of Psychiatrists highlighted that anorexia nervosa is prevalent among 1 per cent of women and 0.5 per cent of men and that it has the highest mortality rate for any type of severe mental illness. Women are likelier to present with an eating disorder, as are LGBT people.

I have raised the need for improved data on mental health in the chamber previously, and I will continue to do so. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has said that there are real gaps in our knowledge as to the impact of eating disorders on our ethnically diverse and LGBT communities, in particular. I would be grateful to hear from the minister what action is being taken to improve the situation and whether we have data on how people from minority ethnic backgrounds are affected by eating disorders, given that data on the mental health of minority ethnic communities is often inadequate.

As well as putting in place training for future medical staff, we need to ensure that time is made for current staff to improve their awareness and

learn from new research. The “Scottish Eating Disorder Services Review” found that,

“Services ... have seen increased numbers of referrals of people with eating disorders since the start of the pandemic”

and

“are seeing people present later and significantly more physically unwell.”

The review also said:

“Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) eating disorder leads have reported an unprecedented increase in the number and severity of children and young people presenting with eating disorders.”

Those findings are extremely worrying. It is vital that we receive regular reports on what action is being taken to improve eating disorder services and help them to meet growing demand.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has highlighted that, nearly a year on from the publication of the “Scottish Eating Disorder Services Review”, we need to know what progress is being made towards delivering on the recommendations that the review document set out. The RCP has called on the Scottish Government to outline how it will evaluate progress towards delivering on those recommendations, and I ask the minister to address that in his closing speech as well. I appreciate that there is a lot in there.

17:56

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I thank Emma Harper for securing the debate. She has led these debates for quite a few years now and she consistently brings up the subject of eating disorders in the chamber and—I know this first hand—makes sure that it is factored in where appropriate and possible in her committee work. Oliver Mundell also mentioned the work that she does through the CPG on mental health.

Emma Harper highlighted the increased incidence of people suffering from eating disorders during the pandemic and the problems that they have experienced. The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee recently did some work on young people’s mental health, and Emma was quick to ensure that that issue was factored in, for which I commend her. She follows, as I do, in the footsteps of our friend and colleague Dennis Robertson, who many members have rightly mentioned. We cannot overestimate the impact that Dennis’s work has had, and continues to have, in raising awareness, all of which he does in the name of his daughter Caroline, who tragically lost her life.

We talk about many difficult and complex issues in the chamber; I see that as our job. Eating

disorders are such an issue, and so is suicide, which we find difficult to talk about. I do not think that there is an awareness out there among the public of the impact that eating disorders can have in terms of suicidal ideation, in particular among young women.

When we talk about mortality rates for eating disorders, many people think first of the tragic deaths resulting solely from complications due to deteriorating physical health. Of course, that is a factor, but I was taken aback to find out just how many of those suffering from the mental health conditions of binge eating, anorexia nervosa and bulimia attempt or complete suicide.

In considering the mortality rate for those with eating disorders, it is sometimes hard to contemplate the issue of suicide, in particular when we think about families who are terrified that one of their own is struggling with an eating disorder. I can only imagine how difficult it is to hear that one in six people with an eating disorder will try to end their own life; that makes what is an already frightening concept for parents and families even more frightening.

Nevertheless, people can and do get better, and I point to the massively improved child and adolescent mental health services in Aberdeen as a model for how access to mental health services can be made much better and more appropriate for young people who are at risk. We now have a modern and appropriate setting for those services in the city of Aberdeen.

I am grateful to Beat for its briefing today, and for the work that it does on the importance of early intervention and support for families. As I said, there are frightened families who fear that the worst may happen, and also fear that there is little that they can do. I have had conversations with Dennis Robertson about the fear that he and his wife Anne felt when Caroline was suffering—fear that they might do the wrong thing, and that there was no support out there for them.

Families need expert advice, and Beat absolutely provides pathways to that. Parents and guardians worry that it might not be enough to get their young person through the door, and that the medical professional they see might not have the expertise—Siobhian Brown mentioned a situation where that was the case. They fear that the waiting list might be too long, and they do not know what they can do in the meantime. As always when I speak on this issue, I will put a link to Beat's excellent website on my social media, along with its phone number.

I will not echo much of what has been said by others about the training of medical professionals, except to say that it is a very important theme. Indeed, it is not just medical professionals who

can benefit from training and awareness, and I want to discuss what training might be helpful to parents, young people and teachers on the earliest interventions and on the potentially negative influence of social media. When I was a teenager, that debate was around images in women's magazines, but those came out only monthly or bi-monthly. Now, there is a constant stream of images of so-called perfection on tap on TikTok and Instagram, and there are websites with tips on how to starve yourself hitting the top of Google searches—pro-ana and thinspiration websites, for instance. There has been some progress on them being called out, but they are still out there, and I do not think that the social media companies are doing enough to bring them down. I would also point out that body-shaming clickbait in tabloids and online exacerbates the mental health issues that young women might face.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way on that point?

Gillian Martin: If I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just winding up. It needs to be a very brief intervention.

Stephen Kerr: The member has mentioned young women, and it is important to put it on the record that young men are also impacted by those images.

Gillian Martin: Forgive me—young men are of course impacted as well. I do not forget that but, as a woman, I think about the situation of women a lot, as that is my lived experience.

Given the many aspects of the impact on the mental health of women in particular—and on that of men, as Stephen Kerr has mentioned—I urge social media companies and media companies in general to do far more than they are doing at the moment. They are making staggering profits from our reliance on them, with their psycho-technical tactics in having us glued to their content. It is time for them to be far more responsible for the content that they share that can harm young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on the minister to wind up the debate. You have around seven minutes, minister.

18:02

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Seven minutes does not seem long enough to answer all the questions.

First, I will welcome some folks to the gallery: Emma Broadhurst, Beat's national officer for

Scotland, and the Beat ambassadors. It is great to see you here today.

I welcome this debate to mark eating disorders awareness week 2022. It allows us to raise awareness about eating disorders and the terrible impact that they can have on those who are diagnosed and on their family and friends, too. I thank Emma Harper for lodging the motion this year and for focusing our minds on how significant this subject is. I am pleased that our minds are focused on it at least once a year, but I see it as part of my job not just to keep that focus on the once-a-year debate that Dennis Robertson instituted but to get folk speaking about the issue more.

Jackson Carlaw rightly asked what has changed. I think that a lot has changed. For a start, the communication about eating disorders is much less taboo than it was when Dennis Robertson first stood up in the chamber to speak about the subject 10 years ago. That means that more folk are seeking the help that they need.

As a Government, we are making significant investments in our mental health services. We know that the pandemic has had a huge impact on people's mental health, and we are aiming to encourage recovery and renewal as we emerge from the pandemic. That includes dedicated actions to improve support for those with an eating disorder and their families and carers, which I will touch on later in my response.

I also extend my thanks and appreciation to all those across the country who work day in, day out to support the recovery of those with an eating disorder and their families.

As has been mentioned, the theme of this year's awareness week is to encourage our medical schools in Scotland to ensure that they provide eating disorder training to medical students. That will ensure that our future workforce is equipped with the skills and confidence that they need to provide the support that people across our country require. I am pleased that our medical schools in Scotland are all in discussions with Beat to deliver eating disorder training, or are already delivering it. In particular, I want to mention the University of Glasgow, which was the first in the UK to adopt Beat's training. The folks from Beat have called Glasgow the trailblazers, and that is the case. However, we need all our other medical schools in Scotland to follow suit, and I am sure that they will do so.

Oliver Mundell: Obviously, universities are independent institutions, but does the minister hope that, by this time next year, all universities will have moved forward and will offer that vital training?

Kevin Stewart: They are independent institutions, as Mr Mundell rightly says, but they have all engaged with Beat, which is a good sign. We will do all we can to persuade them all to move forward on that.

It is vital that our GPs and those who work in our primary care services feel confident about spotting the early signs of an eating disorder and understanding the complexities of this type of illness. They are key players in ensuring that, when someone comes forward for support, they are directed to the right treatment. We do not want any more situations such as the one that Grace had to deal with in Ayr.

As I have mentioned, in the past two years, we have taken significant actions to ensure that those who require support for an eating disorder can receive timely access to appropriate treatment. Our transition and recovery plan, which was published in October 2020, is backed by the £120 million recovery and renewal fund, which will help to transform services, with a renewed focus on prevention and early intervention.

In June last year, I was pleased to announce £5 million to implement the recommendations of the national eating disorders review. The majority of the funding is being provided to NHS boards to support them to respond to the increase in eating disorder referrals. Early feedback highlights that boards have used the funding to ensure that their staff have access to the right training, to expand clinician time and to recruit additional staff.

In that regard, I refer to Gillian Martin's point about the changes that were made to child and adolescent mental health services in Grampian, which made a real difference in modernising services and getting things right. We need to export that best practice right across Scotland, which has not quite happened yet. The reason why we have put our CAMHS specifications in place is to ensure that it happens.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Kevin Stewart: I will take a brief intervention from Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Does the minister also agree with Gillian Martin's comments about the need for social media companies to take more responsibility for the content that is published on their platforms?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I am happy to give you the latitude that I have given every other speaker: you have a generous seven minutes.

Kevin Stewart: I will come on to Mr Kerr's point towards the end of my speech, but I will definitely address that issue.

We have had additional recruitment of staff in our NHS, and we have also provided more than £400,000 to Beat, the UK's eating disorder charity, to provide a wide range of support options to families and carers as well as support for children, young people and adults who are impacted by an eating disorder. Feedback from those services highlights just how important different types of support can be, with one user reporting:

"For the first time I was with a group of people who totally understood what I was going through. It is so reassuring to hear others' experiences with eating disorders and to know you are not alone".

It was because of that feedback that I commissioned additional services from Beat to be rolled out nationally across Scotland, beginning in April.

We have awarded Beat more than £300,000 to provide expanded helpline support until midnight seven days a week, improved carer support through NHS board referrals, specific binge eating disorder support services and beyond eating symptoms training for GPs and other healthcare professionals to support them to identify when a patient has an eating disorder and to confidently intervene early. From a conversation that I had earlier today with Beat, I believe that we will be the first part of the United Kingdom to have it deliver all its suite of services in our country. I am glad that Scotland is leading the way on that.

I am also pleased to provide an update on the eating disorders implementation group that was established last year to take forward the recommendations from the national review. I will attend the group's next meeting.

There are specific questions from the debate that I must answer with regard to that work. Emma Harper asked when we would publish the specification for the lived experience panel. It will be published shortly. She also asked about the data working group. It plans to meet in the next two weeks.

Gillian Mackay and others brought up the subject of data. We do not yet have the right data. That is one of the reasons why we have established the data working group. We need to do better on that front and, with the group's help, we will no doubt do so.

We need to get over the subject being taboo, as Siobhian Brown described it. The more that we speak about, and encourage others to speak about, eating disorders and some of the other difficult subjects that come with mental ill health, such as self-harm and suicide, which Gillian Martin mentioned, the more impact we can have on getting it right for people.

Mr Kerr talked about the online aspect. We do not have powers in this Parliament to deal with the

social media and internet providers, but I hope that every member will engage with the bill that is proposed and going through the House of Commons on the issue, not just in relation to eating disorders and the things that the so-called influencers do but in relation to every other aspect of mental health, because I do not think that that proposed legislation goes far enough. In some regards, it does not really matter what I think because the third sector organisations—the folk at the front line—including the Samaritans, do not think that it goes far enough. Perhaps we could get some cross-chamber agreement to get cross-border agreement to beef that legislation up somewhat and get rid of some of the nonsenses that exist on social media channels.

I thank Emma Harper for lodging the motion for the debate. I reiterate my support for and thanks to the staff who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to support people with an eating disorder and their families. I assure them and Beat that they have the Government's full support.

Meeting closed at 18:13.

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