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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):

The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today, who is no stranger to the chamber, is the Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness QC, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

The Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness QC (Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland): Presiding Officer, it is both a privilege and a pleasure to be back in this chamber, albeit in a somewhat different role; to lead this time for reflection, which is, I understand, the first in-person reflection in more than two years; and to bring you and the Parliament the warm greetings of the General Assembly.

Those two years have been very difficult and challenging and, for some, they have been traumatic and heart breaking, and we meet against a backdrop of cruel strife and war on our own continent of Europe. It would be so easy to become despairing yet, during this time, we have also seen, in the words of Pope Francis, “an eruption of humanity”. We have seen neighbours helping each other, profound examples of compassion and caring and, in the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, a willingness to welcome the stranger. Such outpourings of love and concern are surely an antidote to pessimism, beacons of hope and light in the darkness.

At this Eastertide, we who are Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a cause for joy and hope. It is an affirmation of life over death and a triumph of love over hate. It is a time to celebrate life, rebirth and resurrection presence in, with and through all things and peoples.

Now is a time for us all to reflect on a new imagining for our country in a post-Covid world and to see the world not only as it is, but with a vision as to how it might be and what our contribution will be in making it so. That is a call to service.

I want to share and commend to you part of a prayer that was given to me in my early days as a member of Parliament, which is based on St Francis of Assisi’s “A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples”:

“Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received, fading symbols of honour, trappings of power, but only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage.

Enter into God’s plan of liberating all peoples from everything that oppresses them and obstructs their development as human beings. Do not grow tired of working for peace among all people.

Uphold the rights and dignity of the human person. Foster the creation of a society where human life is cherished and where all peoples of the planet can enjoy its gifts, which God created for all in a Spirit of love and justice and equality.”

Amen.

Topical Question Time

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

Kinahan Organised Crime Group

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it can take in response to sanctions announced by US authorities against members of the Kinahan organised crime group, in light of the group's reported connections to Scotland. (S6T-00644)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government continues to work with law enforcement agencies in Scotland and elsewhere to tackle organised crime. We cannot comment on individual operations, but we will continue to take any action that we can—as will our partners—within our current powers to ensure that organised crime groups do not see Scotland as a safe haven for their assets.

Russell Findlay: One Kinahan gang member who has been sanctioned is John Morrissey, along with his Glasgow-based vodka company, Nero Drinks. However, the Kinahans are not interested in flogging vodka—their real business is cocaine and heroin. It is widely known that the cartel is in partnership with Scotland's Lyons gang, making vast profits from killing Scots.

The Scottish National Party Government turned its back on the United Kingdom Government's project ADDER—addiction, disruption, diversion, enforcement and recovery—which aims to tackle drug trafficking through tougher police enforcement. Considering the international sanctions, will the cabinet secretary rethink that decision?

Keith Brown: I am sorry that Mr Findlay has so quickly adopted his usual attack-the-SNP mode. There is a very serious issue at the root of his question, which is the pervasive influence of organised crime. We and Police Scotland work very effectively with other agencies, including the National Crime Agency, to address not only organised crime but issues with drug gangs. I will continue to support Police Scotland in those efforts, and to support our joint work with the National Crime Agency and other partners in Scotland and the UK. That seems to be a constructive and effective way to go forward, rather than seeking to throw mud whenever possible.

Russell Findlay: No mud was thrown on my part, but no answer was given on the cabinet secretary's part.

Journalists in Ireland and elsewhere have taken great personal risks to reveal how the Kinahan cartel's dirty money has infiltrated boxing; Tyson Fury and the Scottish world champion Josh Taylor are among those whom Daniel Kinahan represents. However, I contend that Scottish football is also contaminated by drugs money. Last year, the Scottish Government issued a video warning young players about the risk of being targeted by organised criminals who pose as advisers. Can the cabinet secretary tell us, therefore, what tangible action has been taken against dirty money in boxing and in football in the 12 months since that video was released?

Keith Brown: I have already mentioned the extent to which we work with Police Scotland and other organisations, including the Scottish Football Association, on those issues. It is also worth saying that in taking action, whether against the gangs that Russell Findlay mentioned or against organised crime more generally, it is often not the best course of action to lay out exactly what you are doing as you are doing it.

As I am sure that the member will know, certainly in relation to sanctions and other actions that are taken against organised crime groups, the more you telegraph what you intend to do, the harder it is to find both the evidence and the proceeds of crime that derive from the activities of those gangs.

We will continue to work with our partners in sport and with the police to ensure that we take effective action and that people who are vulnerable, including young sportspeople, are best protected by taking the advice that they can get from Police Scotland and other justice partners.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): How will the updated serious organised crime strategy enable Scotland to combat serious organised crime?

Keith Brown: It does so by ensuring that we work with organisations, including those that I have mentioned already, as well as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the national health service, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, the National Crime Agency, HM Revenue and Customs and others that are represented on the serious organised crime task force.

We also benefit hugely—despite what was said in the previous set of questions—from having the crime campus, which is unique in the UK. It has been commended by most of the justice organisations, and by the UK Government on a

regular basis, given the frequency of its visits to see how that work is carried out.

The attack on serious organised crime is carried out jointly, with fantastic co-ordination, at the national crime campus. We are determined that, despite the occasional brickbats that are thrown from elsewhere for party-political purposes, we will continue to work in that way with our agencies in Scotland and with those across the UK. Of course, we recognise that serious organised crime does not recognise borders and that our response to it must therefore be joined up.

Hepatitis Outbreak

2. Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the reported recent outbreak in cases of hepatitis in children across Scotland. (S6T-00640)

The Minister for Public Health, Women’s Health and Sport (Maree Todd): A further incident management meeting is being held this afternoon. However, the most recent information is that, to date, Public Health Scotland has identified 13 cases of severe hepatitis requiring hospital admission in children aged between one and 10 years old. The cases are spread across six health boards. Although most cases have presented since March, one child was admitted to hospital in early January 2022. Cases have also been detected in other parts of the United Kingdom.

These cases are unusual in that the hepatitis has not been caused by one of the recognised strains of virus. In an average year, we would expect to see only seven or eight such cases without another underlying diagnosis. At present, we do not know the cause of the hepatitis, but all potential causes are being thoroughly investigated. A number of children have tested positive for adenovirus, which is generally mild, but which can, in some rare cases, cause hepatitis.

The most effective way to minimise the spread of adenovirus and other common childhood viruses is through good hand and respiratory hygiene. Therefore, I urge anyone who is taking care of younger children to supervise hand washing and ensure good hygiene. I also urge parents to contact their general practitioner or other healthcare professional if they notice signs of jaundice in their child, such as a yellow tinge in the whites of their eyes or on their skin. Other symptoms include dark urine, pale grey-coloured stool, itchy skin, muscle and joint pains, tiredness, feeling sick, a high temperature, a loss of appetite and stomach pain.

Although investigations into the cause are ongoing, we are able to definitively confirm that there is no connection between the Covid-19

vaccination and those cases. None of the infected children has received a first dose. Although I know that many people will be concerned by the situation, I ask them to please be assured that Public Health Scotland is working hard to identify the cause and is working closely with health agencies across the United Kingdom and with international partners.

Paul O’Kane: The situation is, naturally, very concerning. There has been an increase in cases across the UK, with the World Health Organization having been informed and the UK Health Security Agency co-ordinating that investigation. It is vitally important that work to identify the factors that are causing the infections moves at pace, and that a high level of support is offered to the affected children and families.

We all want to avoid speculating on the causes of infection, which could cause further anxiety in communities; however, there have already been media reports suggesting a number of potential causes. I note what the minister said about Covid-19 vaccination, but there have also been stories about toxins in food, drink and toys, which all cause concern in the wider community.

Will the minister say when she expects further detail on the causes, in order to avoid such speculation and to ensure that the right plan is in place to tackle the concerning infections?

Maree Todd: I definitely give a commitment to update Parliament when we have definitive information—I have no problem with doing that.

We are working not only with UK agencies but with international partners, and Public Health Scotland published a *Eurosurveillance* journal article to alert international colleagues. I am aware that there have been a number of reports in the US of a similar type of hepatitis. Therefore, it is a global concern, which people around the world are working on.

At present, there is no known cause, so I cannot put an end to the speculation, but I assure the public that all potential causes are being explored. At the moment, infection is considered to be the most plausible cause. There are a number of clinical advisers who would be better placed to give more information on the matter, and I am more than happy to get that information to parliamentary colleagues as smoothly as possible.

Paul O’Kane: I thank the minister for her undertaking. I think that everyone in the chamber would welcome that detail as the situation develops, because it is concerning.

To push the minister further on her previous answer, how does the Government intend to increase awareness of the symptoms among parents and carers, given the importance of early

diagnosis and health interventions? Public Health Scotland has highlighted the importance of increased hand and general hygiene, as the minister alluded to. How will the Government support that messaging for families at home and in early learning and childcare settings and school settings, particularly at a time when people might be becoming more lax or less observant in that regard because Covid-19 regulations are changing?

Maree Todd: I am more than happy to get back to the member with definitive answers on that, but it seems sensible that we work closely with healthcare professionals, education colleagues and Parent Club, which is an excellent resource that is trusted by parents in Scotland, to ensure that the appropriate information is made available.

Over the past couple of years in relation to Covid, we have been practising good respiratory hygiene by coughing into our elbows and washing our hands after coughing. With this virus, if it is adenovirus, it is particularly important to clean hard surfaces. Therefore, all the lessons that we have learned over the past couple of years will stand us in good stead in facing this particular threat.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): It is concerning that an unusual number of hepatitis cases have been detected in young children across Scotland's central belt. Although I appreciate that Public Health Scotland and the UK Health Security Agency are investigating the matter at pace, what urgent steps is the Scottish Government taking, in addition to the measures that the minister has mentioned, to trace the outbreak and to raise public awareness, particularly among parents and guardians, of hepatitis symptoms so that those who are susceptible to it are better protected and able to receive life-saving treatment far more quickly?

Maree Todd: As soon as the issue was signalled to us, we put out communications. As soon as we were sure that there was something to tell the public about, we very quickly followed that up with public information. I am aware that, because so much is going on in the news agenda at the moment, not everybody is engaged with that. I am more than happy to reflect on and consider whether there are better, more specific means of communicating, particularly with healthcare professionals, parents and education facilities, to ensure that everybody is well informed about what we are looking for.

As I said in my earlier answers, the situation is evolving. We are not entirely sure what the causative agent is. However, there are certain rules and guidance that we can follow to try to reduce the risk, regardless of the cause.

Technology Sector

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Kate Forbes on transforming Scotland's tech sector. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement.

14:16

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes):

In August 2020, the Government published the "Scottish Technology Ecosystem Review", which is a blueprint to establish Scotland as a leading hub for tech start-ups. As members will know, the report was written by Mark Logan, the former chief operating officer of Skyscanner, which was one of Scotland's first tech companies to achieve a valuation of more than £1 billion.

Professor Logan's report was greeted with acclaim on publication. It was described as an

"exciting route map for how the government and the private sector can work together to build Scotland into a global leader."

Today, I will provide an update on progress against the route map, which is backed up with £45 million-worth of Scottish Government investment, and on how it is building a sense of momentum and excitement in Scottish tech.

That sense of momentum is being felt in London, where tomorrow the First Minister will open the EIE London innovation and investment showcase, which is an event that is aimed at strengthening the gateway to global investment and finance for Scotland's most innovative companies. It is being felt in silicon valley, where a Government-funded cohort of 20 Scottish start-ups arrived last week on a curated visit that has been arranged by Startup Grind, which is the world's largest community for start-ups, founders and innovators. It is also being felt at home, in Glasgow, where next week we are co-funding the first Glasgow tech fest at the University of Strathclyde, bringing together founders, businesses and the Scottish tech ecosystem in the city to help the sector grow and flourish.

Those are not isolated examples. They are all connected because they are happening thanks to our Scottish technology ecosystem fund, which the Logan review recommended in order to make strategic investments in what ecosystem builders call "social infrastructure", creating the best possible network and environment for founders and start-ups to succeed.

Thirty-four awards totalling more than £1 million have been given through the fund, which will deliver an exciting and diverse range of meet-ups,

events and projects such as the three that I have just mentioned. That work has engendered a distinct buzz around Scottish tech, but there is an even bigger buzz about what is still to come.

Last October, we invited suppliers to tender for a contract to establish a national network of five tech-scaler hubs in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Inverness. The hubs will provide Scottish companies with commercial education sourced from the best providers in the world. That education will be complemented with physical co-location, first-rate mentoring and vibrant peer communities. Through state-of-the-art remote technologies, all of that will be available virtually in every community in Scotland.

Those tech scalers are a game changer. They will deliver for Scotland one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive state-funded environments for the creation and scaling of start-ups available anywhere in Europe. They will put Scotland on the global start-up map, and we will promote their services relentlessly to attract the world's most talented founders to establish their businesses in Scotland. The tender exercise is almost complete, and I expect to announce the winning bid in early summer.

Building momentum is one thing, but sustaining it over a period of generational change requires deeper, longer-term investment. Professor Logan's route map recognises that, and calls for far-reaching changes to the teaching of computing science in Scotland, raising it to a level where it is considered just as important as physics or maths. We have made significant strides towards delivery here, too.

In partnership with the University of Glasgow, we have established a new organisation, Scottish Teachers Advancing Computing Science, or STACS for short. STACS is led by two teachers: an inspiring young woman named Toni Scullion, founder of the coding club charity dressCode, and a deeply experienced former head of department named Brendan McCart. They are supported by the University of Glasgow's Professor Quintin Cutts, one of the United Kingdom's leading experts in computing science pedagogy. Together, they will act as critical friends, driving improvements in equipment, teacher training and the curation of best practice. Working with Toni and Brendan, we have invested more than £1 million pounds to add to schools' existing stocks of computing hardware, putting more kit into classrooms and into the hands of teachers and pupils.

We are designing a new plan for professional skills development in computing science, to build teachers' confidence and help them keep pace with rapid change. Later this year we will pilot the

plan in partnership with one of our local authorities, before a national roll-out.

Our ambitions for tech do not end in schools. Last year we invested £1 million in the digital start fund, a programme that supports people on benefits or low income to undertake courses with providers such as CodeClan, which give people the skills that they need for a well-paid career in tech. We invested a further £500,000 in the digital skills pipeline, a bespoke set of modular courses running from beginner level all the way through to advanced coding. We provided grant funding of £150,000 to CodeYourFuture, a truly exceptional organisation that supports refugees with the skills and networks necessary to progress in education and employment. Together, those programmes have supported around 600 people to reskill and re-energise their career.

The Government is delivering on its promise to transform tech in Scotland. In doing so, we are dismantling long-standing barriers to entry and opportunity in the sector. Here, we will benefit from the whole-system review of female-led enterprise in Scotland, which I have asked Ana Stewart, the founder of i-design, to carry out. Ana has invited Mark Logan to contribute to the development of that report.

It is clear that there is much to be done. Today, female founders get less than a penny out of every pound of venture capital invested. That position is clearly intolerable, and that is why the Scottish National Investment Bank has agreed to support the all-female investor group, Investing Women Angels, to establish a new investment fund focused exclusively on women and minority founders based in Scotland. That makes Scotland one of very few European nations with a bespoke seed investment fund focused on stimulating the growth of female-led companies, delivering yet another of Mark Logan's recommendations.

This year we will pursue delivery of another exciting suite of recommendations. We will build a national network of coding clubs, ensuring that young people and children enjoy equity of access to extra-curricular learning, irrespective of where they come from, and we will create an investor discoverability platform, increasing the visibility of Scottish companies to global investors.

Just last month we published the national strategy for economic transformation, which extends Mark Logan's thinking from the tech domain to all forms of high-growth entrepreneurship.

On education and talent, there is strong evidence that the creative, commercial and leadership skills that are necessary to start and scale a business are teachable, so we will embed project-based entrepreneurial learning into school

and post-16 education curricula, in partnership with industry. We will create a new start-up apprenticeship, which is an inventive way of exposing new talent to the start-up community and creating a potentially rich source of future founders. We will embed entrepreneurship in the young persons guarantee, cultivating the business leaders of tomorrow by exposing them to first-rate start-up techniques and experiences.

On entrepreneurial infrastructure, the tech scalars are just the beginning. Over time, we will shift their focus from tech to all high-growth companies, irrespective of sector. We will complement them with a network of what we are calling “pre-scalars”, which are smaller community-based hubs that will stimulate the very earliest stages of high-growth entrepreneurship by prospective founders to conceive new ideas, start companies, design and develop products and support early tests of market traction. As our ecosystem matures and more consistently generates success, we will seek to partner with prestigious commercial accelerator programmes, ensuring that the ambitions of our very best companies can be realised in Scotland.

Together, the reports commit the Government to the most radical reforms of the Scottish entrepreneurial ecosystem since devolution. Our ambition is nothing less than to establish Scotland as one of the leading start-up economies in Europe. It is worth remembering that it was a Scottish start-up that led the world to the previous economic revolution that transformed global living standards and lifted millions of people out of poverty.

In the current context of Brexit, the climate emergency and an uncertain post-pandemic world, the challenges that we face today are just as grave. However, there have never been limits to the problems that our people can solve. It is time for Scottish start-ups to get to work, and the Scottish Government stands full square behind them.

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

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for prior sight of her statement. The Parliament will be pleased to have some more information about the STACS initiative.

First, I draw the cabinet secretary’s attention to the following. In 2008, there were 766 teachers of computing science, but, 18 months ago, that number had fallen to 595. In 2001, 28,000 pupils in Scotland were studying computing science, but, by 2020, that number was 9,800. As a result of the

subject choice issue, the number of schools that offer the subject has fallen from 2,500 to 425. If the Scottish National Party wants the initiative to take place and be successful, what is it doing to address the subject choice issue?

Kate Forbes: Liz Smith identifies—in part, although unpacking the numbers is really important—the critical importance of the pipeline of talent coming through our schools to serve the start-up community and to become the next generation of start-ups.

The recommendations on which we have arguably made the greatest progress are those around STACS and ensuring that there is greater choice for young people in their formal subject choices and informal extracurricular activities. That clearly starts with teachers, and Liz Smith will know that we have offered a bursary of up to £20,000 for career changers, to attract more teachers to teach science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. The highest demand for teachers needs to be in computing.

Liz Smith asked for a bit more detail on STACS. It is a teacher-led organisation, so it starts with teachers. It aims to provide support and expertise to and promote skills among computing science teachers across Scotland, so that they can teach as effectively as possible and meet the needs of young people. As I said, it is led by teachers, who understand the challenge.

Part of that challenge—I will close with this—is about promoting computing science as a subject choice and a career option for pupils. Although we need to ensure that there are enough teachers to meet the demand, we also need to do more work to create that demand in the first place. That is something else that STACS is already doing. That includes exploratory career sessions with teachers, parents and students to support more students to pick computing as a subject. We have seen too many students choosing not to pursue it, not only because of a lack of choice, as Liz Smith said, but because there just is not the demand.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I welcome the initiatives that the cabinet secretary set out in her statement. It is important that we take tech start-ups and turn them into growth organisations. The statement is a positive step forward.

To go further with Liz Smith’s line of questioning, not only did the number of teachers fall by about a quarter between 2008 and 2020, but the number of people studying for highers dropped by a quarter, from just over 4,200 to 3,200, in the same period. The cabinet secretary is right to identify the need for a pipeline of talent, but if young people are not studying for highers and

we do not have teachers to teach them, what progress can we make? Would she concede that we must make progress on those fundamentals?

I also ask about tech uptake among small and medium-sized enterprises. While tech start-ups are important, the recent paper by the Productivity Institute on the Scottish productivity challenge identified the poor uptake of technology by SMEs as a core reason for Scotland's lagging productivity growth. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to address that vital issue?

Kate Forbes: Those are two important questions. I will start with the point about education. I am not disagreeing with the importance of getting the pipeline of talent right. The statement was designed to demonstrate the progress that has been made since the recommendation was published in 2020.

One of the first things that we did was to establish a steering group, which is led by Mark Logan and Shirley-Anne Somerville, who is now the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. Prior to that, Mr Logan was engaging with the Deputy First Minister, who then had responsibility for education. The steering group includes the most senior leaders from education and skills agencies across Scotland and is working to progress changes in computing science in schools.

That has resulted in STACS—about which I can go into more detail—and in some critical changes elsewhere. We have provided more than £1 million for additional computing science hardware and software to improve provision in schools. We have also provided funding to Digital Xtra, whose grant award programme aims to inspire young people to acquire digital technology skills through high-quality, exciting extracurricular activities.

There is a risk that we might think that someone can pursue a career in a tech start-up only if they have done computing science. This is absolutely and vitally important: there will be young people who have never considered doing computing science and who need access to those digital skills. We are trying to encourage them to want to study technology and technology-related disciplines and ultimately to pursue a career. That is hugely important.

Daniel Johnson picked up on another important point, which is about the sectors that are not specifically deemed as technological. We are in a time when every sector is ultimately a tech sector. That is one of the changes that have emerged from Covid. Prior to Covid, it was perhaps harder to make the case for SMEs to invest in digital capabilities, either in the skills of their workforce or in the facilities that they used. Covid has changed that significantly.

We have seen significant uptake of, for example, the digital boost scheme, which is why the commitment to invest £100 million in giving small and medium-sized enterprises access to digital technology really matters. We reopened the £25 million digital boost fund in the Government's first 100 days, recognising its importance, which Daniel Johnson referred to. It is more popular than ever, not because the programme has changed, but because the uptake is significantly higher. The appetite is there, and we will build on that to provide not just the funding, but the expertise. Ultimately, it is probably one of the biggest game changers when it comes to productivity.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I refer members to my registered interest as a member of the British Computer Society. I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement, and particularly for the emphasis on women and entrepreneurial endeavours in this area. We know from the Royal Society of Edinburgh's "Tapping all our Talents" report that many women have left the tech sector and other science, technology, engineering and mathematics areas. What opportunities will there be for women in particular to retrain in the tech sector?

Kate Forbes: That is another excellent question. Retraining was a key theme in elements of my statement. We want to ensure that, when we try to bring more women into the sector, we provide routes for them to either return to work or change their careers. CodeClan does important work when it comes to retraining and reskilling, but a key thing in all of this is the digital fund that I mentioned in my statement, which specifically targets those who are furthest from the job market. The digital start fund targets those people to encourage them to undertake intensive courses with providers such as CodeClan, which will give them the skills that they need to have well-paid careers in tech.

CodeClan is absolutely brilliant at helping people where they are. Having visited it a few times—I am sure that Clare Adamson is familiar with it, and she may want to visit it, too—I know that it is excellent at providing wraparound support for individuals who are returning to the job market or changing careers.

Ultimately, in a sector where accessing talent is a real challenge and the number of women is still disproportionately low, we can meet two challenges by expanding the number of talented individuals and ensuring that we increase the number of women. That is one of the primary commitments in implementing the STER recommendations.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Scotland has spent many years lagging behind on STEM and entrepreneurship

education, and it is vital that that is addressed, albeit belatedly. On the technology side, we saw during the pandemic that the issuing of laptops to schoolchildren across Scotland was plagued with delays and obfuscations, as has been the promise to provide internet-ready devices for young people in Scotland since the election. Our education and apprenticeship system has been bruised by two years of Covid and it will take time to recover. The cabinet secretary spoke about new start-ups, apprenticeships and entrepreneurial learning in schools. When precisely will those things be delivered?

Kate Forbes: They are already being delivered. We are obviously keen to expand and grow them, but the apprenticeship model has already been adapted. We have far more young people choosing to do cyber apprenticeships than we had before. Many young people are choosing to work and study simultaneously, and a number of tech businesses are already taking advantage of that apprenticeship model.

Work has also started on expanding the young persons guarantee. We are pleased to be working with Young Enterprise Scotland to look at how we can work as effectively as possible through the young persons guarantee to ensure that there are a number of routes into the tech sector for young people.

A lot of work has started. We are building on that progress and expanding it. The key thing about the national strategy for economic transformation is that it takes a lot of the most successful interventions in the tech sector and tech entrepreneurship and expands them across the entrepreneurship domain so that they are not unique to the tech sector.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and celebrate the ambition that is contained in it, particularly the actions regarding women.

My question is specific to my constituency of Falkirk East. It concerns data flows as a critical enabling technology. Only recently, US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen made a joint declaration on co-operation regarding the value of data flows. Germany is leading within Europe, and the German Government has mandated the method of Obashi Technology Limited, a pioneering firm, to map and model its data flows. Will the minister meet me and Obashi senior management at its site in Stenhousemuir to learn about how Scotland and the Scottish Government could utilise, and lead the world with, that critical new technology?

Kate Forbes: I thank Michelle Thomson for bringing that to my attention. It is great to see what is being done in her constituency. I am particularly

keen to look at how we use data more effectively and at how we support businesses working in that field. I would be very happy to get further information from her and to consider how we can support that work, including by meeting the relevant business.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Mark Logan's company, Skyscanner, was sold to Ctrip of China for £1.4 billion in 2016. That is not necessarily a success story for the Scottish economy; it reveals a major strategic weakness in companies of high-scale potential being lost to overseas ownership. What measures might the Scottish Government consider to protect Scottish start-ups through the critical growth phase? Would it consider direct measures such as the Government taking golden shares in companies to shield them from predatory overseas takeovers, or perhaps tackle a strategic weakness that Mark Logan identified by coaching a critical mass of senior executive leaders to have the confidence to keep their headquarters in Scotland through making an initial public offering of shares, rather than selling to an overseas multinational?

Kate Forbes: We are progressing a number of recommendations specifically around investment and investment funding, to avoid the situation whereby, for a Scottish start-up to expand, grow and develop, it needs to access funding elsewhere.

Although no one would dispute that Skyscanner has been a success, some of the recommendations looked at, for example, establishing a series A funding partnership between the Scottish Government, Scottish venture capitalists and external investors; investment vehicles specifically for certain groups, such as female founders; the need to identify where grant support is effective and where it is ineffective; and the partnering of Scottish VCs with the Scottish Government on a number of joint initiatives, including maintaining and publicising a live database of all angels and all start-ups in Scotland.

Obviously, a bigger issue is at stake: ultimately, keeping businesses in Scotland is about delivering an environment in which they want to continue doing business. We can put in place a number of interventions. I have just rattled through a few of the recommendations very quickly; not all of them will necessarily be relevant to the example that the member cites. However, ultimately, it is about building up the wider ecosystem, infrastructure and environment so that, at every stage of a start-up, and at scale-ups in growth, there is access to investment funding, talent or whatever else it might be that will either stop a company from growing in Scotland or enable it to continue to be headquartered in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I appreciate the cabinet secretary's desire to provide comprehensive responses, but many members would like to put a question, so I would be grateful if her responses could be made more concise.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): How will the cabinet secretary ensure equal opportunities in access for children in our more deprived communities to benefit from technology education? Can we provide additional resources, where those may be required?

Kate Forbes: The point that Willie Coffey makes is one of the key themes that comes through in the national strategy for economic transformation. It specifically talked about apprenticeships for underrepresented groups. Those might be underrepresented along the lines of gender, income inequality or ethnicity. There is a focus on expanding the pool and creating equity of access. Our priority is to roll out apprenticeships specifically among those underrepresented groups.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I warmly welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of new investment in building Scotland's tech sector. The measure of success will not be the number of start-ups but the number of companies that kick on for the longer term.

Fundamental to supporting the sector and future start-ups is ensuring that we have the necessary digital infrastructure. However, many parts of Scotland are being left behind badly through delayed superfast broadband roll-out, particularly in island and rural areas. What confidence can the cabinet secretary give members that the ambition that she has reasonably set out will be met with delivery on the ground over the next decade?

Kate Forbes: That is a fair question if we care about equity of access. We still have much to do with the 95 per cent of access to broadband that already exists. Clearly, the reaching 100—R100—programme needs to ensure that every property has access to broadband. We will progress that and ensure that it is delivered despite the fact that it is a reserved area and we are stepping into the breach to do that.

Liam McArthur is right to say that there are two sides of the same coin but, ultimately, the work is progressing. I know that many communities, not least the ones that he represents, would like us to go faster, further and deeper into their communities. We will do what we can and the R100 programme is continuing to try to meet the shortfall where it exists.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement. It is important to be clear that developing the tech sector is not just about information technology and apps but

that tech is the foundation of sectors such as the space and aerospace industries, which the export plan identifies as growth areas in Scotland. Prestwick airport is integral to thousands of jobs in the aerospace industry in my constituency. What role will Prestwick airport and spaceport play in meeting our ambitious goals?

Kate Forbes: Siobhian Brown rightly points out that every community, business and key national asset, such as Prestwick airport, is part of our ambition to be a world-leading tech nation. Many communities, particularly under the Ayrshire growth deal, are already taking significant steps. I have been in contact with a number of individuals from those communities, particularly in relation to the HALO project, to see how we might integrate our plan for tech scalers with work that is already on-going.

It would be dangerous to suggest that the work that I have just outlined is the first of its kind. It is about bringing together much of the great work that is already going on in the Scottish ecosystem and providing support, including to businesses in Siobhian Brown's constituency.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement, which I welcome. There is much to commend in it.

I will ask about support for digital solutions to social and environmental problems. The sharing economy for good can play a key role in designing new solutions for certain challenges that we face, not all of which have commercial or commodifiable elements. Therefore, such solutions will need continuing investment or support, especially if they have rapid growth trajectories predicted. What support will be available for the mission and challenge approach to designing new solutions and for the sharing economy for good more generally?

Kate Forbes: That is an important question because tech for good has grown significantly in recent years and we want to provide support to social enterprises and other companies.

It is not just about the private sector working to create wealth; it is about resolving many of the biggest issues that we face. The tech for good sector is critical in that regard, and working with social enterprises, charities and others to embrace the opportunities that technology presents is important, too.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary set out what steps are being taken to ensure that women's tech businesses play a full and leading part in transforming Scotland's tech sector? What will that success look like?

Kate Forbes: The tech ecosystem fund has supported multiple events for and by women, with more than £160,000 of funding given to Women's Enterprise Scotland, Female Founder Squad, Mint Ventures and other organisations providing learning and peer networking opportunities and helping to overcome some of the challenges faced by women in tech.

There is a clear gender gap in business participation in Scotland. Closing that gap and unlocking the full economic potential of women in enterprise will have a transformative impact on Scotland's economic performance. As part of our commitment to fund £50 million of support for women in enterprise, we will consider how we better close that gap. Ana Stewart's work as an experienced entrepreneur will be critical when it comes to the independent short-life review of the support landscape for women.

Success looks like 50 per cent of businesses being female led, with equal participation and equal sharing of the opportunities in technology among women and men.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The Logan review highlights that on average in any given year, 84 per cent of students studying higher computing science are male. What action is the Scottish Government taking to address the chronic gender imbalance in computing science at school level, which has resulted in a huge loss of talent in the workforce pipeline for tech start-ups?

Kate Forbes: There are clear recommendations to contend with that. I have referred to some of those recommendations in previous answers. Some of that is about overcoming gender stereotyping in the early years. That is where the work of young women, such as Toni Scullion, is critical. Being able to provide extracurricular activity that creates equity of access to opportunities to learn is so important. Those young women are being role models as female founders and in celebrating female computer science teachers, which is critical to all of this.

Right now, Education Scotland has a dedicated team that is working with schools and early learning centres specifically to deal with early gender stereotyping and to ensure that that engagement carries on throughout primary school and high school and ultimately into the university years.

I can refer to specific interventions in the work that Education Scotland and Toni Scullion are doing, as well as the extracurricular activity, but there is a bigger issue around the visibility of successful women in technology and successful female entrepreneurs to inspire young women to see themselves in those roles in the future.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The issue of poor cybersecurity has been raised recently as a result of several high-profile breaches. Does the Scottish Government have any plans to promote that side of the tech industry? Many young people who have no official qualifications have great ability with computers and might be the ideal recruits to that developing sector.

Kate Forbes: That is another good question, to which the short answer is yes. We are keen to avoid having to retrofit cybersecurity to digital solutions. We are keen to see more small and medium-sized enterprises embracing the opportunities of technology, and that needs to go hand in hand with cybersecurity. In the past, we have provided financial support, such as vouchers, to help SMEs to do that.

The second part, though, is around introducing the fundamentals of cyber skills, from the earliest years onwards. There is a pipeline of talent in that area, too, and examples of where that has been done successfully.

My last point is about inspiring young people through extracurricular clubs and so on—for example the cyber discovery and cyberfirst programmes—so that cyber is not seen as an afterthought. I have referred to some of the cyber apprenticeships. That all goes hand in hand with promoting best practice across the public, private and third sectors.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on transforming Scotland's tech sector. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business.

National Planning Framework 4

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-03985, in the name of Ariane Burgess, on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, on national planning framework 4. In the unexplained absence of the convener, I call the deputy convener, Willie Coffey, to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

14:58

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I thought that I was closing the debate, so this is a closing speech, as I am sure members will soon hear.

I am pleased to be opening this important debate on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. First, I thank committee members for their contributions to the process, and our clerking team and the Scottish Parliament information centre for their help and much-valued guidance along the way.

From my perspective, the debate has been immensely constructive, and I hope that it has been helpful in shaping the final version of NPF4, and a planning system and culture well suited to delivering on its ambitions.

Before reflecting on some of the contributions to this afternoon's debate, which I am about to hear—[*Laughter.*]—I want to highlight some of the key conclusions of the report that have not been covered by the convener in her opening remarks.

First, I want to say a few words about the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods, which is a key part of NPF4, as members will recognise. Members welcomed the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods and noted—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Coffey, I will pause you there. This is not a reflection on your remarks, but I do not think that this is reflecting particularly well on the chamber, so I will suspend business for a brief period until we can establish where the convener is and we can recommence the debate. Thank you for your attempt to allow us to stay on track.

15:00

Meeting suspended.

15:00

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the second time, I inform members that the next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-03985, in the name of Ariane Burgess, on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, on national planning framework 4. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function now or as soon as possible.

I call Ariane Burgess to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, but I make absolutely clear how seriously I take the discourtesy to the chamber of the convener not being present for the start of the debate.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and apologies for my delay.

The committee is pleased to have this opportunity to debate the draft of the fourth national planning framework. NPF4 sets out the Scottish Government's strategy for Scotland's long-term development and guides decisions on every application for planning permission submitted in Scotland. It sets out how places and environments will be planned and designed for years to come. NPF4 will be of particular importance in ensuring that we make planning decisions that respond effectively to the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

Planning affects many different aspects of our lives, from where we live to where we work or go to school, and from the job opportunities that are available to us to our health and wellbeing, to name just a few. Given the huge breadth of impact that planning has, I am pleased that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee have all considered the draft NPF4, too, and are all contributing to this debate. I also want to thank the groups that informed our formal and informal sessions. Their contributions were immensely helpful to us.

A lot rests on the success of NPF4, and it is essential that we get it right. Committee members were all agreed that there is a lot about the draft NPF4 that the Scottish Government has got right. The committee certainly welcomes its ambition. However, there are ways in which we think that NPF4 and the current planning system could be improved to better deliver those laudable ambitions.

Perhaps of greatest concern to the committee is the capacity of planning departments to deliver on

NPF4. We were told by stakeholders that, since 2009, planning departments in Scotland have collectively experienced cuts of 42 per cent in real terms. Having properly resourced planning departments will be essential to the success of NPF4. We were told by a number of stakeholders that there was a need for 700 new planners over the next 10 to 15 years, given the loss of planners as a result of cuts and the ageing profile of the current workforce. The committee welcomes the minister's recognition of that significant obstacle to the success of NPF4.

The committee also welcomes the minister's commitment to exploring the potential for full cost recovery as a means of better funding planning departments. However, given the current state of local authority planning departments, it is debatable whether, even with full cost recovery, local authority planning departments will have the resources to move towards the kind of public-led planning that the committee considers is necessary to realise the ambitions of NPF4. At the very least, it will be key that any funding that comes to local authorities from that full cost recovery is retained by planning departments.

NPF4 requires a very different kind of approach to planning, so an increased number of planners will not, in and of itself, effect change in how we make planning decisions in Scotland. Both current and new planners must be given the training and skills to work in that new environment.

Moreover, for planners to deliver on the ambitions in a clear and consistent way, they need to be clear on how to apply the NPF4's priorities. In some cases, planners told us that NPF4 does not give them that clarity. Several witnesses asked for clarity on how developers and decision makers should balance or prioritise the four priorities that are set out in the national spatial strategy, the six spatial principles, the development priorities that are set out in the five action areas, and individual planning policies.

We understand that it is for decision makers to make informed judgments on a case-by-case basis, but the committee believes that greater clarity on priorities is required if the ambitions in NPF4 are to be delivered in a coherent and consistent way. We would welcome the minister's reflections on what more can be done to provide decision makers with the clarity and certainty that they are seeking.

The committee considers that, in some cases, more clarity and certainty is also needed in the choice of language to support the delivery of the ambitions in NPF4.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Ariane Burgess calls for more clarity. Does she

agree that large chunks of the draft document need to be rewritten?

Ariane Burgess: I do not necessarily think that large chunks need to be rewritten, but there needs to be greater clarity to deliver the ambitions.

Several witnesses raised concerns about lack of clarity and certainty for decision makers in the wording of some policies. They highlighted that words such as "should" and "supported" could be used rather than "must" and "approved". There are ways in which the Government can find wording that provides that clarity in the changed planning landscape.

NPF4 should be an accessible and usable document, so it is of concern to us that there is uncertainty about the meaning of terms and words. It is particularly concerning that such issues were highlighted to the committee by people who are very familiar with the planning system. We would welcome the minister's reflections on the comments that were made to the committee about the language that is used in NPF4, and his thoughts on how to provide greater clarity and certainty.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, a key focus of NPF4 must be the climate and biodiversity emergencies. The committee wholeheartedly supports the prominence that is given to both emergencies in NPF4. However, it is essential that that prominence is reflected in planning decisions. That will require a significant change in approach for the planning system, and it would be good to hear more from the minister about how planners will be supported to drive that change and balance it against competing priorities.

The committee agreed that, for NPF4 to be successful, there needs to be a public-led planning system. For that to happen, we need to have informed and engaged communities across Scotland. We would welcome the minister's reflections on what more can be done to ensure that communities—particularly those from more disadvantaged areas—are supported to engage in shaping the places where they live.

We would also welcome the minister's thoughts on what more can be done to alleviate consultation fatigue. In particular, what can we do to ensure that consultation is undertaken timeously and that communities are involved in a collaborative, rather than a solely consultative, manner?

NPF4 is a long-term plan, and we need to be able to check regularly that it is delivering on its ambitions and effecting change in Scotland's communities. We need to properly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of NPF4 and how it is being delivered by local communities. We would

welcome a commitment from the minister to produce an annual evaluation of NPF4 against the outcomes that are set out in the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. We would also welcome the minister's reflections on how benchmarking in local government could be used to ensure that the ambitions of NPF4 can be delivered.

We ask the Scottish Government to take on board the issues that I have set out, those that have already been set out, and the contributions from my committee and other committees as it develops a final version of NPF4.

The committee remains concerned that it will not have sufficient opportunity to scrutinise the final version of NPF4. It is conceivable that a final version will be materially different from the draft version.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude now, Ms Burgess.

Ariane Burgess: I am winding up. Thank you.

The committee welcomes the minister's commitment to appear before it on the final version of NPF4, and it would welcome an assurance from the minister today that sufficient time will be allowed to the committee to undertake thorough scrutiny of the final version before the Parliament is invited to approve it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Ariane Burgess: I look forward to hearing the rest of the contributions in the debate.

On behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's 4th Report, 2022 (Session 6), *National Planning Framework 4 (SP Paper 149)*, on the Scottish Government document, *Scotland 2045: Our Fourth National Planning Framework*, the letters from the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee included within that report and the Official Report of the Parliament's debate on the report and letters, should form the Parliament's response to the Scottish Government on the proposed framework.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that, as a result of the delayed start of the debate, we now have no more time in hand, so speeches will have to be to time and interventions will have to be incorporated into them.

I call Gillian Martin to speak on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee for up to six minutes, please.

15:11

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important cross-committee debate on national planning framework 4.

The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee took evidence on NPF4 in late January. Our specific focus was on considering NPF4's contribution towards improving health and wellbeing. For understandable reasons, NPF4 has an overarching strategic focus on climate and nature, and ensuring that planning policy contributes positively to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss. However, witnesses who gave evidence to our committee argued that improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities are equally important strategic priorities for planning policy.

We face many health-related challenges in which planning policy can make a real difference, such as tackling obesity, where too much access to unhealthy fast foods in local communities makes matters worse and improving the local availability and affordability of healthy, high-quality food would vastly improve the situation.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I notice that the Scottish Sports Association has argued that, along with the proposed assessment of greenhouse gas emissions, there should be an assessment of the impact on sport and physical activity of any proposed planning development. Did the committee consider that?

Gillian Martin: We did not get that directly in evidence, but I would be interested in looking at what the Scottish Sports Association said, because that is part of the wellbeing aspect of NPF4. An important point has been made.

Increased availability of gambling outlets on local high streets, particularly in more deprived communities, can have a detrimental impact on mental health. In taking planning decisions, we need to take those wider impacts on health and wellbeing properly into account.

To ensure that the health implications of individual planning decisions are more carefully considered, we have requested improved guidance for planning authorities and robust processes for elected members for making decisions on health grounds. Ultimately, if we are serious about making improved health and wellbeing a core objective of NPF4, we need to look at ways of making potential impacts on health and wellbeing a material consideration in determining future planning applications in which those impacts are likely to be significant. That is not the case at the moment.

We welcome NPF4's ambition that future places should be

"Designed for lifelong health and wellbeing",

and we welcome the national spatial strategy's vision that

"Our future places, homes and neighbourhoods will be better, healthier and more vibrant places to live."

That speaks to Alex Rowley's intervention.

The spatial planning, health and wellbeing collaborative group has recently produced a set of place and wellbeing outcomes. Witnesses told our committee that those place and wellbeing outcomes describe what every place needs for everyone in them to thrive.

In recent years, we have seen many low-density housing developments springing up on the edge of Scottish towns. Those developments can be very car reliant with limited public transport provision, and those trends could risk storing up physical and mental health problems for the future. That is why it is so important that we make health and wellbeing a strategic priority for NPF4 on an equal footing with climate and nature; otherwise, we will not meet the ambition that

"Our future places, homes and neighbourhoods will be better, healthier and more vibrant places to live."

Our committee welcomes the efforts to promote the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods and the health and wellbeing benefits that they could bring. However, we need to be clearer about the objective that underlies that concept. Witnesses who gave evidence to our committee argued strongly for a flexible approach that recognises the huge variation in different communities and neighbourhoods across Scotland, not least rural communities. In essence, 20-minute neighbourhoods are about improving the quality of access to key local services, and that concept can be applied equally to neighbourhoods in central Aberdeen, Dundee or Glasgow and to those in rural parts of Aberdeenshire, the Highlands or the Borders. Dr Matt Lowther from Public Health Scotland told the committee that

"we should not get too hung up on the 20-minute aspect."—
[*Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*, 25 January 2022; c 43.]

Health and care partnerships, territorial health boards and the third sector play a pivotal role in contributing to effective strategic planning for future health and care service provision, and that role needs to be more prominently recognised in NPF4. If we are to be confident that local communities can continue to have the local health and care services that they want and need, we need to involve those parties as strategic partners from the outset in preparing any new local development plan.

As I mentioned, NPF4 can play a critical role in improving our future health and wellbeing. However, it has an equally important role to play in addressing and tackling health inequalities to ensure that planning policy is genuinely responsive to the needs of different population groups, including those who are living in poverty or suffering from other types of disadvantage, or who have borne the brunt of bad planning decisions in the past. We advocate the wider use of health inequality impact assessments and—as I said—giving our local decision makers the tools to implement them.

In less than a month's time, elections will be held across Scotland's 32 local authorities. Councillors and council officers will have a crucial role in making NPF4 work in practice. Our committee recommended that the Scottish Government work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to develop and deliver a comprehensive programme of training on NPF4 for new councillors and council officials across Scotland. NPF4 offers an important opportunity to put health and wellbeing at the heart of future planning policy. We should seize that opportunity, and do what we can to make that ambition a reality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Finlay Carson to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee.

15:17

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Many people will say that I often do not have a leg to stand on. Today, I have literally only one leg to stand on. That will give me an incentive to canter through my speech so that I can sit down, although—with your permission, Presiding Officer—I might have to revert to my seat.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on behalf of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee. To support my committee's scrutiny of draft national planning framework 4, we held, on 9 February, an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands and the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth. In addition, two of our members contributed to the wider stakeholder engagement sessions that were hosted by Scottish Rural Action and Rural Housing Scotland. We are grateful to those organisations for their insight and expertise.

In our written response to the Scottish Government, we highlighted five key areas where we consider that the framework could be strengthened to support rural communities. Those include the role that communities play in the framework, the overall vision for rural communities

that it sets out, how the action areas in the framework are defined, how NPF4 relates to other policies and strategies, and the lack of detail in it.

I begin by focusing on how we engage constructively with communities to inform how we make planning decisions. As we heard from one of the stakeholders at the engagement sessions, community engagement should be a “golden thread” running through NPF4; my committee shares that view. We concluded that the role of communities—in particular, those in more rural areas—should be expressed more explicitly in the framework. We also proposed that NPF4 establish a formal mechanism whereby the views of communities are heard in planning decisions, and that the needs of those communities should be central to decision making.

My committee also called for the framework to have greater clarity of vision in order to provide adequate support to Scotland’s most vulnerable communities. We need only look at the recently published “National Islands Plan Annual Report 2021” to see the stark downturn in population in some of our island communities. At the stakeholder event, colleagues heard about the central role that housing plays in supporting rural repopulation. Having timely, adequate and affordable housing is key to retaining people in and attracting people to our communities.

The Scottish Land Commission made a number of proposals on how land market reform and land use planning could help to deliver more affordable homes, thereby supporting repopulation. Perhaps the most important finding in its research on land for rural housing was that, with large house builders being mainly inactive in rural Scotland, if new homes are to be built, other developers, such as community bodies and small and medium-sized enterprises, must absolutely have a role in delivering new housing.

The committee also raised the concern that the action areas in the draft NPF4 are not well defined. For example, the north and west coastal innovation area is made up of communities that are very different, particularly in terms of population and size, and therefore have different needs. That highlighted the related concern that island communities are simply not well represented in the draft NPF4. NPF4 needs to devote some attention to the needs of those communities specifically, rather than as they exist in the defined action areas.

When the action areas were explored in the committee’s evidence session with the cabinet secretary and the minister, it was stated that the action areas

“are indicative and very much open for comment.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee*, 9 February 2022; c 13.]

That flexibility in how the action areas are viewed is welcome, but the committee considers that it needs to be better reflected in NPF4 itself.

The committee also considers that the relationship between NPF4 and some wider policies and strategies could be more explicit, and that NPF4 could elaborate on how conflicts among them are to be dealt with. For example, transport projects, such as the second strategic transport projects review, and the just transition have a relationship with NPF4, but the way in which they interact is not clear. Those policies have a significant impact on rural communities; therefore, the committee would welcome clarity on their interconnectedness in the final version of NPF4.

The committee appreciates the cabinet secretary’s assurances that, although it might not be explicit, neither the draft NPF4 nor related strategies are considered in isolation. However, the committee considers that the lack of direct reference to certain strategies leaves a lack of clarity about how those matters interrelate.

The committee also considered the relationship between NPF4 and the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill—in particular, the need for people in urban areas to have access to food-growing areas. Stakeholders, including Obesity Action Scotland, set out in their written evidence the importance of the food environment and the role of NPF4 in that regard. The committee considers NPF4 to be significant in ensuring that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill can meet its aims.

The lack of detail in the draft NPF4 was explored by the committee in evidence. The minister emphasised that it is intended that NPF4 is not prescriptive, in order to allow flexibility in the planning system. Although it recognises that argument, the committee once again feels that there are areas in which further detail is required. As I have already mentioned, there are issues in relation to rural housing that need to be addressed, including the lack of affordable housing in rural areas; young people being priced out of the market; a lack of housing more generally, which prevents rural communities from being able to attract new residents; the inability to succession plan on farms due to housing constraints; and substandard housing for agricultural workers more generally.

The current lack of detail in the plan does not make it clear how such issues will be addressed. Therefore, the committee considers that something more prescriptive is required for planners. That view is supported by Heads of Planning Scotland, which stated in its written submission that the draft NPF4 contains

“too many ‘coulds’ and ‘shoulds’ rather than directing change.”

That suggests that planning officers recognise the need for clearer guidance.

In summary, NPF4 has the potential to support rural communities in Scotland better, but my committee considers that it would benefit from a clearer vision for those communities. They need to be more involved in the planning process, and the policies to support rural communities need to be well defined and to work coherently.

15:23

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

I am very pleased to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

The fourth national planning framework impacts on a number of policy areas that will be vital to meeting Scotland's net zero ambitions. On behalf of the committee, I record our thanks to everyone who has supported parliamentary scrutiny of the draft framework—in particular, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for leading scrutiny of the framework across Parliament, portfolio areas and committees.

I will speak about some of the key recommendations of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, which are based on the evidence sessions that we held. At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that NPF4 demonstrates the necessary levels of ambition and takes a comprehensive approach to addressing a multitude of policy issues. So far, so good—but, as other members have highlighted, there are a number of weaknesses in the draft framework that need to be addressed.

The first is the need for greater clarity. On the face of it, NPF4 appears to recognise that the climate emergency, the nature crisis and the need for sustainable development are the first considerations in a hierarchy of spatial planning interests. Although that ambition is welcome, stakeholders have called for greater clarity on what that means in practice, on how planners are to use the framework to make decisions on the ground, and on how competing priorities are to be treated.

Stakeholders also found the language that is used in the draft to be unhelpfully vague, with some believing that that could fail to sufficiently protect planners and their decisions. The Scottish Government has received a significant volume of written evidence that addresses many of the concerns. We hope that, when we see the final framework, a number of them will be addressed.

Another key theme in the evidence that my committee heard, which has already been mentioned, is the critical role that local

government must play in delivering net zero targets. However, stakeholders were unanimous in their concern that local authorities do not have the necessary resources, budget or expertise to deliver on national targets. One particular area of concern is the depletion of resources and specialist skills in council planning departments and environmental departments. We have already heard from the convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee that the Royal Town Planning Institute has highlighted a 32 per cent reduction in planning department staff over the past 12 years, which has left planning departments critically short of necessary resource at a time when the demand on that resource is growing exponentially.

We also heard from Scottish Renewables that planning applications can take so long that, by the time a decision is reached, the relevant turbine technology is obsolete. Surely, that is a massive concern.

The United Kingdom Climate Change Committee also recognises those concerns and has called on the Scottish Government to ensure that adequate support is provided to allow for robust implementation of the framework, including the necessary guidance, training and resource to ensure that the necessary capacity and expertise are in place. There are real concerns. As we have heard already, there is consensus that the necessary planning capacity and resource are not available.

One recommendation that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee heard to address the potential planning-related bottlenecks is for the Scottish Government to classify planning of resources as a science, technology, engineering and mathematics subject, in order to prioritise the necessary skills in that area and to attract more young people into what is, and should be viewed as, a very interesting career with massive opportunities, given the policy priorities in the area.

The Climate Change Committee also commented that the framework is vision heavy and delivery light. It went on to say that

"It is unclear how the Scottish Government will ensure compliance with NPF4."

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee received consistent messages from stakeholders on that matter, and on the importance of data collection, measurement and monitoring.

We have heard already that the framework contains a number of references to mitigating, reducing and enhancing things, but has little guidance on how those measures will be managed. We highlighted to the lead committee the need for data collection, measurement and

monitoring of the policy areas, to ensure that NPF4 is capable of being measured and managed in a meaningful way.

On implementation and delivery, I understand—the minister can correct me if I am wrong—that the Scottish Government will lay before Parliament a delivery plan, with the final draft of the NPF4. I hope that the Parliament's committees will have the opportunity to consider that delivery plan as part of our scrutiny of the framework.

There is consensus across the chamber on the vital importance of meeting Scotland's climate change emissions reduction targets for 2030 and 2045. They are, quite rightly, very ambitious targets. For the targets to be met, we will need an unparalleled level of private finance to be invested across the board, including in retrofitting of buildings and decarbonisation of heat. I remind members that that will involve retrofitting and decarbonisation of more than 1 million domestic dwellings and 50,000 business premises by 2030, at an estimated cost of £36 billion.

Just this morning, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee heard evidence from private finance providers that that level of investment is available, but will be forthcoming only if Government policy is clear, joined up and supported with the capacity and resources to deliver on the ground. As things currently stand, much more work is required for the framework to meet those vital criteria.

15:29

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I am delighted that we are debating Scotland's fourth national planning framework. As has been recognised across the chamber, it is a critically important strategy for Scotland's future, and the draft NPF4 is a bold and ambitious plan. It has the potential to ensure that we build the developments and infrastructure that we will need to get to net zero and to tackle the nature crisis—and to do that while making our places better for people and for business.

I welcome the thoughtful and comprehensive report that has been produced by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, which was well informed by evidence presented by several other committees, as we have just heard, and by a broad range of stakeholders. I am incredibly grateful for the time that the Parliament and our many stakeholders put into the work that has been done to prepare and scrutinise the draft NPF4.

I am confident that NPF4 has captured people's imaginations and that we are seeing a renaissance in what is often an undervalued

profession and a vital public service. There has never been a more important time for planners to help us to address the challenges that we are facing, from climate change to Covid recovery. I have been especially keen that we, in the Parliament, collectively embrace with enthusiasm this opportunity to shape what we really need from Scotland's planning system in the challenging years ahead. I am hugely encouraged by the committee's report and by the positive way in which the Parliament and stakeholders have engaged with the debate on our future places.

It is clear to me that we all recognise the potential for planners to make a real and positive difference to our people, economy and places. I want to build on that consensus as we move towards finalising NPF4 so that, in the future, we can look back with pride and say that we worked together to make the right choices for future generations.

The committee's report is very constructive, and I expect that the debate will cover many of the issues that it raises, so I will not try to cover every point in detail just now. However, I will highlight a number of areas. First, there has been a lot of comment on the use of language, on the detail of the wording and on the priority or weight to be given to different policies in NPF4. Through our public consultation, we have received many detailed responses on that. I assure the Parliament that we will work through the draft to ensure that the final version is very clear on what is expected in planning decisions. We recently received a detailed and helpful response from the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee, and we will give it careful consideration. There is no point in signalling commitment to net zero unless we can be confident that the policies will lead to change on the ground.

The committee makes an important point about community engagement, which is a vital part of the planning system. That means hearing from local people in order that they can inform the choices that we make for the future. The draft NPF4 was prepared on the basis of wide and positive engagement, including with community organisations and interest groups. Some members may have seen the enthusiastic responses that people have shared on social media. We are doing a great deal of work to make the planning system more accessible, so that more people get involved in shaping their places. However, there is much more work to do to inspire and engage with people, whether through digital apps or, more formally, through local place plans.

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I ask the member to allow me some time to make progress. I would like to take

interventions—I always do—but I have a lot to get through and my time is limited. I will try to pick up on any points in my concluding remarks.

The committee raised some important points around key policy areas, including 20-minute neighbourhoods, renewable energy, town centres and housing. The final draft that we will present to the Parliament for approval will benefit from the many detailed responses that we have received on those and other topics.

The pandemic has brought many challenges, but it has also shown us that we can live in a different and more sustainable way that supports our health, builds communities and promotes more neighbourly places.

Planning plays a crucial role in supporting good green jobs and building a wellbeing economy. It is not about choosing development over environment; it is about place-based approaches that make good use of our assets by working with local people.

I am conscious that some people—for example, those in the renewables industry and house builders—have raised concerns about whether NPF4 will help to deliver the developments that we will need to get to net zero and support our future communities. I assure the Parliament that we are considering those views very carefully, alongside wider responses, so that we get the final version right. I want to support the delivery of development, but it must be of good quality and in the right locations.

The committee has commented on the importance of monitoring and evaluation. That is an important part of the planning system, which is reflected in the changes that we are making to local development plans so that they are informed by thorough evidence reports and in our move to a more outcomes-focused performance management system for planning. The NPF4 delivery programme will be a focal point for that monitoring. It is not a plan that will just sit on a shelf; it will be a catalyst for place-based action, closely aligned with a range of other programmes and investment plans. I assure the Parliament that that work is on-going and that the revised draft NPF4 will be accompanied by a delivery programme when I bring it to the Parliament later this year.

I want to touch on resources and, in particular, the importance of planning authorities in taking forward NPF4. I give a commitment that we will revise the document so that what is required of them is as clear as possible. Alongside that, I am committed to continuing to work with the high-level group to address performance and resources. Important work, such as our collaboration to develop a pipeline of future planners, will mean, I

hope, that we can move forward with confidence that NPF4 is deliverable over the longer term.

There are a wide range of views on NPF4, but I ask all members to bear in mind throughout the debate one important point: the vast majority of people who have engaged with the draft NPF4 welcome its aims and ambition. Their comments focus on how we can best achieve those outcomes rather than on asking for a change of direction. I want to build on that consensus so that the final version is a vision that we can all buy into, because NPF4 brings with it a serious responsibility to do the right thing for Scotland. In years to come, we must not find ourselves looking back at missed opportunities, thinking that we could and should have done more.

I look forward to hearing views from members around the chamber this afternoon. I will listen carefully and respond to any matters that are raised. I will attempt to take interventions in my closing remarks—I apologise that I have been unable to do so during this speech. I will continue to think long and hard about how we can make Scotland's fourth national planning framework the best that it can be. Then, later in the year, I will bring it back and ask the Parliament to vote to approve it.

15:38

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I probably speak for all members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee—and possibly for members of all the Parliament's committees—when I say that, instead of counting sheep to get to sleep at night, I now count national planning frameworks. I am sure that it is even worse for the minister.

I pay tribute to all the individuals, organisations and businesses that have given evidence and submitted their views to the committee and to the work of all the committees that are involved in NPF4. Working on a piece of work such as this shows the Parliament at its best.

The key concerns that are outlined in the committee's report on NPF4 very much stand, so I welcome what the minister has said today. I hope that he will take the concerns seriously and use the time that he now has to fix the framework.

I want to touch on a few important issues and bring attention to a few concerns that Conservative members have about NPF4 as it currently stands. Supporting the regeneration of our high streets is important, and supporting the Scottish retail sector to recover from the pandemic is critical. There is cross-party support for the town-centres-first approach in our planning system that previous NPFs have aimed to achieve. However, there are concerns about the proposed

moratorium on out-of-town retail developments, which is too prescriptive. We should look at changing that and consider how the planning system currently looks at the merits of individual planning applications. Garden centres and agricultural machinery retailers are often on the outskirts of towns, which is something that we need to consider.

I agree with what Gillian Martin said regarding one of the key themes that is missing from the framework, which is the need to prioritise active travel and building healthier communities. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of access for all of us to safe green spaces for exercise, sport or mental wellbeing. We need to capture that in the way that our communities develop.

During our time on the Health and Sport Committee, the minister and I heard of a number of opportunities to improve community access for sports clubs to local facilities, especially schools. A number of proposed reforms were put to committees during the previous session of Parliament. Those could make a real difference in ensuring that new housing developments have access to green space, and they would be in addition to the access legislation that we have all supported.

I welcome the points made by the Scottish Sports Association during the process. There is the potential to take a number of reforms forward. I know that the minister attended the cross-party group, and I hope that he will take those points forward.

As Dean Lockhart said, it is clear that there are and will be a number of competing priorities and pressures within NPF4. RSPB Scotland, the Woodland Trust and Friends of the Earth Scotland all say in their briefings that the current draft of NPF4 lacks the policy detail that planners—who will inevitably be taking it forward—will need to tackle the nature and climate crisis within the planning system.

The delivery of targets for renewable, clean energy is a key area of NPF4 that needs significant improvement. I have highlighted that at committee meetings. Companies in the renewables sector have made it clear that they have significant concerns about the current draft. A number of companies have said that the framework will be fatal to the renewables sector if changes are not made to the draft. It is telling that almost 20 per cent of the correspondence that the committee received during its call for views on NPF4 came from renewable energy companies, highlighting their obvious and real concerns about the framework as it currently stands.

The sector has outlined a number of options for redrafting, which I believe have been put to ministers. I hope that ministers will look at those. It is concerning that, as it stands, we could see a less positive planning framework for renewable developments than the one we saw in the 2014 Scottish planning policy.

Finlay Carson said that there has been a lot of focus, during all committee evidence sessions, on the wording of the framework. That is really important, and it will be a challenge for the civil servants who are working on the framework, as was clear from the evidence that we took in committee, but it is important that we see those changes. Key sectors have provided helpful suggestions about how outcomes can be achieved, especially in policies 3, 19, 28 and 32, and about whether the descriptive word that is used has to change from the term that was used in the three previous frameworks. It will be difficult, but I hope that the minister and his officials are looking seriously at that. If we are serious about our net zero targets and about the climate emergency, the energy transition and the huge opportunity that it provides for Scotland to deliver supply chain jobs are important. Changes in the wording of those policies could be part of that change.

Perhaps the most important issue is that of delivering the new and affordable homes that we all want to see. Homes for Scotland highlighted a number of key concerns in its submission to the consultation. As the framework currently stands, we could see a reduced number of homes being delivered, exacerbating the housing crisis. I want a housing crisis element to be included in the framework. Many communities are in housing crisis and that should have been looked at. It is important that the framework delivers the homes that we all want to see. There is a lack of detail in the delivery strategy about the financial interventions that will help to deliver the homes that Scotland wants to see. As the convener said in her opening remarks, the failure to address on-going resourcing challenges within local authorities often holds back key planning decisions in many sectors. I hope that we can address that.

I welcome the constructive approach across Parliament that the minister has taken to date. I hope that today is genuinely the start of a process whereby ministers will listen and reach out across the chamber and that we will work to make sure that the final version of NPF4 delivers the planning system that Scotland needs to deliver the homes, the energy and the communities that we all want to see.

15:45

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): As the convener and others have done, I thank the clerks for their assistance with the evidence sessions and with producing the report that we are debating this afternoon. I am also thankful to everyone who gave evidence. Scrutinising the draft framework would have been much harder without the critical input of the practitioners and professionals we heard from. Overwhelmingly, they said that the framework is ambitious but that it lacks the necessary detail and clarity to aid their scrutiny and enable them to understand their role in delivering on the ambitions to reach net zero, make Scotland a healthier country and tackle our housing crisis over the next 10 years. The lack of a delivery and resource plan and a monitoring framework has further hindered our ability to appreciate and scrutinise the plan.

At the most basic level, concerns have been expressed about the process and the language that is used. Heads of Planning Scotland called for a longer consultation process to

“prevent appeals and court cases”.—[*Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*, 8 February 2022; c 6.]

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee reported:

“some respondents felt rushed to respond.”

There remains, for example, an unresolved debate about the use of the words “should” and “must”. We heard from the Law Society of Scotland and SURF—Scotland’s Regeneration Forum that the use of the word “should” may infer a level of discretion, but Government officials have disagreed with that interpretation.

That point might seem technical, but it is instructive because it allows us to ask who the framework is for. Given that planning professionals told us that they were struggling to understand the meaning of and intentions behind some of the language in the framework, how can we expect the public to access and understand it? For the framework to be effective, local communities—particularly those that are disadvantaged—must be empowered to contribute to decisions about developments in their area, and to do that, they need to understand the framework, not be worn down by constant consultation and jargon.

We believe that, in all likelihood, the draft framework will not deliver a public-led planning system, nor will the ambitions be achieved given the current state of planning departments. They have been stripped back to their minimum and, in the face of £911 million of real-terms cuts to local government since 2013, far from there being a renaissance in Scotland’s planning system, our committee notes the “almost universal concern”

about resources and talent, which will ultimately undermine delivery of the ambitions in the framework.

When we dig into the policies, we see that, even where there is detail, the framework raises more questions. The emphasis on addressing the climate emergency is incredibly welcome, but the questions about how to deal with it and how to balance competing priorities are ones that we heard repeatedly. The minister has agreed to consider how there could be a more explicit presumption in favour of renewables, but policy 19, which is the most important policy for renewables and decarbonisation, is viewed as being deficient. Solar Energy Scotland says that it is “internally contradictory”, and Scottish Renewables says simply that

“the proposed draft NPF4 does not support an expansion of renewable energy.”

It has offered a full redraft of the policy. The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and Scottish Environment LINK echoed the need for a hierarchy of priorities so that communities and planners know what the priorities are.

What sets off alarm bells for me, however, is the document’s failure to help to tackle our housing crisis. As the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations points out, “Housing to 2040” is barely aligned, and we heard that the minimum housing numbers risk becoming de facto targets for low house building. Homes for Scotland says that the minimum housing numbers “serve no beneficial purpose” and, worse still, that we could be “planning for decline”. Two councils questioned the numbers that were given—and the process altogether—while Taylor Wimpey advised me that the policies in the framework could make it difficult to progress proposals to delivery on the ground.

The minister’s desire to focus on great places rather than numbers will not do anything to support the most disadvantaged at the sharp end of the housing crisis, and I urge him instead to work across Government to set an all-tenure housing target in the revised document that he brings to the Parliament for approval.

The framework is undoubtedly a draft, and I fear that it is much more of a draft than the minister and his officials realise. It needs more than just a simple brushing-up ahead of parliamentary approval.

As the consultation closed, the housing and place delivery forum, which includes academics, Homes for Scotland, the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers, the SFHA and the Chartered Institute for Housing, wrote to him, asking that the process be paused so that clear shortcomings could be addressed and the spatial framework radically rethought to align with existing

governance and delivery structures. That is a serious intervention. It sums up where we are. I ask the minister to respond that urgent call, in responding to the committee's report in the debate, and to substantively revise the framework so that planners can match the clear ambitions in NPF4 with clarity, practical action and delivery.

15:51

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The national planning framework is an important part of Scotland's future. Like others, I have received many briefings and representations from stakeholders across Scotland in preparation for the debate.

To quote RSPB Scotland,

"the current draft of NPF4 lacks the policy detail that planners, developers, and communities need to tackle the nature and climate crisis through Scotland's planning system."

The RSPB also said that it shares

"the committee's view that parliament needs more time for scrutiny and believes that members must ask for clear mechanisms within NPF4 for delivering biodiversity enhancement."

I echo that sentiment for more scrutiny and greater time to flesh out the detail.

I will start by talking about town planning and the impact that it can have on lives. I will say a little about rural and island areas, too.

Last month, my Liberal Democrat colleague in Westminster, Christine Jardine MP, brought forward a private member's bill—the Planning (Women's Safety) Bill. Women need a voice in planning processes to bring the perspectives that are necessary to giving women the foundations for more agency and for feeling less vulnerable in their daily lives. However, town planning has most often been done from men's perspective.

Designing spaces without gender bias is crucial if we are to have well-lit and open areas, avoiding narrow, poorly lit, twisting alleyways, which are not routes that conjure up safety and security or encourage passage. It is about enabling women to plan and to go about their lives with safety and security. Women should be confident in knowing that their concerns have been considered in new developments, so that they can feel safer in living their lives. Given what has been said about the general lack of planners, there is a job of work to be done in encouraging more people, especially women, into planning.

The Scottish Sports Association also highlighted the ability of planning decisions to enhance lives in its response to the consultation. Planning, done in the right way, can improve mental health and increase active travel, thereby making a happier

population. Different planning ideas could, for example, encourage more learners to use active travel methods to get to school, allowing for further access to nature, physical activity and extracurricular activities, where rigid bus timetables can limit travel home.

Liberal Democrats believe that decisions should be made as close as possible to the people they will affect. That is why we believe in empowering local communities. It is one of the reasons why my colleagues voted against the Planning (Scotland) Bill in the previous session, as it did not address adequately enough the voices of local communities throughout the new planning process.

Scotland has a housing crisis. My constituency is not immune from that situation. To address that, we must look at building more homes, but we must look at building the right homes in the right places.

NPF4 is important for our rural and island communities. Scottish Liberal Democrat campaigning led to a rural housing fund and an islands housing fund being established to increase the supply of affordable housing in such communities through renovation and new builds. We would like those funds to be expanded and the barriers to communities accessing them to be reduced. We would also like there to be a requirement for public bodies to consult rural and island communities and for Scottish legislation to be rural proofed as well as island proofed.

In February, at a meeting of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, I quizzed the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands on fuel poverty in rural and island communities—the areas that are often most greatly impacted—and asked whether NPF4 should give more prominence to the issue. This is our opportunity to make the right choices for the future. More scrutiny and greater time to flesh out the detail would be good next steps. Getting it right now will be worth it for all of us—for the communities that we represent—in the long run.

15:56

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): A process such as parliamentary consideration of the draft NPF4 asks one fundamental thing of the people who are charged with conducting that consideration: that we consider the Government's proposals and any contrary viewpoints on their merits, setting aside our own instinctive positions and recognising that we are asked to reach conclusions based on opinions or interpretations that can sometimes be clouded by predictable, underlying and perhaps understandable biases.

In essence, committees have to sift through claim and counterclaim, each with its own merits,

to point to an appropriate and balanced way forward. Therefore, I pay tribute to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, on which I served for a small part of its consideration of NPF4, for highlighting some of the key issues with the draft and making some reasonable asks of the Government. Based on the contributions from other relevant conveners, I extend that praise to the other committees.

In the brief time that is available to me, I will focus on a few of the issues.

The fact that an ask for greater Government direction is at the heart of some of the legitimate criticism of the framework causes me, as a long-serving member of the Parliament, a wry smile. All too often, central Government is criticised for being too prescriptive and too directive in its approach. We are told that greater flexibility should be afforded to local government when it comes to the implementation of policies and plans. However, as the committee's report highlights, there is a plea from the people whose job it will be to bring aspects of NPF4 to life at a local level for greater clarity on prioritisation, clarity on the true meanings of concepts and the use of clearer and more decisive language.

To be fair, the ask on prioritisation is perhaps legitimate. The appeal from Christina Gaiger of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland for a hierarchy of matters that should be taken into consideration strikes me as having a degree of justification. At the very least, planners need some broad guidance.

Then there is the issue of what terms such as "community wealth building" and—especially—"20-minute neighbourhoods" mean in rural settings. The committee also heard concerns about the definition of "out-of-town locations". Clarity of a sort is needed on those terms not only for planners and developers but, to be frank, for the wider public, some of whom—let us face it—will wonder what on earth "community wealth building" means.

We have also heard about the choice and meaning of the language used in the draft, and the use of the word "should" rather than "must". The Law Society of Scotland's view is that using "should" in relation to policies 5 to 35 of the NPF offers insufficient clarity on whether those policies must be complied with.

As a number of members have noted, there is also a capacity issue with the ability of planning departments to deliver on NPF4. It was sobering to learn that the resources that are at the disposal of planning departments have suffered a 42 per cent real-terms cut since 2009, which means that the departments are struggling to meet current duties and obligations, let alone deal with what

NPF4 will generate. In addition to the resourcing issue, we heard about the need for an estimated 700 new planners over the next 10 to 15 years and we were told that a change in culture was needed.

COSLA advocates for full cost recovery to properly fund planning departments, including the reskilling of existing staff. It probably has a case, but personally, I would want a firm assurance that any sums generated by full cost recovery were effectively ring fenced for planning departments and not left at risk of being hived off. Otherwise, delivery of NPF4 would undoubtedly be at risk.

Finally, I support the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's ask that it is afforded a proper opportunity to consider the finalised version of NPF4.

16:00

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to take part in this debate. In some ways, I feel responsible for the debate taking place because, in the previous session, I was on the committee—the Local Government and Communities Committee—that dealt with the bill that became the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, and it was my amendment that secured the ability for Parliament to vote on the NPF.

However, we do not have the ability to amend the draft, and from what we have heard so far, it would be good if we were able to do that. We seem to have a listening minister in post. Perhaps as the process moves on, he might want to consider giving committees some sort of ability to change and improve things because, from what we have heard, improvement is definitely needed.

We have heard the word "clarity" used time and time again. The previous speaker, Graeme Dey, spoke about the woolly phrases that crop up throughout the document. We are both former journalists and that grates; when phrases such as "community engagement" and "20-minute neighbourhoods" are used, we have to ask what on earth they mean.

At the moment, NPF4 is a typical planning document, where any argument can be made to fit any circumstance. It may take time, but the framework needs to be rewritten. Ariane Burgess—although she might not realise it—agrees with me on that point. The document needs to have fewer get-out clauses.

Let me give an example of what I mean. As a regional member for the area, I represent the community of Calderbank in North Lanarkshire, which has had the threat of a large planning development hanging over it for some years. It includes a large area of ancient woodland that is

rich in heritage. I am looking at NPF4 to see whether it would protect that area of ancient woodland. Currently, the answer is no.

I am a firm supporter and defender of green spaces, particularly woods, so let us see what NPF4 says about woodlands. It says:

“Existing woodlands should be protected wherever possible.”

The phrase “wherever possible” is a get-out clause.

Policy 34, on trees, woodland and forestry, says that

“Local development plans should identify and protect existing woodland and potential for its enhancement or expansion”

and that

“Development proposals should not be supported where they would result in: any loss of ancient woodlands, ancient and veteran trees, or adverse impact on their ecological condition.”

What is an ancient woodland? How do we tackle the old trick of saying that trees are past their best and then chopping them down? There is never any enforcement action, even if the tree is protected.

Policy 34 also says that development proposals should not be supported where they would result in

“fragmenting or severing woodland habitats, unless mitigation measures are identified and implemented”—

that is another get-out clause. There is a whole series of such clauses and there is woolly language throughout the document, which needs to be tightened up. I urge the minister to get people around the table—I think that he wants to do that—so that we get to the point where everyone can agree on a document that makes sense and delivers.

16:04

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this afternoon’s debate. I thank the clerks and other members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for their work, and I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests—I am a serving councillor on East Lothian Council, at least for the next two weeks.

I have been a councillor in East Lothian for the past 15 years. Planning is fundamental to the economic wellbeing and biodiversity of an area, and it is fundamental to how we tackle the climate challenge that we all face.

I want to focus on two key areas: housing and renewable energy. If we are to meet the target of

delivering 110,000 affordable houses by 2032, we need clarity around some key strategies. In achieving those targets, we need to maximise the deliverability—that is a key word—of homes of all tenures, which is aligned with the stated aims and ambitions of the Scottish Government.

The committee’s report mentions that we need to ensure that there is compatibility and follow-through on the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement—MATHLR—figures and the housing need and demand assessment, or HNDA. The housing to 2040 strategy is also key.

In its response to NPF4, Homes for Scotland stated that the 10-year MATHLR figures, as presented by each local authority and the Scottish Government, need to be robustly challenged. Local authorities should be able to justify their minimum housing number to ensure that the minimum standard is set at the appropriate level. Some local authorities have proposed a MATHLR figure that falls below their previous 10-year completions level. That is a critical consideration, given the role that NPF4 will play as a core part of Scotland’s suite of next-generation local development plans.

The current HNDA process also needs to be refreshed as soon as possible to identify the full range of housing need across the country. At the moment, many households are excluded. We need to ensure that student housing and housing that meets care requirements is reflected accurately.

NPF4 sets a higher bar than existed previously regarding the allocation of sites for residential development. The draft NPF4 outlines that a site should now be “deliverable”. We need to ensure that key stakeholders work closely together in that regard.

As we have heard from other members, discussions around resource to achieve that are also key. Planning fees increased on 1 April 2022 and, in line with that, we need to ensure that there is a clear strategy for the improvement of planning performance.

I want to mention two other key areas in relation to developing sites. First, as has been mentioned, we need to ensure that active transport considerations are front and centre of any proposal, which needs co-production and design with local communities. Walking, cycling, horse riding and bus routes need to be in place. Another consideration is to ensure that there is sufficient green space, as well as infrastructure to support the development of sports facilities. Many new developments result in lots of children moving into an area and we need to ensure that sports provision is able to grow.

The second key area is renewables. Scotland has rightly recognised the emergency that our climate faces, and we have an ambitious net zero target. To realise a Scotland powered by renewable energy, we must achieve a net zero-driven planning system. NPF4 planning reforms provide a key opportunity to deliver that ambition. The sector already supports 22,660 jobs and an economic output of £5.2 billion a year. The following priorities should be adopted. Climate change and nature recovery should become the golden thread running through the entire NPF4. We need to ensure that there is clear guidance on how the planning balance should change to ensure that addressing climate change and supporting nature recovery are the primary guiding principles in all plans and decisions.

We need to ensure that NPF4 delivers the levels of renewable energy deployment that are needed to achieve net zero. NPF4 should be an enabling tool for facilitating the ambitions set by the Scottish Government. We should also ensure that it is designed to facilitate renewable energy deployment.

What we decide on in NPF4 is one of the most important policy decisions that we will take in this parliamentary session, and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee will continue its work to maximise the opportunities that NPF4 brings.

16:08

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It has been interesting to listen to colleagues' contributions, and I share many of the concerns that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has raised about the inadequacies of the current national planning framework.

Planning is a great tradition in Scotland, born of the Scottish enlightenment. Urban planning was devised in Scotland, and the city of Glasgow was largely designed by the city architect John Carrick and laid out from the 1870s under the Glasgow City Improvement Trust, which set the standards for how tenement buildings might look, the datum line of streets, how wide streets would be and the sanitary conditions of the city's public buildings. That has largely given rise to the outstanding historical character of the city of Glasgow, despite many ill-advised post-war planning decisions that the city has suffered.

Unfortunately, over the past 20 to 30 years, the previously accepted standardised design of communities—high density, sustainable and scalable—in cities such as Glasgow has been eroded and replaced by a patchwork, laissez-faire approach, where developers are largely given free rein to build whatever they see fit. A key omission

from the national planning framework is a serious attempt to meet the need for rigorous and clearly prescribed urban design codes. That really needs to be more rigorously attempted in the national planning framework.

Although attempts have been made to reinstate a design code, with work being undertaken by heritage architects such as Collective Architecture and Dress for the Weather, as yet, they have failed to be adopted in Glasgow—much to the detriment of the city—or more widely in Scotland.

We also have a huge opportunity to address the climate emergency. For example, if there were to be a standardised design code for Glasgow, it would allow for the creation of standard designs of products such as air-source heat pumps and standardised ways of installing them in the city's buildings. Instead, constituents have contacted me to express frustration about the fact that their planning applications to install such devices have been rejected by Glasgow City Council's planning department rather than being encouraged in a constructive way. I think that the approach that is being demonstrated is short-sighted and counterproductive in the context of a twin climate and cost of living crisis, and I hope that that can be rectified swiftly through the NPF4 process.

We also need to consider our cities' beauty and how that impacts on people's wellbeing and sense of self-esteem. Harry Burns has often talked about the way in which the urban environment of a community impacts on people's psychological sense of wellbeing, and that is often given scant regard in the planning process. We can consider things such as how beautiful shopfronts look. We have seen examples of outstanding best practice in Scotland, where traditional shopfront reinstatement programmes have dramatically improved the condition of high streets, yet they are seen as an isolated intervention rather than being the norm that is formalised in planning legislation. That is something that we need to learn from and rigorously adopt as part of a proper urban design code. I hope that NPF4 will examine where best practice is working well and scale it up as the baseline for policy in Scotland, rather than letting it simply be a flash in the pan.

Good work is being done in places such as Saracen Street in Possilpark in the north of Glasgow, where the Possilpark business improvement district project is working with local businesses to encourage such interventions, which are proving to be amazingly and dramatically successful. Those are the things that need to be developed as part of NPF4, rather than vague promises and vague visions.

We also need to look at sustainability. In Glasgow, for example, there are more than 76,000 pre-1919 tenements. A maintenance crunch is

coming, as more than 60 per cent of those buildings are in need of urgent repairs, with a collective cost that is estimated to be in excess of £3 billion. We are not addressing that with nearly the sense of urgency that is required, and NPF4 does not do that, either. We need only look at recent crises such as that involving the Trinity tower in Park Circus, where the owners face a £3 million repair bill, which will potentially bankrupt them.

Those are just two examples of where we need to see change and more rigorous intervention. NPF4 is the best opportunity that we have had in decades to reinvigorate our great cities and towns, stitch them back together and make them more attractive and sustainable places in which to live. I hope that we are all able to work together to achieve that aim.

16:12

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I responded to the NPF4 consultation, and I appreciate colleagues' comments in the debate so far. I want to focus on two specific issues that the draft framework will have an impact on: vacant, derelict and abandoned sites, and permitted development rights.

Scotland has almost 11,000 hectares of vacant and derelict sites, which is equivalent to 20,556 football pitches, and, on average, people live within 500m of a derelict site. According to the Scottish Land Commission, if a person lives in an area that scores low on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, they are more likely to live within 250m of a derelict site. Evidence that we heard in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee affirmed that those sites negatively affect a community's mental health and wellbeing and that people in those communities feel less safe and are likely to use the words "blight" and "eyesore" to describe those places. People take less pride in their home place when they live beside derelict, decaying or dilapidated eyesores, as the Scottish Land Commission has affirmed in its work.

I have sought to engage with communities and support them to see timely action taken to address those sites across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. Those sites include the former Interfloor factory in Dumfries, the George Hotel in Stranraer, the Central Hotel in Annan and the N Peal building in Hawick, which I visited yesterday. However, as the draft framework and the Scottish Land Commission have pointed out, addressing the issues with those buildings currently presents many challenges to communities and local authorities.

I welcome that the part of the draft framework that discusses the spatial principles for Scotland for 2045 states that they will seek to limit urban expansion into greenfield sites and instead will incentivise the reuse of brownfield sites for redevelopment. However, as noted by COSLA, additional financial constraints exist around utilising abandoned sites in that way, and it is often extremely costly for developers and local authorities to address them. For example, the former Maxwelltown high school in Dumfries cost around £250,000 to demolish before the site could be redeveloped.

I would like assurance from the minister that the Government will work with local authorities and developers to ensure that they are accessing vacant and derelict land funds, and that public funding will continue to be made available to redevelop the brownfield sites and eyesore sites that blight our communities.

I have been involved in the community in Eskdalemuir, the Samye Ling Buddhist monastery and the Upper Teviotdale and Borthwick Water community council. They are all concerned about the dynamic and target shooting activity in the area, where high-velocity weapons of up to 50 calibre are being fired. Those powerful weapons, which require skill and accuracy, can shoot ammunition up to two miles and are being used close by the Romans and reivers walkways, the Craikhope Outdoor Centre on the Borders side of the Borders way and the southern upland way. I share the community's concerns over safety and the reported high decibel level of the shooting.

The shooting activity operates using a legal loophole. In class 15 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (Scotland) Order 1992, permitted development rights allow for a temporary use of land for a different purpose from its lawful use for up to 28 days in a calendar year. The only exemptions are for caravan sites or open air markets. I agree with the community that that is wrong and that shooting activity, particularly with such high-powered weapons and ammunition, should be subject to robust major planning that allows local voices to be heard. I would like to see that in the final NPF4.

I thank the minister for his engagement so far on the matter, but I ask him for a commitment that NPF4 will ensure that any proposal for shooting ranges and activities such as shooting be subject to a robust major planning application. Finally, I reiterate my two asks: to focus on tackling vacant, derelict and abandoned sites and to consider closing the shooting activity loophole in permitted development rights.

16:17

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Green): I welcome the fourth national planning framework. The recognition of the climate emergency for the first time as an overarching objective is particularly welcome, because what we plan for today must deliver a just transition tomorrow rather than locking us in to a polluting economy for decades to come.

However, as with other previous planning frameworks, NPF4 does not sit in isolation. What is agreed in the final version of the strategic transport projects review and the energy strategy will be key, and at the local level, councils will have work to do to translate some of the fresh thinking in the NPF into their local development plans.

Twenty-minute neighbourhoods are a case in point, because they should set a new standard for localisation where travel is minimised, people can meet more of their everyday needs locally, and our high streets are regenerated. There should be a benchmark for new developments, but we are already seeing major housing growth areas, such as in Scone, being built with minimal up-front investment in essential services, which builds in car dependency from day 1. We are still seeing multimillion-pound proposals for car-dependent out-of-town retail centres being approved by many local councils, such as the controversial Asda development in Stirling. That has to change. Twenty-minute neighbourhoods must mark the start of relocalisation that is driven by the needs of communities rather than the whim of developers.

Parliament has also heard important evidence on nature restoration, and Graham Simpson highlighted some of the woolly words that have been used on woodlands. The draft NPF acknowledges the nature emergency, which is right, but it must follow through on making sure that developments deliver net positive benefits for nature, and that nature networks are given the status in planning that they need as a major part of our national infrastructure. Environmental non-governmental organisations have provided important feedback. I know that the minister is listening, and I hope that he will now act on that feedback.

I am very proud that the Parliament, even with its limited devolved powers, has been able to put in place a ban on new nuclear power stations and fracking through the planning framework. Scotland is still living with a damaging and costly legacy from coal and nuclear power for which communities and energy consumers will pay for generations to come. The Tories and Labour need to come clean on where they would put new nuclear power stations and waste dumps in

Scotland. As I read national planning framework 4, there is no place for either.

I ask the Tories: which communities, from Larbert to Canonbie, would see fracking licences resurrected and planning applications supported by Tory councillors? We cannot afford any more costly distractions such as fracking and nuclear, which would take years to implement, but would offer nothing to people who have to choose today between heating and eating.

Let us face it: Scotland has won the jackpot of clean, renewable resources. With technology costs continuing to plummet, now is the time to double down on that natural advantage and deliver new wind and solar farms. That technology has developed rapidly, and it is time that the planning system caught up. There will always be constraints on where wind farms can go, but we can maximise extensions and repower existing wind farms while developing new sites that have lingered in the planning system for years.

The draft NPF does not yet deliver the changes that are needed if we are to double the capacity of onshore wind and increase our ambition on solar. However, I look forward to the minister reflecting on the recommendations that have been made across the Parliament so that Scotland can power ahead in tackling the climate and nature emergencies while delivering a just transition that is both prosperous and fair.

16:21

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):

I thank the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for bringing the issue to the chamber for debate. I am not a member of that committee, but I was keen to participate in the debate to raise issues of importance to my constituents.

There are key tenets that should be the foundation of the framework. Provisions should be made for a nature-positive Scotland and a healthy, active Scotland. I fully welcome NPF4, as we need a long-term plan, and we agree that any development plans must have emission assessments, physical activity assessments and green space provisions enshrined in their planning.

Investing in a healthy and active Scotland will have innumerable benefits, and it should be encouraged by all. Playing fields, community centres and investment in schools and other facilities for grass-roots-level sports and local communities will benefit communities and all ages. The pandemic and lockdowns surely demonstrated the need for everyone to have access to good quality local green and blue spaces, and they reinforced the importance of the

vital work that is being done in areas such as Coatbridge and in making the Monkland canal as accessible as possible. I put on the record my thanks to the friends of Monkland canal group, Scottish Canals and Sustrans for their recent work and investment, and I hope to bring to the chamber a members' business debate on that issue soon.

I will spend the remainder of my time speaking about some local issues with the planning system that have a national bearing and that have been brought to my attention in my time as an MSP. As a brief bit of context, my Coatbridge and Chryston constituency is home to the densely urban town of Coatbridge, which is flanked by similar post-industrial towns. However, the north of my constituency—approximately one third of it—comprises several small towns and villages, which include Stepps, Muirhead, Chryston, Moodiesburn, Glenboig and Gartcosh. Together, they are referred to as “the northern corridor”. The requirement to have a nature-positive and healthy, active Scotland applies to those who currently live in communities such as those in the northern corridor. That area has seen a huge increase in development and planning in recent years, and many of my constituents feel that it has come at the cost of a nature-positive and healthy, active locality.

Those communities are ably brought together through the northern corridor community forum. I put on the record my thanks to all those who have worked hard to ensure that that forum is a success. I cannot possibly name everyone but, in particular, I thank the current office bearers, Alice Morton, Isobel Kelly and Carole Henderson.

Throughout the northern corridor, every one of those unique post-industrial small communities has witnessed extensive development in recent years, with a seemingly endless list of planning applications. It is understandable that developers want to build in those areas, and my communities are not against house building, but the sheer scale of those developments has brought with it a huge loss of assets in terms of green space, woodland and wider natural environment, as well as transport difficulties. Rapidly increasing populations have left schools alarmingly over capacity and health services are struggling to cope with demand. Other members have made those points. Those are real issues and, generally, the northern corridor community forum does not feel that their voices are being heard and feels that the North Lanarkshire Council local development plan does not take into account the specific needs of those village areas.

In 2019, I spoke in support of petition PE1748, lodged by the aforementioned Isobel Kelly, on planning policy on small communities in Scotland.

The crux of the petition was that any future planning policy should undertake a full audit of community assets and infrastructure before development takes place, and that it should listen to what local communities say about any high-value assets that might be jeopardised. That is a reasonable request, and NPF4 must acknowledge that it is necessary to include in planning policy the desires and concerns of existing communities. We cannot get away from the fact that some people in local communities such as those in the northern corridor feel ignored in the development of such policy.

I have had a lot of correspondence with the minister on that issue, and I thank him for all his feedback and responses. However, I would be grateful if, in summing up, he can address two points. First, I am aware that he is in the process of approving the adoption of the North Lanarkshire LDP. How will he ensure that the concerns of my constituents are taken into account in that process? How does he believe it would be best, following the process, for the Government to engage directly with the forum face to face? Secondly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Mr MacGregor—you are over your time.

Fulton MacGregor: Can the minister advise on how best to achieve independent scrutiny of, or an independent inquiry into, the issues facing the northern corridor in North Lanarkshire?

I will close there, Presiding Officer—thank you.

16:26

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): National planning framework 4 has formed a large part of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's work over the past few months, and I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. As many members have outlined, NPF4 sets out where development and infrastructure are required throughout the whole of Scotland. There are merits in undertaking that piece of work, and I believe that the intentions are genuine. However, as with every piece of legislation, NPF4 does not come without its challenges. That was certainly my experience as a committee member who participated in formal evidence sessions on the framework, alongside stakeholder events outwith the committee structure. At times, I was rather frustrated with the process.

Although I support some of the ambitions that are set out in NPF4, I do not believe that the Scottish Government has understood the scale of the work that is involved in implementing the document. Key stakeholders certainly expressed that view during the committee's evidence

sessions—many stated, for example, that the framework lacks clarity. Dr Caroline Brown, professor of infrastructure at Heriot-Watt University, raised concerns about clarity in the NPF4 document. She explained that

“elements of NPF4 ... need to be fleshed out ... to provide clarity ... particularly in a system that is struggling for resources.”—[*Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, 25 January 2022; c 30.*]

In my short contribution, I will raise the point about lack of resource, which many members have mentioned. I declare an interest as I am, until 5 May, a serving councillor on North Lanarkshire Council. Councils will need to be better funded if NPF4 is to be a success. As we know, council funding has been cut over the past decade, which has had a considerable impact on planning decisions, among other service areas, in local authorities. As we know, local authorities are best placed to implement planning decisions in their communities. However, they have been starved of the ambition to make changes due to a lack of fair funding.

NPF4 could allow for greater flexibility in local government planning policy, which I believe would lead to better decisions that would improve our diverse and unique communities throughout Scotland. Last week, I visited Baron’s Haugh in Motherwell in my region with the local RSPB Scotland team. It is fantastic for an urbanised area to have such a beautiful nature reserve on its doorstep. Some of the many issues that we discussed during our walk around the reserve included increasing the resilience of biodiversity, helping to tackle climate change, directing investment towards nature and creating better spaces in which people and nature can cohabit. That left me wondering why plans relating to the creation of a nature network were not included in NPF4 and whether that area should be explored further in the final draft.

Four minutes is not a long time in which to reflect on weeks of evidence and the content of the NPF4 document, but I will mention one other area before I draw my remarks to a close. That is the issue of 20-minute neighbourhoods, which was one of the many issues on which I focused when asking questions in committee. More work is needed to define the concept of a 20-minute neighbourhood and what that would mean for our rural areas in particular. Those areas lack transport infrastructure, which would need to be significantly improved to enable the concept of a 20-minute neighbourhood even to be considered. I feel that the idea is intended more for urban areas, but we cannot cut off our rural areas, which are in desperate need of investment. I believe that that idea needs to be expanded, and I would be grateful if the minister could reflect on and outline how rural parts of Scotland could implement 20-

minute neighbourhoods, particularly in relation to building local circular economies.

NPF4 has its merits, but we need more clarity over its deliverability. My worry is that NPF4 will overpromise and underdeliver for communities that need development and infrastructure. My other concern is that, due to the lack of clarity in the current document, it will be open to interpretation and there will be no way to record and monitor progress. Will we be able to find out whether any lessons have been learned from previous national frameworks, and how will success be monitored as we move forward?

I would like to see a national planning framework that gives our local authorities more autonomy to make the best possible decisions for their area.

16:30

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I commend the committee and its members for their hard work in producing the report. It provides a good overview of the benefits and problems of the draft planning framework.

The framework will set the stage for Scotland’s development in the coming years as a nation that is committed to sustainability, biodiversity and tackling the climate crisis, and the committee clearly recognises the importance of getting it right. That is partly why I and my colleagues on the Scottish Labour benches find the lack of detail in the framework particularly concerning.

If NPF4 is to be successful, planning authorities across Scotland must have clarity, both in terms of their priorities and the definitions of the areas that they are to prioritise. Such clarity is particularly important because of the emphasis that the Scottish Government is putting on the climate emergency. Of course, we welcome that emphasis, but the authorities that will be operating under the framework must have confidence that they are following it as it was intended to be followed. Any lack of clarity defeats the point of having a national planning framework in the first place and invites piecemeal implementation across local authorities.

We must also ensure that people have confidence in the planning system and the role of local development plans. In the Lothian region, I have heard that the Scottish Government has not provided robust interim guidance on the issue of effective land supply. Reporters have also been given requirements that have led to their approving speculative sites that do not fit with local development plans. In such circumstances, how are local populations and local authorities to be brought along with the planning and development process? Any national framework must be a

collaborative process that brings along local populations and local authorities and does not alienate them.

If we are to ensure a truly national planning framework, we must have a commitment from the Scottish Government to properly funded planning departments. After years of real-terms cuts to local authorities, we have a situation in which planning departments have been cut back to their bare minimum. How do we expect the framework to work at a national level, when its implementation will depend on how, or whether, local authorities across Scotland have been able to shield their planning departments from nearly a decade of cuts?

It is crucial that we get answers to those questions right now, so that we do not have to chase solutions to them years down the line and risk wasting yet more time and resources in pursuing goals that are not clearly set out. Therefore, I join my colleagues in calling for a pause to the process, so that those points can be addressed.

16:34

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Members have, I believe, already seen—and, indeed, heard in the debate—evidence that NPF4 marks a turning point in Scotland’s planning system, not least because that system now allows a key role for this Parliament.

The draft NPF4, which was laid before the Parliament last November, has been subject to extensive scrutiny and interest, both here and in wider society, as a number of speakers have reflected.

The draft represents a change of direction in how we think of the places where we live in Scotland. It is grounded, I hope, in an attempt to ensure that our planning system can live up to the aspirations of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—and that we can recover economically from Covid, as well as simply make our communities more resilient, pleasant places to work in that have, above all perhaps, a distinctive sense of place, which is important to say.

However, I think that we all recognise that, for those aspirations to be realised, strong leadership will be needed, both in this place and locally. Compared to its predecessors, NPF4 is likely to be shaped to a greater extent by this Parliament, following the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. The importance of meeting the needs of communities is recognised in the longer 120-day period of scrutiny, and in the requirement for the draft NPF to be approved by a resolution of the Parliament before Government can adopt it.

As others have said, the draft NPF4 has been scrutinised by four committees of this Parliament. The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth has, in turn, reacted to that process, and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee’s report

“welcomes NPF4 and its ambition.”

One item that I want to focus on briefly is the place that is given to spatial strategy in NPF4 and how this Parliament will need to shape that as a concept. I think particularly of spatial strategy as it applies in rural areas, where, as others have mentioned, the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods will need to be imagined slightly differently for obvious reasons.

We will need to develop those concepts as we go, to counteract and not contribute to the tendencies towards the centralisation of population in a few rural centres, away from our more fragile communities, as has happened over the past few decades. It is good to see the focus that NPF4 puts on rural-proofing planning goals in rural areas.

The draft NPF4 sets out important proposals for the resettlement of previously inhabited areas. It will also enable new homes in rural communities, with planning policies that are more proactive and directive in shaping existing places and creating new ones.

In particular, we will have to put housing needs at the heart of what we understand by good rural planning. Literally everywhere I go in my island constituency, whatever the meeting is about, people express to me their anxieties about the need for affordable housing, both to buy and to rent. We need to overcome outmoded models of planning social housing that create a catch-22 situation, in which no houses are built in many rural areas where there is no record of demand. There is, of course, often no record of demand simply because there are virtually no rented houses for which anyone might apply to live in.

I hope that, in rural and urban Scotland alike, we can work together as a Parliament to ensure that NPF4 can enable the investment and development that Scotland will need in the coming decades, creating communities where people can prosper and, crucially, actually afford to live.

16:38

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Tom Arthur said earlier that the majority of consultees and those who have contributed evidence welcome the aims of NPF4. I have absolutely no doubt about that. However, I agree with the Local Government, Planning and Housing Committee that the draft document lacks detail.

The absence of a clear delivery plan that is backed up by financial commitments and an effective monitoring process leaves more questions than it gives answers. That needs to be addressed.

Beatrice Wishart said that when the most recent Planning (Scotland) Bill came to Parliament, she and her party voted against it. I certainly voted against the bill, as did the rest of the Labour Party here. That was because, despite the rhetoric about wanting to engage and involve communities, and to give them a far bigger say, in reality the bill denied people and communities the same rights as developers have.

I know that Scottish National Party colleagues voted with the Tories against the amendments to that bill to give equal rights to communities and individuals, but it surely cannot be right that developers have such control and power over communities, over elected councillors and over democratically elected planning committees. Time and again, when decisions are made at the local level, with the support of local people and communities, the decisions can be overruled because developers have the right of appeal, and the Scottish Government reporter then steps in and—more often than not—upholds the appeal against the views and wishes of communities and people. That cannot be right, so it must be addressed. If we are serious about giving people a real say in their communities, we need to address that imbalance between the power of developers and the power of communities, people and democratically elected planning committees.

As Emma Harper did, I responded to the consultation, and like her, I believe that if we get this policy right it will be in everybody's interest to be able to develop our communities and ensure that they have the ambition that is set out in the document. I hope that the minister will, while praising people who support the framework's aims, listen to what they have to say and take on board the points that are being made.

I hope that the minister will, in his summing up, address the questions that have been asked by RSPB Scotland: what are the next steps, and will there be an opportunity for further public consultation and further public engagement? The RSPB says that although NPF4 recognises the dual climate and nature crises, a wide range of representations have raised concerns that, as drafted, the framework will not play its part in halting biodiversity loss, let alone support nature recovery. Will the draft be amended to take into account those comments and the many other such comments that have been made throughout the process?

One key issue that comes up again and again is that any planning framework is destined to fail

unless planning departments throughout Scotland are properly funded. I am not sure—although I am not blaming the minister for it—that I have heard the minister acknowledge the current state of planning departments up and down Scotland. Over a number of years, planning departments and economic development departments have been disproportionately cut as part of the overall cuts that are being made to local government. I contend that, as a result, very few planning services across Scotland will be able to deliver on the ambition that Emma Harper, I and others welcome. That point must be addressed. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has made that point, as did the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

I welcome the importance that has been placed on addressing the climate emergency. However, there is not enough clarity for planners on how to deal with the emergency in the face of competing priorities—in particular, the scale of the housing crisis. If we are going to tackle the housing crisis, we need to start thinking about how we can use land. We need to give local authorities the confidence to identify land and, through legal processes, to take land where land is needed to build houses for social good—the type of housing that is actually required. Councils must have those powers.

The issue of front loading has not been addressed—it is an issue that I raised with Mr Arthur's predecessors. There are major development sites—certainly, in Fife and, I believe, across Scotland—that are currently stalled because of a lack of front loading for investment in education and health. There are funds for infrastructure including roads, sewerage and so on, but there is no fund to support infrastructure for education or health. If that is not addressed, major developments will be stalled. It is the developers who can come up with the land that needs the least investment. In the area where I live, a 900-house development has been completely stalled because of a failure to put in the infrastructure.

Those are just some of the issues that we must address. I hope that the minister will confirm that there will be further discussions and debate, and that we can take on board all the points that have been made.

16:45

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am still a councillor on Aberdeen City Council.

I congratulate the Scottish Government on producing a draft framework that has managed to

unite many organisations in their criticism of the framework's complete lack of detail. Like so much that is produced by this devolved Government, it is full of headlines that no one could disagree with, but is lacking in substance. I hope that the new version will address that.

I thank the committee for its work and the excellent report that it has produced. It does not take us long to discover the first big issue, which is capacity in the current planning system, which was mentioned earlier by Graeme Dey.

Local authorities have, quite rightly, bemoaned the lack of consultation on and the timing of the proposals. Coming at the same time as many local authorities are formulating local development plans, the proposals have thrown into doubt the LDPs and have caused a great deal of confusion and worry for our local government colleagues. LDPs are sizeable documents that take years of consultation with local communities. The measures that are outlined in NPF4 have thrown much of that into doubt, with changes to regulations that will put additional strains on our already underresourced colleagues.

The conclusions of the committee report highlight the funding issue as a key concern, and state that it is debatable whether, even with additional funding, it will be enough. Years of underfunding have left our councils in dire straits—a point that was well made by Meghan Gallacher and Foyso Choudhury. Unlike Alex Rowley, who does not blame the minister, I blame the SNP Government. The problem has been caused by many years of underfunding of local government.

The response from Homes for Scotland reveals the framework's failure to address the on-going resourcing challenges in local authorities, and notes that it adds to planning officers' workloads with a "raft" of, at times, "contradictory" policies with no clear decision-making hierarchy. Officers will also have to take into account a raft of new technical reports. Reduced budget with more work for our local authorities is a recipe for failure.

The committee raised concerns about the lack of ambition in figures that are proposed for the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement. That is echoed by Homes for Scotland, which points out that the tool that has been used for calculating the MATHLR relies too heavily on past population trends and fails to identify the full range of housing need, with many people being excluded from the count. That follows a recent report that shows that the cumulative housing shortfall since the global financial crisis is now approaching 100,000. The committee report asks the Scottish Government

"to develop a tool that is up to date and fit for all areas of Scotland".

I hope that the minister will address that in his closing speech.

There are concerns from our rural communities, which we heard about from Finlay Carson and Gillian Martin. Sarah Madden, who is the policy adviser on rural communities at Scottish Land & Estates, commented:

"We fully support the overarching ambition of NPF4, but unfortunately there is a large gap between that ambition and the detail in the framework.

We of course understand that the planning system needs to take the climate crisis into account, but addressing that must not be to the detriment of rural development."

Many people have criticised the NPF4's focus on urban environments and the fact that it does not understand our rural environment.

The planning process must take account of infrastructure planning, but the link between NPF4 and infrastructure planning is not clear. The Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland said:

"we also need to see land identification then matched with the appropriate infrastructure changes. And then we need to help planning authorities realise the connection between these national strategic plans and their own ... priorities."

On infrastructure changes, the framework has little red lines, which it calls "strategic connections". There is one between Inverness and Perth and one between Inverness and Aberdeen, so the Government must surely now recognize that those connections are strategic and that it should, therefore, get moving on full dualling of the A9 and A96.

I must mention and thank the Scottish Sports Association for its excellent submission to the consultation. From the submission, we can see the opportunity that the framework could bring, so I commend the Scottish Sports Association's chief executive, Kim Atkinson, for highlighting how important sport and wellbeing can be in a planning framework. As the first line in the submission states,

"Fundamentally, sport is fun, but it is also the golden thread which connects health, communities and equalities."

I would go further. Sport is one of our best forms of early intervention and prevention, so I urge the Scottish Government to work with the association and to incorporate as many of the submission's suggestions as possible into NPF4. That will bring real long-term benefits to Scotland's health and wellbeing.

If the devolved Government is serious about digital, full fibre connectivity should be mandatory for every new home. Throughout the past two years, when working from home has become the norm, we have seen an accelerating need for better digital infrastructure. Although NPF4 goes

some way towards addressing that, it is arguable that, in the world that we now find ourselves in, it must go further. I ask the Government to look at that as it amends the draft and produces the final document. Digital connectivity is particularly important for rural communities such as mine.

NPF4 has much to say about my area—the north-east. Once again it focuses on an idea that we all support—the just transition. The framework needs more detail about how that area will support our drive to net zero. There is no mention of the proposed energy transition zone or of the hydrogen production hub.

The SNP-Green Government is once again full of words, but there is little action. The policy will not deliver for the people of rural Scotland. It will not deliver the homes that are needed or the environmental impacts that have been promised. It does not link up the vital infrastructure that we require. It places undue pressure on local authorities that face continuous cuts from this Government. The framework needs a lot of work, so I encourage the Government to listen to all who have contributed.

16:51

Tom Arthur: I thank everyone for their contributions and echo the thanks of many members not only to the committees but to the committee clerks for their involvement in preparing the evidence and reports.

The debate has been informative and, for the most part, has shown Parliament at its best, with the Executive proposing and Parliament scrutinising by providing thoughtful and considered input. Although many points have been raised—and I will come to those in a moment—what has emerged from the debate is in concert with the point that I sought to make in my opening remarks: there is a consensus about the vision for what we are trying to do with NPF4.

Climate change is central to that. We can recognise the climate emergency and the crisis in biodiversity and can recognise the need for a just transition. We will be judged on the actions that we take. Politicians have to make decisions. It has been clear throughout the debate that tensions quite properly arise as part of the planning process. Decisions have to be made and we must confront the reality of opportunity cost. Wanting to do one thing may preclude the possibility of doing another thing.

I turn to some of the key themes that have emerged. One is about process and how we will take forward the draft NPF. I want to be very clear. The maxim that underpins my approach is that that which is done well is done quickly enough. My priority is not to meet some artificial deadline; it is

to ensure that we get NPF4 right. Notwithstanding Mr Lumsden's contribution, I want to build maximum consensus across the chamber. Let me be clear at the outset that I am open to meeting any member to discuss specific concerns about wording, policy or any other aspect of the NPF.

Douglas Lumsden: Does the minister agree that, if language is too vague, there will be no consistency across different planning authorities and that that will add to the number of appeals coming through to the Scottish reporter?

Tom Arthur: I welcome the member's constructive point. I will come to the idea of clarity.

I am grateful for all the submissions that we received throughout the public consultation. From memory, there was a total of 757. It will take time to work through those and to consider them in detail and with the respect that those who have submitted those responses deserve. That will inform how we take the process forward.

We will give all the points that have been raised careful consideration—both the general points about language and structure and the points about the need for precise and detailed wording. I am grateful to the organisations and individuals who have submitted views on that. We have to get the wording right. We can agree on policy aspirations, but we need to make sure that the wording is clear. I take very seriously the points that have come from Heads of Planning Scotland and others who have asked for greater clarity. Equally, I want to ensure that planners feel empowered to take the decisions that are necessary to realise the vision in NPF4.

We also have to recognise that NPF4 cannot do everything. We must recognise the important role that planning authorities have in determining how to develop their local development plans and, crucially, doing so in partnership and in conjunction with their local communities.

Mr Rowley raised a point about a third-party right of appeal. That was debated at length in the previous session of Parliament and I do not want to rehearse the arguments again, but a key point—

Finlay Carson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: Certainly.

Finlay Carson: The minister has talked about communities and we have heard about appeals. In Dumfries and Galloway, local council tax payers are subsidising wind farm developers to get their applications put through the council. The not-fit-for-purpose planning department in Dumfries and Galloway is increasingly not determining applications within the timescales. They are then referred to the Scottish Government, which is

increasingly approving applications against the wishes of local communities. How can NPF4 improve that situation? Given the assumption that there is going to be more support for wind farm developments and more commercial planting, how does NPF4 allow proper consideration of the rights of local communities?

Tom Arthur: It is important to recognise that the overwhelming majority of planning decisions are taken by local communities. For example, in 2020-21, approximately 25,000 applications were decided by local authorities. The number that were decided on appeal was 135. It is important to see that context.

On the point about resourcing, I respect local authorities' autonomy to set their own budgets, but I think that members across the chamber recognise the clear necessity to ensure that our planning authorities are resourced to achieve what we want them to achieve through this. Where I have been able to take action—and have done so—is on planning fees. From 1 April, almost all planning fees increased by between 25 and 50 per cent. Early projections suggest that, for some local authorities, that could mean additional resource of between £600,000 and over £1 million. That is action that I have taken at the earliest opportunity to help with the resourcing of planning departments, and Heads of Planning Scotland is working to ensure that best practice is assured.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I would like to, but I need to make some progress.

A specific point was made about renewables, which are of course at the heart of our ambitions to meet our climate obligations by 2045. I recognise that we have to ensure that the ambition in NPF4 is commensurate with our ambitions on, for example, onshore wind and other renewables. The commentary that has been received on renewables and specifically on policies pertaining to renewables will be considered in great detail.

The issue of monitoring and delivery has been raised. We will publish a delivery plan along with the finalised version of NPF4. Although there is no statutory obligation for the delivery plan to go through Parliament and be voted on, I will welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee not just to discuss NPF4 in its finalised form but to take questions on the delivery plan.

As I have stated previously and as has been recognised for some time, NPF4 is not a capital spend document. Existing funding streams are available. However, the delivery plan will help to co-ordinate a lot of the funding streams and make clear how the resource links up to the ambitions in NPF4. It is important to recognise that the delivery

plan will be a living document. It will be continuously updated. It cannot be a static thing that just sits on the shelf. As such, there will be an opportunity for continuous scrutiny, which will also provide a vehicle for monitoring.

Before I conclude, I want to raise a point on housing. I am very grateful to Homes for Scotland for its considered contribution throughout the consultation process, and I will give careful and detailed consideration to what it has submitted. It is important to recognise that the MATHLR that has been mentioned is a minimum. It is not a target or a cap. It is a floor. There is an important role for local authorities in developing their local development plans to set out their housing land requirements for their local areas. That can be informed by the most up-to-date data that is available.

I apologise to members whose points I have not been able to address, but I reiterate that I am grateful for the considered contributions of all the committees and for the contributions by members this afternoon and that my door is open to any member who wants to meet to discuss specific issues on NPF4. If we work together and get that shared ownership—that shared Parliamentary support—we can deliver an NPF4 that is equal to the vision and ambition that are set out in it, on which we are all agreed.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Willie Coffey to wind up the debate.

17:00

Willie Coffey: I am pleased—finally—to be closing what is an important debate, on behalf of our committee. I reiterate my thanks to the committee members for their contributions, and to the clerking team and SPICe for their help along the way. Before reflecting on some of the excellent speeches that have been made this afternoon, I will cover a few of the points in our report that the convener did not cover in her opening speech.

First, the committee welcomes the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods, and we note that stakeholders recognise it as a good planning concept. Undoubtedly, however, significant challenges are associated with delivering on 20-minute neighbourhoods. Whether it concerns a new development to an existing urban setting, or is in a rural or island context, careful consideration will need to be given to what a 20-minute neighbourhood means and how it can be achieved in specific cases. Many members mentioned that. Communities will need to be involved in shaping the places in which they are to live.

Among other things, a focus will be needed on infrastructure and sustainable transport to deliver on those ambitions. The committee welcomed the

minister's recognition of the importance of STPR2 in delivering on 20-minute neighbourhoods. However, we would welcome in the final version of NPF4 further information from the Scottish Government on how it intends to deliver on 20-minute neighbourhoods across Scotland, particularly in our rural and island areas, in which the challenges of creating 20-minute neighbourhoods appear to be most pronounced.

I will say a few words on the rejuvenation of our town centres. In both the committee's formal sessions and the informal sessions that it held, members heard various concerns about the decline and dereliction in our high streets. The picture was not universally negative, however, and the committee heard positive examples of town centre regeneration. In particular, the committee was impressed by the work being undertaken by Celebrate Kilmarnock, which has driven community-led regeneration in Kilmarnock in my constituency, and by the regeneration plans that we heard about during our visit to Govan.

We need to give careful consideration to what we can do to effect the rejuvenation of our high streets. We did not come to any conclusion on the best mechanism to achieve that, and that needs further work. However, we welcomed the minister's commitment to effecting an improvement in our town centres through NPF4 and other initiatives, and we will be paying close attention to how that progresses. We are keen to see how NPF4 and any other available powers can be deployed effectively in order to improve town centres, and I am sure that we will all return to that issue later in the session.

We also considered the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement, or MATHLR, as we referred to it, which sets out the minimum number of housing units that local, city region and national park authorities must plan to accommodate future development plans. The minister emphasised that earlier.

Each planning authority in Scotland has been presented with a minimum all-tenure housing land requirement, and each has been invited to present an alternative scenario if it wishes to do so. However, many of those whom we heard from raised concerns about those figures. Although we noted that those are merely a minimum, not a cap, we were concerned that having minimum targets might limit ambition at a time when we need to be ambitious to meet Scotland's housing needs.

I turn to some members' contributions. Gillian Martin reminded us that health and wellbeing must be a strategic priority, with health inequality impact assessments at the heart of the process.

Finlay Carson, on behalf of his committee, told us about the importance of community

engagement and the continuing need to provide access to housing, particularly in rural and island settings.

Miles Briggs reminded us once again to pay more attention to the concerns of the renewables sector and the potential impact on future housing needs.

Mark Griffin made helpful points when he reiterated some of the concerns about renewables and how those will affect delivery on the demands for housing in the future. He strengthened one or two of the messages that were shared by members around the chamber.

Graeme Dey, who made a significant contribution even in his short time at the committee, focused on the capacity in our planning departments. A number of members expressed concern about that.

Graham Simpson graciously accepted the blame for the debate taking place. He stressed the need for greater clarity and to take out some of the woolier language that appears in the draft NPF.

Paul Sweeney mentioned an issue that is close to the hearts of most members when he asked us to consider the look and feel of shopfronts on our high streets. That is also of great concern to the committee, but we did not come to any firm conclusions about how to tackle the matter.

Agreeing to the final version of NPF4 will by no means be the end of the journey that we are on. The committee will continue to pay close attention to the contribution that NPF4 makes to effecting change in Scotland's planning culture. As the convener recognised in her opening speech, one of the biggest challenges to the success of NPF4 will be finding enough planners to help to deliver it. We expect to pursue that throughout the rest of the parliamentary session.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on national planning framework 4.

Ariane Burgess: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I apologise to you, your deputies, my colleagues around the chamber and everyone supporting this vital debate for being late at the start. I recognise the impact that it has had on everyone. It will not happen again.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Burgess. I appreciate your comments.

As a matter of courtesy and respect to other members and the Parliament, it is essential that members who are contributing to debates are in the chamber at the right time. Most business follows on from other business. Timings offer guidance to members but it is important that members follow proceedings closely to ensure that they are in the chamber when we expect, in order

to avoid any delay to parliamentary business or, indeed, any reduction in the business that we are able to get through.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-04061, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 21 April 2022—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Long COVID

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Progressing Scotland's Leadership on Blue Carbon

followed by Scottish Government Debate: The Scottish Approach to Managing the Global Risk of Antimicrobial Resistance

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Health and Care Bill - UK Legislation—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: I call Stephen Kerr to speak to and move amendment S6M-04061.1.

17:07

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): My amendment to the business motion should not be controversial. It simply reinstates a debate on long Covid that the Scottish Government proposed only three weeks ago, when the Parliamentary Bureau last met. That debate should not have been cancelled at the last minute.

My colleague Dr Sandesh Gulhane has been calling for a long Covid strategy since before he was elected. He knows what he is talking about. He has seen what is—[*Interruption.*] I am surprised to hear dissent from members of the Scottish National Party to the idea that Dr Sandesh Gulhane knows what he is talking about, because he does. He has seen at first hand what is happening in the lives of thousands of people who are suffering from long Covid. He also knows what is being done elsewhere in the United Kingdom and what is working.

Before the recess, I believed that Thursday's debate was a promising start. I believed that it was a recognition that there was a problem, a recognition that the SNP Government has failed and the start of addressing that failure. Perhaps I should say, "More fool me."

Perhaps because there is an election in a couple of weeks' time, there is to be an embargo on any criticism of the SNP Scottish Government in the Scottish Parliament. Perhaps our Scottish

Parliament is to be sent into slumber without any controversy for fear that the SNP policy might be exposed for what it is.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business, George Adam, says that a debate will happen when the Government has something to say. I conclude that the Government has nothing to say on long Covid—or, as Mr Adam may wish to put it, the Government is not ready to say anything on long Covid. Ministerial statements are for Government announcements.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Does the member agree that, with no clinics, no in-home support and not a penny of the support fund having been spent, many long Covid sufferers are being left behind? Does he also agree that it is sorely disappointing that the only debate on long Covid in the Scottish Parliament was in Opposition debating time during a Liberal Democrat business day last November?

Stephen Kerr: I have every sympathy for what the member says. In respect of the timetabling of business this week in Parliament, her party has been shown a great discourtesy by the SNP. We had scheduled a debate on long Covid and that debate should go ahead for the sake of our constituents and their health concerns.

The Scottish Parliament exists to scrutinise the Executive—the SNP does not seem to get that. If the SNP members were less tin-eared, they might hear something in a debate, such as ideas that they might wish to pursue. Frankly, the Parliament hardly needs more evidence that the SNP does not have answers—it is remarkably devoid of ideas, as we can all attest.

The thousands of people who are suffering from long Covid must wait for concerted action such as has been proposed by my colleague Dr Gulhane.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does the member accept that many people with long Covid, including some of my constituents, are being treated right now?

Stephen Kerr: I can only say to the member that I have a full post bag from the family members of those suffering from long Covid, who are concerned that concerted treatment is unavailable to them. Instead of having a debate, those constituents and their families will have to wait. The constituents who are suffering from the effects of long Covid—struggling with extreme tiredness, shortness of breath, problems of memory and concentration, heart palpitations, joint pain—*[Interruption.]* Those patients are being sacrificed to save the SNP minister a difficult afternoon in Parliament when the minister will have to answer a few questions and listen.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I noticed one or two SNP MSPs pointing to themselves, saying that they have long Covid and are being treated. It is all very well for a well-known MSP to receive treatment when they see their general practitioner, but many of my constituents are not being treated and are looking to the Scottish Parliament for solutions.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I will wind up, Presiding Officer.

Undoubtedly, the SNP and the Greens will line up tonight to prevent an open debate on those who are suffering from long Covid and their treatment. That is disrespectful to those who are suffering from long Covid and it is disrespectful to the Scottish Parliament that it is being used to shield the SNP from criticism.

I hope that I am wrong and that the minister will hear the arguments and relent. However, I fear, on past form, that he will not.

I move amendment S6M-04061.1, to leave out “The Scottish Approach to Managing the Global Risk of Antimicrobial Resistance” and insert:

“Long COVID”.

The Presiding Officer: I call George Adam to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:13

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): I felt that I had explained this earlier today to everyone in the bureau in a very open, honest and transparent manner. Once again, I will endeavour to articulate our position. It is not the position claimed by Mr Kerr, whereby I said that the Government had nothing to say on the matter—everyone who was in the room knows that that is not what I said. I said that there are real people dealing with real issues in their lives at the end of all this and that the Scottish Government needs to ensure that, when it puts anything in front of the Parliament, it is strong and robust enough to deliver for those people.

On the other matter, the debate has been postponed to enable another debate on Thursday, when the Scottish Government will provide the Parliament with an update on Scotland’s multisectoral one-health approach to addressing the global health threat posed by antimicrobial resistance, or AMR. That is an important topic, as, I am sure, everyone here would agree.

What I will say in response to some of Mr Kerr’s rantings is that we intend to bring the long Covid debate back to Parliament after the local elections.

Members: Ah!

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, I would like to hear the minister.

George Adam: It appears that panto season has already started for the Opposition.

That very short postponement will allow ministers to provide a fuller progress update, as it will not be bound by pre-election period restrictions. The Scottish Government's intention is to provide Parliament with a detailed update on the outcome of the thorough planning process that is currently being undertaken with national health service boards to determine the first allocations of the long Covid support fund.

I sincerely hope that that puts the minds of my Opposition colleagues at rest on the matter. I will inform the Parliamentary Bureau, in the normal manner, when the long Covid debate can be brought to the chamber.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Hear, hear.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. For clarity, for those who are watching these proceedings, can you confirm that there is nothing about the pre-election restrictions that would prevent a debate on long Covid from happening in the Parliament on Thursday?

The Presiding Officer: Pre-election announcements are a matter for the Government.

The question is, that amendment S6M-04061.1, in the name of Stephen Kerr, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04061, in the name of George Adam, setting out changes to this week's business, 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.

17:16

Meeting suspended.

17:20

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-04061.1 be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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)
 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)
 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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (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)
 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 is: For 52, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-04061, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to this week's business, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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)
 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)
 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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (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)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (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)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 69, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 21 April 2022—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Long COVID

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Progressing Scotland’s Leadership on Blue Carbon

followed by Scottish Government Debate: The Scottish Approach to Managing the Global Risk of Antimicrobial Resistance

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Health and Care Bill - UK Legislation

Decision Time

17:25

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is one question to be put as a result of today’s business. The question is, that motion S6M-03985, in the name of Ariane Burgess, on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, on national planning framework 4, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee’s 4th Report, 2022 (Session 6), *National Planning Framework 4 (SP Paper 149)*, on the Scottish Government document, *Scotland 2045: Our Fourth National Planning Framework*, the letters from the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee included within that report and the Official Report of the Parliament’s debate on the report and letters, should form the Parliament’s response to the Scottish Government on the proposed framework.

Down Syndrome Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02795, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, on welcoming the Down Syndrome Bill. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I encourage those who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I call on Jeremy Balfour to open the debate for around seven minutes, Mr Balfour.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the Down Syndrome Bill, introduced in the UK Parliament by Dr Liam Fox in June 2021; understands that it received cross-party support in the UK Parliament at its second reading in November 2021; welcomes what it considers the supportive comments made during the second reading from Douglas Chapman, the Scottish National Party MP for Dunfermline and West Fife; understands that, as introduced, the Bill extends to England and Wales, but that it could be extended further to apply to Scotland, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to facilitate this opportunity to, it considers, improve the services offered to people with Down syndrome and to place a duty on local authorities and public bodies to assess the likely support needs, including education, health and social care, employment and independent living needs, of people with Down syndrome, and plan provision accordingly.

17:27

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I will declare an interest and say that I have a niece and two cousins who all have Down's syndrome.

I begin by thanking those members from across the chamber who have supported my motion and members' business debate. It has been great to see support from almost all parties, although I am disappointed that the Greens decided not to support it. I find it sad that they could not bring themselves to put politics aside for the sake of the Down's syndrome community.

I also thank Dr Liam Fox. His bill has been long anticipated, and it sends a clear message to a community in this country that has felt left behind, undervalued, and ignored for a long time. I am in no way saying that the story will end with the passing of the bill because it is clear that there is still a long way to go, but it is certainly a large step in the right direction.

I have to admit that this is not the speech that I had planned to give, nor is it a speech that I particularly want to give. My original speech was going to extol the virtues of the bill. I was going to describe how placing a concrete responsibility on local authorities to accommodate those with Down's syndrome will create a much less hostile environment than the one that they unfortunately have been used to.

I was going to petition the Scottish Government to adopt the bill and allow it to be a United Kingdom-wide piece of legislation. As drafted, the bill extends to England and Wales, although there was a possibility for the people of Scotland to benefit from it. The Down's community in Scotland could have had the same protection as England and Wales. Given the fact that a Scottish National Party member of Parliament had publicly supported the bill, I was hopeful. Mr Chapman said in the second stage debate:

"I hope that, should it be passed, our colleagues in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland will look at it sympathetically and introduce equivalent measures across the UK. I wish the Bill Godspeed."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 26 November 2021; Vol 704, c 580.]

It is now too late. The bill has passed through the Commons and the Lords and is awaiting royal assent. To the delight of those with Down's syndrome in England and Wales, new protections and rights are only a signature away from being a reality. Those in Scotland, however, are left with a hollow feeling, wondering what possible reason there could be for the SNP to refuse to support them in this way. The answer is that there is no good reason. A political decision has been taken by a Scottish Government that is so caught up in a constitutional battle and grievance politics that it cannot even support the Down's syndrome community, and whose fear of deviating from saying "Westminster is bad" even overrules issues affecting those with disabilities.

During the past 15 years, the whole of Scotland has suffered from the SNP dropping the ball on issues such as drug deaths, accident and emergency waiting times and educational standards, while the Government's eyes have been on its constitutional obsession, but the disability community feels uniquely cast aside. Let us have a look back at even just the past couple of years. During the pandemic, face masks presented a great problem for those who are hard of hearing. They muffled people's voices and made it impossible for those who rely on lip reading to interact with and participate in society. While health boards around the UK approved clear face masks, the Scottish Government dragged its heels and it was not until December 2021—almost two years after the beginning of the pandemic—that NHS Scotland provided doctors with them. The SNP refused to prioritise the disability community yet again.

Another prime example is the unfolding ferries fiasco. Although it is undeniable that lots of mistakes have been made, changing places toilets could have been included in the design. They are the gold standard of disabled facilities that provide for all the needs a disabled person might have, but more than that, they send a message to the

disabled community that they are welcome in a place and can travel freely.

My colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston asked the Scottish Government whether the plans for the two new ferries included changing places toilets and the short answer was no, they include no such toilet. The answer seemed to imply that the Minister for Transport did not understand that a changing places toilet is more than just a disabled toilet with changing facilities. Once again, the SNP refuses to make the inclusion of the disabled community a priority.

Those are just two examples, but they show the Scottish Government's attitude and the reason behind tonight's debate.

There were no good reasons for the Scottish Government to oppose the bill. It will tell us that it is planning something bigger and better and more tartan, but that is simply an excuse. The UK bill does not need to be exhaustive, and it in no way prevents the Scottish Government from going further with future legislation. This was a political decision that used Down's syndrome as a pawn for the sake of scoring cheap points against a Government that is taking the issue seriously. The result is that even if the SNP introduces its own bill, those with Down's syndrome in Scotland will be forced to wait an unnecessary length of time. Unlike those in England and Wales who now have these rights, we do not have them in Scotland. Stronger For Scotland? I think not, and certainly not stronger for the disabled community.

17:34

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank Jeremy Balfour for bringing his motion to the chamber. I must also give a wee shout out to an inspirational family member with Down's syndrome—I will call him Mr T—who can wow you with his music knowledge and make you smile every day of the week.

Like my colleague in Westminster, Douglas Chapman, I want to offer supportive comments on the Down Syndrome Bill for England and Wales. The bill sets out to destigmatise Down's syndrome, improve services and deal with issues such as long-term care. It will require the UK Government to publish guidance on the specific needs of people with Down's syndrome and how those needs should be met. With legal protections in place, it is hoped that the bill will make it easier for people with Down's syndrome and their families to secure the services that they need and to challenge authorities that are not acting on their duties.

However, although I support the intentions behind the Down Syndrome Bill, I believe that the approach laid out by the Scottish Government has

clear advantages as it looks to secure and sustain the transformative change that is overdue for people with Down's syndrome who live in Scotland. The Scottish Government is committed to introducing a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill as part of the programme for government. In addition, a welcome learning disability commissioner role will be created. The bill and the associated commissioner will ensure that the rights of people with Down's syndrome, among others, are respected and protected.

The inclusive rights-based approach in Scotland—a pan learning disability, autism and neurodiversity approach—is attracting a lot of attention from other parts of the United Kingdom. That is because it avoids the situation in which one group is singled out and prioritised over another in the delivery of public services. Instead, our approach recognises people's distinctive needs while protecting the rights of all those with learning disabilities.

Organisations such as Down's Syndrome Scotland have told me that they are encouraged by the timetable for developing and introducing the learning disability bill in Scotland, and they are equally impressed by the Scottish Government's determination to ensure that people with lived experience are fully and meaningfully engaged in the consultation on the bill's scope, ambition and policy position. Their voices are so important. The Scottish Government's programme provides the community—and that is parents, carers and adults with Down's syndrome—with the time and the space to meaningfully express their views in ways that are inclusive, accessible, respectful and rights based.

When I spoke on the international day of persons with disabilities, I focused my speech on the importance of the words “nothing about us without us”. One of the criticisms of Dr Liam Fox's bill is how few people with lived experience were included in its development. I applaud the Scottish Government for taking an alternative approach, one that champions the voices of the community. Given the Scottish Government's more inclusive approach that embraces the rights of people with all learning disabilities, it will be crucially important to recognise and explicitly identify people with Down's syndrome within the definition of learning disability as set out in the learning disability bill in Scotland.

Those new pillars and provisions build on work that is already under way in Scotland to bring about lasting change for people with Down's syndrome and their families and carers. Eddie McConnell, the chief executive of Down's Syndrome Scotland, believes that we are opening a new chapter with the learning disability bill in Scotland and I wholeheartedly agree with that. I

hope that the Down Syndrome Bill also heralds a new chapter in the UK Government's approach and thinking that is far more centred on lived experience. As I said earlier, nothing about us without us.

17:38

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Jeremy Balfour for securing this debate on the Down Syndrome Bill, which has passed its stages in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

As the motion states, Dr Fox's bill received cross-party support across the house and has moved through its stages, allowing for important debate and discussion about the human rights of people who have Down's syndrome and their families and carers. That is what is important tonight. I do not want to get bogged down in a constitutional debate; I want to talk about the important lived experience of the people we are talking about.

My Welsh Labour colleague in the House of Commons, Ruth Jones, spoke very powerfully at the bill's second reading about her experiences as a paediatric physiotherapist and, in particular, about the work that she did in supporting children and young people. I believe that that was perhaps the first time that many of the issues experienced by those people and their families were heard in the United Kingdom Parliament, so it was crucially important.

Although the provisions of the bill relate to England, they have been welcomed by charities in Scotland. Eddie McConnell of Down's Syndrome Scotland, who we heard about from the previous speaker, said that

"The Down Syndrome Bill has the potential to be a landmark moment in advancing the rights of people with Down's syndrome."

He went on to point to the important collaborative work already being done in Scotland to move forward the rights of people who have Down's syndrome and other learning disabilities. I am proud to have already played a small part in that journey in my working life prior to becoming an MSP and I hope to continue that work in the Parliament.

The Down Syndrome Bill seeks to remind public bodies of their duties and gives legal weight to the rights of people and their families who are fighting to get the support that they need. That is so important for many people who describe trying to access the right support and services as a daily battle.

As I have said, although the bill has been broadly welcomed in England and by

organisations in Scotland, it is fair to say that there have been some divergent views on how far the bill has gone and the fact that it could have gone further. Mencap has said that it would have done things a bit differently had it been more involved at an earlier stage in the development of the bill. For example, it would have made the bill apply to everyone who has a learning disability and framed it in the language of a social rather than a medical model, going to greater lengths to engage more people with lived experience. However, rather than oppose the progress that bill represents, Mencap has acknowledged that it has looked optimistically at what the bill could lead to in the future in England. To be honest, I think that that is where we find ourselves in Scotland—with a very clear opportunity.

I have already alluded to my previous work. When at Enable Scotland, I had the great honour of working with people who have a learning disability, their families and carers, and organisations such as Scottish Autism and the National Autistic Society, to secure cross-party commitment to a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill, with the introduction of a commissioner to advocate, support and protect the rights of people across Scotland. I know that the current minister, along with Jeremy Balfour and colleagues across the chamber, share our passion and concern so that we get that right, working with people across the country, listening to what they need and delivering both that bill and a commissioner with a robust set of powers to make a real difference.

Now that I am a member of this Parliament, as convener of the cross-party group on learning disability, I will seek to act as a bridge between the many people who have a learning disability and the Parliament as we work to deliver a bill that will deliver for them. The work of Dr Liam Fox through the Down Syndrome Bill is an important start and we can draw inspiration from it, but I believe that we can and must do more for people across Scotland who have Down's syndrome, other learning disabilities and autism. I look forward to doing that work, which must be done at pace because we do not want to be left behind and we do not want to leave behind the people who need such a bill. I look forward to the work, the discussion and the debates that we will have across the Parliament and our country. We will want to undertake to ensure that the voices of those who, all too often, are not heard in the Parliament are indeed heard.

17:42

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank Jeremy Balfour, my good friend, for bringing this important debate today. I also pay tribute to Dr

Liam Fox, our Conservative colleague in Scotland's other Parliament, for the excellent work that he and colleagues across all parties in the House of Commons have done in bringing the Down Syndrome Bill through all its various stages and into legislation.

When I think about the issue that we are debating today, uppermost in my mind is a firm friend of our family, a young lady—not so young now, when I think about it—by the name of Joy. She is not that much younger than me, truthfully, but we have watched her over the decades and seen how her mother has devotedly looked after her and met her needs. Frankly, the whole of her life and her mother's life are an inspiration to my family. I do not think than anyone could be more appropriately named than Joy, because joy and love—a kind of pure love that is very rare—are exactly what she exudes. I can say in all honesty that her life has touched and is touching ours for the good.

One of the great strengths of the devolution settlement is that Parliaments around the UK can learn from one another and push one another on. I remember well when the smoking ban was first introduced. The Scottish Parliament took a lead on that issue and very quickly the rest of the UK followed. Now the UK Parliament has taken the lead in championing and enhancing the rights of people with Down's syndrome. We in this chamber, and those in the chambers in Cardiff and Belfast, should be passing identical legislation to ensure that everyone with Down's syndrome, regardless of where they live in the United Kingdom, has access to equal rights.

I am saddened by the approach that the Scottish Government has taken to Dr Fox's bill and the new law. Families that have a child with Down's syndrome find themselves fighting on several fronts to get the quality of care and support that they should already have the right to. Parents are fighting ever-increasing NHS waiting lists and fighting for their child's case to be regarded as sufficiently urgent. In the school system, parents constantly seek additional support for a child with a learning disability. In our care system, parents look at the increasing pressure and worry about how their child will cope in that system when they are no longer there to provide support. Dr Fox's bill makes it a priority for the UK Government to address those issues directly, and we should be making identical law in Scotland, so that we make that a priority for the Scottish Government and all levels of government in Scotland.

The new law also enhances parliamentary accountability. Rather than simply granting the minister power to issue guidance to local authorities, the Down Syndrome Bill ensures that

guidance is laid before Parliament. That allows Parliament to scrutinise the guidance in real time and determine how it is working and whether it can be improved. It also requires health boards to have a named individual responsible for the application of the legislation, with the result that parents and families will know who is directly responsible for that. That is another positive step in improving transparency and accountability within our health service.

I was saddened when I talked to Jeremy Balfour and heard about the response that he received from the Government to his advances that identical legislation should be introduced as it stands in this Parliament. I am afraid that sometimes one is left with the conclusion that the Government simply looks at everything—even the championing of disability rights—through the prism of the constitutional debate. Even with a bill that enhances the rights of those with Down's syndrome, the SNP is refusing to budge from its set and repetitive narrative of "Westminster bad". These constitutional games by the SNP and Greens will see Scotland being left behind the rest of the UK when it comes to protecting and enhancing the rights of people with Down's syndrome.

I urge the Scottish Government to grow up, follow the example set by the UK Parliament and implement identical legislation to empower those with Down's syndrome in Scotland, recognising their right to respect, independence and dignity.

17:46

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): I thank all colleagues who have contributed to the debate. I am very pleased that it has enabled us to discuss folk with Down's syndrome and to move forward the discussion to include discussion of learning disability, autism and neurodiversity.

I want to start by saying that I will certainly not be playing any constitutional games when it comes to bettering the lives of folk with learning disabilities, autism or neurodiversity. That is not what I am about, and I am a bit sad that accusations have been made about the playing of constitutional games.

Stephen Kerr asked why we do not have identical legislation. The reason for that is quite simply that we want better legislation. As Mr O'Kane pointed out in his speech, there has been criticism of Liam Fox's bill because it is not as inclusive as it should be and the voices of lived experience have not been listened to as much as they should have been. I agree completely with Mr O'Kane that this is an area where we should be looking at a social rather than a medical model. I

commit to continuing to listen to the voices of lived experience as we move forward, and I give a commitment here and now to work in tandem with the cross-party group on learning disability, where the voices of lived experience are heard, as they are in other places. I hope that we can work across the Parliament to get this absolutely right.

Jeremy Balfour: The minister will know that I propose to introduce a consultation on a disability commissioner for all disabilities in the next couple of weeks. In principle, is the Government supportive of a disability commissioner who would cover not just a certain area, but all disabilities? Will the Government support my consultation document?

Kevin Stewart: I have not seen Mr Balfour's consultation document. We will look at what responses come back. As Mr O'Kane pointed out, there was cross-party agreement that a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill should be introduced in the Parliament—I think that that was in all the manifestos—and the Government will keep to that commitment.

Jeremy Balfour: Will the minister take a further intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I would like to make some progress first.

The Scottish Government is pleased to see the UK Government's commitment to the Down Syndrome Bill. We recognise that people with Down's syndrome face a range of challenges at all stages of life, and it is encouraging that the UK Government is exploring how best to meet the needs of individuals. The Scottish Government shares the ambition to improve opportunities, outcomes and support for people with Down's syndrome, and we will continue to do that.

We are aware of the calls to extend the application of the bill to Scotland. However, our position is that we take a wider view of Down's syndrome and view it in the context of the rights of all people with learning disabilities. The value of such an approach was highlighted by Baroness Sal Brinton during the bill's third reading in the House of Lords on 1 April. She stated:

"if the Bill had the powers which its promoters suggest, there risks being a hierarchy of learning disability. This has already caused a split between families with learning disability, all of whom still need to fight for the limited resources to which the law says they are entitled."—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 1 April 2022; Vol 820, c 1789.]*

In Scotland, we have always taken a wider view, whereby people with Down's syndrome are included in current policy work on learning disabilities through "The keys to life" framework, the "Learning/Intellectual Disability and Autism: Towards Transformation" plan and our work on the

learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill. I will return to some of those points later.

I will take an intervention from—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Jackson Carlaw.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I knew that I was gone, Presiding Officer, but I did not know that I was forgotten.

I have known Liam Fox for more than 40 years and I am quite sure that everything he has done in relation to the bill has been completely sincere, but I also think that the minister is a man of his word. I have listened with care to the argument that he has put to the chamber this afternoon. My concern is with the constituents and the people I know who have Down's syndrome and have carried it throughout their lives.

Can the minister give an assurance that the protections that he expects to emerge from this process for people with Down's syndrome, which he has aligned with other conditions, will be no less robust—indeed, will be more robust—than those for people with other conditions, and that he anticipates and expects the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill to be forthcoming and to deliver timeously for people with Down's syndrome? I think that such an assurance would be very welcome.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I can give you the time back for both interventions.

Kevin Stewart: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I have not been critical of Dr Fox's bill, but I think that we can go much further and can do better by listening to the voices of lived experience. We are delighted that Down's Syndrome Scotland has been very supportive of our work, led by Eddie McConnell, as has been mentioned earlier, who has done a huge amount for people with Down's syndrome in Scotland. I assure Mr Carlaw that we will do our level best. I will be held accountable not just by this chamber but by the likes of Eddie McConnell and Down's Syndrome Scotland. We intend to get this right for people as we move forward.

Jeremy Balfour: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: Will I get the time back?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will, minister.

Kevin Stewart: Okay, I will take the intervention.

Jeremy Balfour: I am grateful to the minister. I appreciate that he has not seen my consultation

on a disability commissioner, but he will recognise that the disability community, which covers physical, mental and other conditions, has been deeply affected through Covid. In principle, without committing to every detail of my proposal, is the Scottish Government in favour of a commissioner not just for neurodiversity and Down's syndrome but for all disabilities, whatever they are?

Kevin Stewart: I will have a look at Mr Balfour's consultation and the responses to it, but what I am speaking about today and what we are discussing today is Down's syndrome. I give a commitment here and now, as was in our manifesto and in the manifestos of many other parties, that there will be a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill during the current session of Parliament, which will ensure that the rights of people with Down's syndrome, among others, are respected and protected in law. To help to make sure that the new legislation is championed when it is implemented, we plan to create a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity commissioner through that new law.

The Government committed to that bill when the First Minister announced it in the Scottish Government's programme for government on 7 September, and we are currently pursuing it to provide and improve support for people with Down's syndrome and other learning disabilities. The Government has set out its commitment to people with a learning disability, including those with Down's syndrome, and their families through the 2013 keys to life learning disability strategy and the implementation framework, which was refreshed in 2019.

Jeremy Balfour: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I need to make progress—unless I can get the time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can, but I ask Mr Balfour to be brief.

Jeremy Balfour: I promise that I will be brief and that this will be my final intervention. I seek clarification. Does the minister expect the bill that he is talking about to be introduced in September of this year or will it be after that? What dates are we looking at?

Kevin Stewart: I am not going to give a timeline for the bill, because we have to listen to the voices of lived experience in order to get it right. It will not be me but the voices of lived experience who will set a timeline for the bill. We know that there are polarised views on some issues. We must iron all of that out and get this right for folk right across Scotland. I am not going to be pushed on the timeline, because we need to continue to have conversations.

I mentioned "The keys to life" implementation framework. In addition, we published the "Towards Transformation" plan in March 2021. It looks at the actions that are needed to shape support, services and attitudes to ensure that the human rights of autistic people and people with learning disabilities, including those with Down's syndrome, are respected and protected. They must be empowered to live their lives in the same way as everyone else. The actions in the plan cover all aspects of life.

To address health inequalities, the Government has commissioned the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory to undertake research on health outcomes for people with learning disabilities, including people with Down's syndrome. In addition, we are exploring a national roll-out of annual health checks for people with learning disabilities. We are currently finalising the review of supported employment and implementing the action plan on the recommendations of the additional support for learning review. The Scottish Government also provides funding to Down's Syndrome Scotland to support people with Down's syndrome and their families. That includes family support, speech and language support for children and peer support for adults.

In summary, the Scottish Government welcomes the UK Government's support for the Down Syndrome Bill, and we will strive to support the needs of people with Down's syndrome, their families and people with learning disabilities more broadly, including via the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill. We want the rights of people with Down's syndrome and all people with learning disabilities to be respected and protected. That is what I will strive to do. I hope that we can do that with cross-party support—I hope that that will be the case as we move forward—but I am sure that we all share the view that we need to do our best for people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodiversity in our country. That will take a fair amount of work as we move forward, but I am absolutely adamant that we must get the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill right.

Meeting closed at 17:58.

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