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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 21 June 2022

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Angela Johnson, celebrant with the Humanist Society Scotland.

Angela Johnson (Humanist Society Scotland): Members of the Scottish Parliament, good afternoon.

Do you remember that, two years ago, as the first lockdown was easing, there was talk about how, when we were back to normal, we would make the way that we lived together kinder? I know that we may be in the early stages of what might be a long arc of recovery, but that back to normal now seems—to me, anyway—to be back to the same public and online vitriol, the same judgmental voices: the very same-old that we did not want to go back to.

But I have hope. I have hope that our arts can begin to play their part in our recovery. It is perhaps only now that our creative sector, the last of us to get back to normal, is beginning to do its work for us—to entertain us, of course, which is great, but also to allow us to see things in a different way, to enable us to feel empathy with those whose lived experiences are not our own.

Our arts have always done that. We can watch news reports on the war in Ukraine and they can affect us deeply, but if we stand in front of Picasso's "Guernica", we can, in a greater sense, feel the violation of a homeland destroyed by atrocity. We can watch a film about a man called Daniel Blake and question why the safety net of our welfare state does not always save. We can listen to a storyline in "The Archers" and realise the power of coercive control to totally rob a victim of their sense of self.

Many among us are finding it difficult to get back to normal, because the past two years have forever changed their lives. I hope that our arts can help us to more deeply understand not just loneliness, endured by so many, but aloneness; not just grief and loss, but grief and loss that had nowhere to go because those who grieved were denied the healing comfort of being with those who shared that grief.

The Declaration of Amsterdam, which sets out the fundamental principles of humanism, speaks

of the transforming nature of all the arts for us as individuals and as a society. Now, surely, is the time for us to let them play their part in speaking for those of us whose voices are never loud—those of us who still suffer. We who have come out of the past two years pretty much okay will listen and watch, and take time to understand, and help to create that kinder place to live.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-05127, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to today's business. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 21 June 2022—

delete

6.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.05 pm Decision Time.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

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 appreciate short and succinct questions and responses.

Avian Influenza

1. **Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how avian flu is affecting bird populations. (S6T-00803)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The winter of 2021-22 has seen the United Kingdom's largest outbreak of avian flu, with commercial and backyard captive flocks and wild birds being affected.

As of 21 June, ten captive bird premises in Scotland have been infected with highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1. In the same period, the virus has been detected in 1,253 dead wild birds across Great Britain, with 467 findings in Scotland in 24 bird species.

Although the impact of the outbreak on wild bird populations is currently unknown, there have been reports of significant mortalities in Scottish seabird colonies.

Ariane Burgess: Gannet and great skua populations in Shetland are being decimated as we speak. Gannet colonies are strewn with dead birds. Fishers are seeing carcasses floating at sea, and they are washing up along Shetland's coastline.

What actions can the Scottish Government take to limit the threat to internationally important breeding grounds on Shetland and elsewhere?

Mairi Gougeon: I say to members across the chamber that the Scottish Government is taking the situation very seriously. We are working with a range of partner organisations to monitor and respond to the situation, where action needs to be taken.

Avian influenza is a highly infectious disease. The current strain is causing significant mortality in seabird colonies across the UK. Even though little can be done to limit the spread within colonies, yesterday, NatureScot announced that it was going to suspend all ringing activities in seabird colonies for the remainder of the breeding season, in order to try to reduce the risk of onward transmission from infected colonies to uninfected colonies in other locations and to try to minimise additional stress on potentially infected birds.

The Scottish Government has published advice for local authorities, landowners, wildlife rescue centres and members of the public regarding how to report, and giving information about collection and safe disposal of, dead wild birds. We will keep that guidance under continuous review as the situation develops.

Ariane Burgess: I would like a little bit more detail. Seabirds across Scotland are now being affected by avian flu, and I am particularly concerned by the news that it has reached the world's largest gannet colony, on the Bass Rock.

RSPB Scotland is calling for better monitoring of the virus and greater clarity about how dead seabirds are being collected and disposed of in order to avoid further spread. Can the cabinet secretary provide clarity on those points?

Mairi Gougeon: NatureScot is monitoring the numbers of dead wild birds that are reported by reserve managers and, where possible, it is carrying out surveys of the affected colonies. As the situation stands, it is not possible for us to assess with any certainty the extent of the population-level impact. We are working in collaboration with NatureScot, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, RSPB Scotland and the British Trust for Ornithology Scotland to collate colony-level demographic data and identify how the data can be analysed to offer information on the population-level impact.

I emphasise that our current advice is that wild bird carcasses should be left in situ unless landowners consider it necessary to remove them. As I said in a previous response, we have published updated guidance on the safe removal and disposal of carcasses when that is required. The disease is spread mostly through live birds, rather than dead birds.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As, I know, the cabinet secretary is aware, there are seabird populations of international significance in my Highlands and Islands region. Where are we on implementation of the Scottish seabird conservation strategy?

Mairi Gougeon: The Scottish seabird conservation strategy is currently undergoing amendments to ensure that the actions that are derived from it are timely and will be effective in optimising the conservation prospects of seabirds in relation to existing and emerging threats. That includes in relation to disease threats such as avian influenza. We aim to consult on that in the autumn. Although the strategy has not been implemented yet, that does not restrict the Scottish Government in responding to the issue or in making plans for future instances of highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The images from the Bass Rock in East Lothian, which is home to the largest colony of northern gannets in the world, are truly shocking. The Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick has said that it feels powerless watching avian flu spread across the colony. East Lothian countryside rangers have the heart-wrenching job of cleaning up dead birds that wash up on our popular coastline. I pay tribute to those rangers.

Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether any additional Government resources will be made available to the East Lothian countryside rangers and similar services and agencies that have been hit by avian flu in other parts of Scotland? Will the minister redouble her efforts and support the call from the Scottish Seabird Centre for acceleration of the national seabird conservation strategy? The need has never been greater.

Mairi Gougeon: I welcome that question. Craig Hoy is right to mention how horrendous some of the images have been. I know that the rangers have the unenviable task disposing of carcasses, which is a horrendous task in itself.

I hope that my previous response to Emma Roddick answered the member's latter question about the conservation strategy. As I said, we are consulting on that. However, even though the strategy has not been implemented, that does not prevent us from taking action to deal with some of the threats that we currently face. I emphasise the points that I have made about the importance of gathering data. We take the threat particularly seriously, which is why we are working with our partners to do all that we can to tackle the issues that are arising.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that the avian flu outbreak has been particularly devastating for overwintering geese on the Solway and has killed an estimated third of the world's population of Svalbard barnacle geese. Sadly, more and more of my constituents are commonly finding dead birds strewn along paths on the shore.

Given the devastation, does the cabinet secretary accept that there is a need for more action to build resilience in the long term by looking again at measures such as restrictions on sand eel fisheries and properly ending bycatch in order to build resilience and better conserve our seabirds?

Mairi Gougeon: I accept that all those points are important. Mairi McAllan and I had a meeting with organisations last month to see what other action we could take. I emphasise that we take the issue very seriously, which is why our partnership and collaborative working with other organisations is critical. We want to do everything that is within

our power to tackle the issues. I will give close consideration to the points that Colin Smyth has raised.

Gene-edited Crops

2. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported warnings from a leading scientist that its opposition to gene-edited crops goes against the scientific consensus. (S6T-00818)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): In Scotland, we are committed to maintaining the highest environmental standards. We remain opposed to the use of genetic modification in farming in order to protect the clean, green brand of Scotland's £15 billion food and drink industry.

The use of genetic technologies is a complex and emotive area. Indeed, the UK Government's public consultation last year saw the public reject the changes that the UK Government is now pursuing. Although I am closely following scientific and other considerations on the decoupling of genetic modification and gene editing, our position has not changed and the UK bill does not change that.

Rachael Hamilton: The minister continues to miss the point. Yet again, she deliberately conflates the two issues of gene editing and genetically modified organisms. That is disingenuous and only weakens the Government's untenable position on the issue.

It seems that the minister wants to wait for the European Union to tell the Scottish Government what to do, but when its own former chief scientific adviser says that the Government is "out of kilter" with scientific evidence, does the minister not agree that she should have a serious rethink of the Scottish National Party's position and stop holding our farmers back?

Màiri McAllan: First and foremost, I am more than happy to confirm to Rachael Hamilton that I am absolutely up to date on the issues. I am not deliberately conflating GM and gene editing, but I remind her that she is in a Parliament in a country in which gene editing is still part of the definition of genetic modification.

I absolutely welcome—and hold in the highest regard—the views of our scientific community, including Professor Dame Anne Glover, our academic institutions and our farmers and food producers. I also value the views of the public. This is an emotive and complex area, and matters must be considered very carefully. In that regard, I agree with the professor on *The Nine* yesterday evening, who said:

"As a scientist, I think it's a very interesting technology, but I do think that, at the end of the day, it's up to politicians to decide, using all the evidence available. Some of that will be scientific evidence, some of it is economic and some will be ethical and some of it philosophical."

Those are exactly the issues that I am considering—unlike the UK Government, which is hurriedly pursuing post-Brexit deregulation.

Rachael Hamilton: Farmers in my constituency are extremely worried that, if the SNP-Green Government does not give its backing to gene editing, they will be at a major disadvantage compared with their neighbours just south of the border. That concern is shared by NFU Scotland, the James Hutton Institute and the Roslin Institute. Gene editing technology would give our farmers a much-needed boost to drive down food prices, help our current food security issues and support climate change goals.

The minister needs to examine what her priorities are. Are they constitutional obsessions and grievances? Will she listen to the experts and work with the UK Government to achieve positive change?

Màiri McAllan: Conversely, it is the member's constitutional obsession—her and her colleagues' desire for unity at all costs—that is the problem here. I wonder whether she has read the joint statement, which, on 10 June, was issued by 30 groups including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Friends of the Earth, the Soil Association and Compassion in World Farming. They said:

"This bill represents a significant change in the law and has huge implications for farming, food, animal welfare, the environment, the UK's internal market and its trading relationships with key global markets. It is clear that, in its haste to deregulate, the Government has not adequately considered these implications."

I hope that Rachael Hamilton and her colleagues will consider that.

Equally, though, she talks about the threat to Scotland's farmers. Of course, the real threat to them is an ideological Brexit—the hardest of the possible options—that was pursued during the second wave of a deadly virus and is being made worse by trade agreements that undermine standards in welfare and the environment and that also undermine farmers' livelihoods. Where was Rachael Hamilton's concern for farmers when her colleagues were negotiating that?

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Setting aside the science of the matter for just a moment, on a practical level, the fact is—[*Interruption.*] I know that the Tories do not want to hear it, but they should just listen.

The fact is that Scotland was invited to participate in creating the legislation the day

before the bill was introduced at Westminster. Requests for sight of a draft of the bill were ignored until the afternoon before it was introduced. That is disrespect, verging on thinly veiled contempt, from a Tory Government that is encroaching on the devolved competences that are within the remit of this Parliament. Does the minister share my view that, if the Tories in London want Scotland to consider its legislative proposals, they must learn to treat our Parliament and the Scottish Government with some respect?

The Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask you to respond briefly, as we are very quickly running out of time.

Màiri McAllan: That is fine, Presiding Officer.

Jim Fairlie is absolutely right: there are substance and process here, both of which are important factors. I have expressed my disappointment with the timing of the UK Government's letter that included the invitation for Scotland to join consideration of the bill coming the day before it was introduced to the UK Parliament. The UK Government was briefing the media at the same time as it was doing so. Discussions of that nature should have taken place prior to the introduction of the bill, to enable the consideration of any divergence. If the UK Government was genuine about its commitment to devolution, it would be serious in its co-operation with Scotland and the other devolved Administrations.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome what the minister said about being led by evidence. It is wrong to set aside the science, as Jim Fairlie just suggested. We should be looking very carefully at what the science offers us as a potential benefit.

As the NFUS said in a statement, it believes that "GE offers the potential for Scottish farmers to ... meet challenges such as climate change, plant and animal health, and market competitiveness".

When will the minister next meet the NFUS, and will she engage in a positive conversation with it and with the UK Government about the potential benefits that will accrue to Scotland because of that science?

Màiri McAllan: I will meet the NFUS when I attend the Royal Highland Show, this week. I have no doubt that this issue will come up, and I look forward to discussing it with the organisation.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time.

World Refugee Day

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-05098, in the name of Neil Gray, on world refugee day: welcoming and supporting refugees in Scotland's communities. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons now. I call Neil Gray to speak to and move the motion—for up to 12 minutes, minister.

14:21

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): World refugee day is an opportunity for people around the world to honour refugees, celebrate their strength and recognise their resilience. It is a day on which we work together to build empathy and understanding for people who have faced danger that most of us can barely imagine.

The United Nations theme for world refugee day 2022 is "Whoever. Wherever. Whenever. Everyone has the right to seek safety" from persecution and conflict. Scotland has a long history of welcoming people from around the world, including those who have been forced to flee their homes and seek safety from war and persecution. Scotland's approach to supporting refugees and asylum seekers is framed by the new Scots refugee integration strategy. Developed and led in partnership by the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Refugee Council, the new Scots strategy has set the clear principle that integration should begin on, and be supported from, day 1 of arrival.

Our new strategy placed Scotland in a clear position to respond to the humanitarian crisis that arose from the conflict in Syria, and it continues to inform our response to the displacement of people from Ukraine and Afghanistan, and through other wars and conflicts around the world.

In recent months, we have all seen reporting of the horror and destruction from the war in Ukraine. People have been displaced within Ukraine and across its borders as they seek safety from the conflict. Although, for most of us, that is something that we have watched on TV, we are not removed from it. Almost 5,000 people have arrived in Scotland from Ukraine. They need accommodation and our support. I am clear that we must step up and do what we hope that others would do for us in such a situation.

The war in Ukraine needs us to provide a united and national response. I am proud to have seen

people in Scotland show strong solidarity with the people of Ukraine. Scottish support agencies have co-ordinated humanitarian aid and support direct to the region; people have offered places to stay for those who are displaced by the war; and communities have stepped up to offer people a warm Scottish welcome.

This is not a time for standing by and watching. We all have a part to play, and I appeal to everyone in the chamber to find out what more they can do in their area to support people who arrive from Ukraine.

The Scottish Government is taking practical steps to support Ukraine and the people who have been displaced by the conflict and who need a place of safety. We are working to do all that we can within the United Kingdom Government's sponsorship scheme and visa routes. In partnership with COSLA, local authorities and the third sector, we are working to ensure that everyone arriving at our welcome hubs receives a warm Scots welcome, with access to essentials, including temporary accommodation, trauma support and translation.

I highlight the relevant section of the motion that is before us in thanking all our local government colleagues and third and private sector partners for all that they are doing—as well as our officials in the Scottish Government, who are working day and night. That is greatly appreciated.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): This seems an appropriate point at which to ask the minister to bring us up to date on the number of Ukrainians who have arrived in Scotland, the number who have been matched to families and homes, the number who remain in hotels or other temporary accommodation, and the average length of stay for Ukrainian refugees in temporary settings.

Neil Gray: It is fair to say that there are people who are currently in hotels in Scotland who have been there for too long. We want to do everything possible, working with our third sector and local government partners, to ensure that the process of checking properties and making sure that the disclosure checks are carried out—which makes that supersponsor scheme the safest, alongside the Welsh scheme, in the United Kingdom—happens as quickly as possible.

We also want to do everything possible to make sure that resources are committed to the national matching service, to ensure that we are utilising expressions of interest and the creative solutions that have been offered in different parts of our social housing sector. I was at the Wheatley Housing Group yesterday, and it has very generously put up 300 properties, which is

fantastic. That will give people long-term security of accommodation, for which I am very grateful.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Last week, the three other Labour MSPs for Glasgow and I met the Glasgow community integration networks, which have written to the minister, outlining their concerns about the lack of support and funding that they have had to cope with the increasing demand on their services, including help with English for speakers of other languages and support for people to access food banks. Can the minister commit to meeting those networks as soon as possible to address those concerns?

Neil Gray: Absolutely; I give the commitment to Pam Duncan-Glancy that I am more than happy to meet those networks. I have met others who represent the Ukrainian community in Scotland, including in the regular meetings that I have with—dare I say it?—my friend Yevhen Mankovskiy, who is the Ukrainian consul general. He is doing a power of work to ensure that the needs and desires of those who are arriving from Ukraine are met. I am more than happy to give that commitment if Pam Duncan-Glancy wishes to write to me on behalf of the local organisations that she mentioned.

Our national matching service, which is delivered by COSLA, supports local authorities to identify suitable longer-term accommodation. It is heartening to see so many Scots opening their homes to those who need it.

The Scottish Government has committed £11 million to increase the capacity of local authority resettlement teams and to support the refurbishment of properties and integration. We continue to work with our national and local partners, including COSLA, local authorities and the Scottish Refugee Council, to improve our approach.

We have provided £1 million to the Scottish Refugee Council to increase its capacity to support people who are arriving from Ukraine. We have also committed £36,000 to support the Ukraine advice Scotland service, which is delivered by JustRight Scotland.

I am pleased to announce that that service has been bolstered recently by an additional £12,000. The service offers free confidential legal advice to Ukrainians and their family members, and it has proved invaluable to displaced people who are struggling to navigate the UK immigration system.

Further, I can confirm a funding uplift of more than £77,000 for the Edinburgh third sector interface organisations and Volunteer Edinburgh to ensure the continued provision of volunteers to give a warm Scottish welcome to tired and often traumatised people as soon as they arrive in Scotland.

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Has the minister had conversations with COSLA about how robust the matching service has been? Has there been an opportunity for Ukrainians and hosts to engage in the process? From my experience, so far they have not.

Neil Gray: As the member will understand, my conversations with COSLA are regular, and they certainly cover the matching service and the need to ensure that we get it right and are able to move as quickly as possible. Rachael Hamilton will understand that ensuring that we are able to match the needs and desires of those arriving from Ukraine to the expectations of those who have offered their homes is a human resource-intensive process, but I am confident that, given the investment and resource that has been committed to the matching service, we can make sure that that happens as quickly as possible.

I will give way one final time.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I have asked this question many times before, but are we doing anything for all the other refugees who have been stuck in hotels for years?

Neil Gray: I thank Foysoyl Choudhury for raising that point. No matter where people arrive from, we are committed to doing everything possible to give them the same treatment. He is as aware as I am of the different nature and responsibilities of the Afghan resettlement scheme. The UK Government has not taken the same partnership approach as it has with the Syria and Ukraine schemes, which has been more of a challenge, but I am committed, as my colleagues in government are, to ensuring that we get the scheme right. I will speak a bit more about that shortly.

Earlier this month, I visited Poland to see at first hand the needs of people who have been displaced by war and how some of the Scottish Government's humanitarian support has been deployed. The Scottish Government has provided £4 million in financial aid to provide basic humanitarian assistance.

I saw the life-saving services and support that a UNICEF blue dot centre is providing to children and families. UNICEF has used Scottish Government aid to support 24 blue dot centres in countries neighbouring Ukraine. I learned how the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund's federated partner Caritas is delivering a wide range of services to people who have been displaced by the war. At a refugee centre called Szafa Dobra, I met some of the inspirational local leaders and volunteers, such as Maria Wojtacha, and some of those who have previously escaped war and persecution themselves and have volunteered to step up, such as Alun Ruznik. They

are absolute inspirations. It was clear that the humanitarian support that Scotland has provided is reaching the right places.

Visiting Poland was moving and at times overwhelming. It really brought home the stark reality of the impact that forced displacement has on people. Seeing women and children living cheek by jowl in a disused shopping centre and on camp beds that were pushed together will live with me for a very long time. It certainly underlined the importance of our collective work in Scotland and my determination that we do everything possible to give people a safe and dignified place to call home in order to rebuild their lives.

Despite the prominence of the war in Ukraine, we must not forget that there are many other wars and conflicts around the world. Scotland continues to welcome refugees and people displaced from many countries, including Afghanistan, following the fall of Kabul last August. That includes people who gave great service working for the British military and other organisations.

All of Scotland's 32 local authorities have committed to participate in refugee resettlement schemes, using the experience that they have developed since welcoming refugees from Syria. I commend local authorities' welcoming people through the Afghan resettlement and relocation schemes, and the global UK resettlement scheme. I also thank Scotland's existing Afghan communities for the insights that they have shared to inform the work and the support for people arriving from Afghanistan.

I have been clear about the key principles of our new Scots approach. Integration from day 1 is not just for refugees or displaced people who have been granted status in the UK; it includes people who are seeking asylum from the day that they arrive here. In February, when I led my first debate as a minister, I was disappointed to have to talk about a regressive UK Government bill instead of Scotland's role as a place of welcome and sanctuary. The Nationality and Borders Bill, the damage that it would do and the problems that it would fail to fix were debated in the chamber, and we voted to withhold consent on two clauses within the competence of the Scottish Parliament.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 was passed in April. It will affect people who live in communities across Scotland, and it will not deliver the humane immigration and asylum systems that the UK needs. It will cause lasting damage to the UK's international reputation, and it will jeopardise the rights of thousands of people long into the future.

I am horrified by the UK Government's attempts to send to Rwanda people who have sought safety in the UK. People who are seeking asylum in the

UK should have their case heard in the UK. If they are successful, they should receive refugee status in the UK. I hope that we can all agree that we want nothing to do with the trading of human misery and that we want to see that stopped. The policy is a complete abdication of the UK Government's responsibilities, it breaches the refugee convention, and it is a threat to the international protection regime. It is also doomed to fail, as the only way to break people trafficking networks is by establishing safe and legal routes to claim asylum. I am sure that the cabinet secretary with responsibility for refugee and asylum policy will say more about that when she closes the debate.

As the UN has made clear in the theme for world refugee day, everyone has the right to seek safety from persecution and conflict. We must do all we can to uphold the refugee convention, to which the UK is a founding signatory. We cannot abdicate our international and moral responsibilities to recognise refugees.

We welcome refugees because they have faced enormous danger, and welcoming them is the right thing to do. We support refugees because of the great challenges that come with seeking safety. We celebrate refugees because we recognise their skills, knowledge and strength. We stand with refugees because they are our friends, our colleagues and our neighbours.

I move,

That the Parliament uses the opportunity of World Refugee Day to welcome people who have sought refuge in Scotland from war and persecution, including refugees, people seeking asylum, people relocated from Afghanistan and displaced people from Ukraine; recognises the contribution that refugees, people seeking asylum, people who have arrived under refugee resettlement and relocation schemes, people granted discretionary leave or humanitarian protection and displaced people arriving under specific visa routes have made to Scotland over many years; thanks local authorities, communities, individuals, the third sector and faith organisations that have supported, and are supporting, refugees, people seeking asylum and displaced people to settle in the country; commends the key principle of the New Scots refugee integration strategy that integration begins from day one of arrival, and celebrates the opportunity to connect and share stories through Refugee Festival Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Members will wish to be aware that we have time in hand for interventions.

14:33

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to open this important debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

Scotland and the United Kingdom have a proud history of welcoming refugees, such as the Huguenots, Freddie Mercury, the Kindertransport

and Sigmund Freud—the list is long and varied. However, that work does not stop; it perseveres to this day. For decades, the United Kingdom has been at the forefront of helping some of the most vulnerable people in the world, here and abroad. Nowhere has that been more apparent than with regard to Ukraine.

Local voluntary organisations, councils, charities and the public have all stepped up in a truly staggering outpouring of kindness. The UK Government has also been hard at work, issuing more than 130,300 visas since the start of the conflict, while supplying considerable amounts of military and humanitarian aid to our Ukrainian friends. Recently, it has also streamlined the visa application process.

Scots have risen to the challenge admirably, as 4,773 individuals have now arrived in Scotland. Many of them are now settled with host families and adjusting to new lives in the United Kingdom. Their resilience, strength and spirit are worthy of recognition, as are the warm hearts of their hosts.

Last week, I contacted a member of the Pentlands Ukrainian support group, an organisation that is based in Currie, not far from the Parliament. The work that the group does is incredible. It was set up by two women, one Polish and one Ukrainian, and it supports local guests and hosts with a range of social events and practical assistance. The PUSG now runs its own English classes and offers employment support. It raises funds to support its work, and the member to whom I spoke told me that their Ukrainian guests are settling in well and swiftly adapting to life in Scotland.

So far, so good. However, even with that model scenario, there are still obstacles to be overcome. Bus tickets are a prime concern. Although Ukrainians arriving in Edinburgh receive a bus ticket that is worth 20 journeys, those are soon used up. Just to get to the Ukrainian centre on Royal Terrace for an advice session, for instance, takes four journeys. Perhaps Ukrainian guests want to visit the centre of Edinburgh to learn about their new home or open a bank account. That is another four journeys. Add in a dentist's appointment or a week's trips to the nursery and it does not take long before the ticket is used up and guests are back to relying on strangers for lifts.

The PUSG attempts to cover the cost, but the majority of its funds are spent on bus tickets that are enabling Ukrainians to rebuild their lives and gain some semblance of normality. However, that is unsustainable. In only a fortnight, the PUSG spent £601 on bus tickets, leaving little for other activities such as English classes or employment support.

Edinburgh Leisure has kindly waived its fees for the first six months of Ukrainians' stay in Edinburgh. Free swimming sessions are welcome, as are the 20 free bus tickets, but I urge Lothian Buses to follow Edinburgh Leisure's approach and consider providing six months of free bus travel for qualifying Ukrainians to make their lives a little bit easier.

On Thursday during the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, Ukrainian Consul General Yevhen Mankovskyi highlighted several other pressing issues that require the Parliament's attention. More support must be provided for the more than 500 Ukrainians in hotels. At the moment, they do not even receive a visit once a week from officials, but regular updates would be warmly received, especially when welcome hubs are expensive and difficult to get to. More language classes and greater childcare provision were mentioned, as was access to schools.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The member rightly mentioned the need to conduct welfare checks for Ukrainians and families living in hotels. We hope to get them into settled accommodation as soon as possible. Does she agree that we should take a similar approach with all refugees and asylum seekers, irrespective of whether they are from Ukraine, because hotels are not a suitable place to house anyone in the long term?

Sharon Dowey: All members need to work together to find solutions to all problems. We will gain more by working together than we will working apart so we need to find solutions to all the problems that are raised by refugees or displaced persons who come to Scotland.

For Ukrainian refugees on the far side of a catchment area, a school can be hard to reach by bus, particularly given the issue with tickets.

I urge MSPs to find out whether their regions have similar issues, and to make contact with local bodies to see how they can be resolved. Sadly, I have heard several times about Ukrainians being bussed off to distant towns without being told where they are going. That is simply unacceptable. I wrote to the minister to request a meeting to discuss the issue and am still waiting to receive a reply.

We can all help in a small way. Members often receive questionnaires offering donations to charities if we respond. I urge members to donate those funds to groups such as the PUSG. The money will make a real difference and will go a long way towards making our Ukrainian friends feel like they are home.

14:40

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open the debate for Scottish Labour and to celebrate UN world refugee day. I welcome the fact that the motion before us highlights the contribution made to our society by refugees and those who have sought asylum here. That is incredibly important to note at a time when refugees and asylum seekers are under daily attack from certain political quarters and quarters of our media. It is important for people to hear how many prior generations of refugees have contributed to and enriched our country and our society, from the displaced of world war 2 onwards, and how many continue to do so. However, the picture is increasingly divided.

In the first instance, we can all be proud of the will to help those who have been displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and grateful for those who have already been helped. However, those who arrive here are, all too often, being failed by inadequate preparation.

Last week, the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee heard from the Ukrainian consul general that hundreds of Ukrainians have been stuck in temporary accommodation for months on end. He pointed out that there are many sponsor applicants and many people who require sponsors but that far too many people are unable to join those dots with no apparent fault on either side. The Scottish Government must ensure that it knows what success looks like in its supersponsor scheme and how it can iron out those problems to avoid further misery.

However, the darker side of the refugee story is that, although we can be thankful for what is being done for the people who have been displaced from Ukraine, the help that is being given to them throws into sharp contrast the treatment of other refugees who have arrived here.

Although people from Ukraine can work and access public funds, people who have fled from, for example, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan cannot. I highlight those countries because they are the ones to which we have a particular obligation, given our foreign policy in recent years. Many of the refugees from those countries have been stuck in temporary accommodation not just for months but for years, with only £8 a week on which to get by. Many cannot get a school for their children and are not legally allowed to work.

I do not mention that to argue that those displaced by the Ukraine conflict should be given less, but to show how much more support could have been given to those fleeing other conflict zones. We need to be careful to avoid the appearance that some may feel of there being a

racist double standard in our approach to supporting refugees.

That is all without even mentioning the latest attack from the UK Government on asylum seekers: the horrendous policy of sending those who cross the channel seeking refuge here to Rwanda. That is a costly exercise, both in monetary terms and in our moral standing as a nation.

The UK Government is intent on sending people trying to flee from a range of conflict zones to a country in the middle of Africa from which we have previously accepted refugees. It is reminiscent of a transportation policy from Britain's colonial past. However, it is also, fundamentally, a policy where the UK, as a developed nation, is paying off a poorer nation on another continent to deal with what our Government considers to be a problem. At the very least, the policy represents a colonial state of mind from the Tory Government in Westminster.

I and my Scottish Labour colleagues continue to call on the UK Government to drop that horrendous policy, which has not even been put before the Westminster Parliament. I hope that future UN world refugee days will be marked without the national embarrassment of such a grotesque policy, and I hope that, as a result, we will be able to more easily celebrate the many ways in which our national compassion has benefited our national life.

Scottish Labour will support the motion, but we do not feel that it represents the full reality of the situation for refugees in Scotland.

14:45

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am very grateful that the Government has secured time for today's debate. The Parliament will, as we always do, mark world refugee day, but doing so this year will come with a poignance, which we will all feel, given what is happening in Ukraine and with the Afghan situation.

I pay tribute to the volunteers up and down Scotland who are, right now, preparing homes for people coming from war-torn countries. I particularly thank the people who are working at the welcome hub at the Royal Bank of Scotland site in my Edinburgh Western constituency—we are very grateful for the work that they do.

At the foot of the statue of Liberty, inscribed on a plaque, are the words of a poem called "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus. It contains the words:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free".

Those lines capture a promise of the American dream, as it was in 1883, when she first penned them. The poem encapsulates the dream of safe harbour for the persecuted and destitute the world over. It told of a progressive attitude towards immigration and diversity, which helped to forge America into one of the most successful countries on the planet. Sadly, that attitude is unrecognisable in large parts of the America of today.

As we mark international refugee day this year, those words feel more poignant than ever for us, as Scots, as we open our homes to those who are fleeing the horrors that are unfolding in Ukraine. However, the 7 million Ukrainians who have left their country and the many more who have been displaced within it as a result of the conflict account for only some of those who are seeking sanctuary in our world today.

Indeed, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has reported that more than 100 million people are either internally displaced or refugees seeking safety and asylum. Foysol Choudhury is absolutely right to bring our attention back to the plight of people fleeing Afghanistan. They have not gone away, and their plight has not gone away.

We are seeing the highest levels of human displacement since world war two as a result of politics, persecution, war, poverty and, of course, climate change. We cannot forget that, sometimes, the actions of humankind drive people out of their homes.

It should say much about the quality of life and the peace that we all enjoy in these islands that refugees seek safe harbour here. The people of this country have a proud history of responding to those fleeing their homes with the compassion and generosity that we see today. That pride is justifiable. However, we are not always as good as other countries at accepting refugees. We should remember that we took in only four Syrian refugees for every 10,000 citizens in Scotland. In comparison, on the same per capita basis, Germany and Sweden took in 70.

In recent years, there has been an immensely worrying shift in both attitude and policy, particularly at a UK Government level, when it comes to those seeking sanctuary on our shores. Quiet xenophobia from the right-wing press on a drip-drip basis, coupled with the UK Government's hardening tone, has created a hostile environment for refugees and survivors of trafficking and exploitation. The ugly face of that environment is encompassed in the so-called new plan for immigration, which includes the appalling Rwanda policy and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, as has been mentioned this afternoon. My party has vehemently opposed all those steps, as they

represent some of the most regressive and illiberal policies ever to have been signed into UK law.

Everyone agrees on the need to stop people smugglers taking people across the English Channel in makeshift rafts, but that means creating safe and legal routes for asylum seekers to make their way here. The unhappy truth is that, in today's world, far too many of us have forgotten the reality, which was captured so eloquently by the poet and refugee Warsan Shire when she wrote:

"No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land."

We have fallen lamentably below the generous and welcoming standards that we would want the rest of the world to recognise in us. I am gratified by the difference in tone and action in Scotland, but we are not always getting it right here, either. We have already heard about the 500 Ukrainians who are still languishing in Scottish hotels. I hope that, as a Parliament, we will work to support the Government to improve processes so that we can make the system slicker. Thousands of Scots have opened their homes and are awaiting guests from Ukraine, but they have heard very little or sometimes nothing from the authorities that are supposed to be making that happen.

I again recognise the immense contribution of immigrants and refugees and what they bring to our society, whether that be the skills and energy that they bring to the workplace as colleagues or what they bring as neighbours and, indeed, friends. We are all the richer for having them here. The plight of refugees, wherever they come from, is visible on our television screens, in our communities and at the points of entry all around the British isles. Our response to that plight will be the measure by which our generation is judged.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate, with speeches of up to four minutes. I call Ruth Maguire, who is joining us remotely.

14:50

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. They are defined and protected in international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention is a key legal document that defines a refugee as:

"someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion."

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everybody is entitled to seek asylum.

Here, in the UK, we should reflect on how our involvement in various conflicts destabilised many of the regions and countries that folk are having to flee from, but that will need a whole other debate. Therefore, today, as we focus on refugees, let us simply ask ourselves this: if we were fleeing for our very lives, and with a right to seek asylum guaranteed under international law, how would we wish to be treated at the places where we sought sanctuary? If we or our families, friends or loved ones had cause to flee from our homes, towns or villages, taking only what we could carry and in fear for our lives, how would we want to be treated? Would we want to be shown compassion, care, decency and humanity? Would we expect to be able to work and contribute to our new community?

How we treat those who need our help defines who we are and what we value as individuals and as a society. We have a moral and legal obligation to provide refuge to our brothers and sisters who find themselves in that situation. However, the UK Government is abdicating responsibility for those moral and legal obligations through its planned offshoring of asylum processing. Priti Patel, Boris Johnson's Home Secretary, has described the deal, which will cost at least £120 million in the next five years, as a "first-class policy". The United Nations does not agree, and it stated in its analysis of the scheme that it is

"incompatible with the letter and spirit of the 1951 Refugee Convention."

The UN also raised a host of potential problems, including a shortage of interpreters in Rwanda, a risk of discrimination against LGBTQ people and a lack of capacity to process hundreds, if not thousands, of diverted asylum claims.

Officials said that there would be 130 people on the first flight to Kigali, but, after dozens of successful legal challenges, only seven asylum seekers were taken to the airbase. Liz Truss, the Foreign Secretary, told the media:

"I can't say exactly how many people will be on the flight. But the really important thing is that we establish the principle."

The principle of rich countries buying their way out of international obligations and trading in human misery by paying poorer countries to take vulnerable humans to somewhere where they might be at further risk of harm is not a principle that I share. I agree with the UN's assessment that it is wrong. It is also expensive and ineffective in meeting the UK Government's stated aims of preventing people from crossing the Channel.

As the minister pointed out in opening the debate, that can be done by providing safe routes and by removing the financial incentive for traffickers by disrupting the market for humans. In particular, in relation to women and girls who are trafficked for prostitution, it can be done with a robust justice response to men who purchase sex. The UK Government's approach will not work. Even former hardline Prime Minister Theresa May of the "go home" vans is criticising the plan on the grounds of "legality, practicality and efficacy."

I hope that Scottish Conservative colleagues in this chamber will be given cause for concern and do what they can by either speaking out or speaking privately and using whatever influence they have with their UK Government colleagues to change that inhumane and ineffective policy, which is shaming us all globally.

We could do so much better. As well as the simple democratic case for our nation restoring its independence, there are a myriad of specific policy reasons. A different approach to foreign policy and migration is one of those. With independence, and full power over migration policy, we can build an asylum and immigration system that is geared to meeting Scotland's needs, which are different from those of the rest of the UK. For example, we need more working age people here.

We could have a system that is founded on fairness and human rights, which we have shown is possible with the Scottish social security system. An immigration system that fulfils our moral and legal obligations and that brings benefits to our nation is achievable for Scotland, but to achieve it we must have the full powers that only an independent nation has.

I welcome people who have sought refuge in Scotland over the years and recognise the contribution that those who have arrived here make to our culture and communities. Refugees are welcome here. Our country is richer for the diversity that you have brought—thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I clarify to members that speeches in the open debate should be of up to six minutes, not four minutes. Apologies for the confusion.

14:56

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): It is not very often that you are generous with our time, Presiding Officer. I thank you for that.

I am delighted to speak on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. My colleague Sharon Dowey has already outlined the proud history that Scotland, and the United Kingdom as a whole, has in

providing homes for refugees. We have also, rightly, focused on the abhorrent war in Ukraine and the support that we have been able to provide for people fleeing Putin's deplorable attack on their sovereignty.

Like many of my colleagues across the Scottish Parliament, I have been overwhelmed by the generosity and kind-heartedness of the people living in the constituency that I represent. Borderers have well and truly stepped up to the plate, opening their homes to 100 refugees. I want to thank them personally for the work that they have done in welcoming Ukrainians to the Borders. I also thank the British Red Cross for carrying out essential welfare checks compassionately and providing other signposting services.

However, I urge the Scottish Government to continue its conversations with COSLA. I thank the minister for taking my intervention on that. I know that he recognises that there have been issues with getting hosts and the refugees into conversations to ensure that they are placed in the right place. The Borders had 421 household registrations in May to act as hosts through the supersponsor scheme, but it is unclear how many of those households will be matched.

Comparing with the experience of the resettlement of Afghans and Syrians, priority was given then to individuals with self-contained properties that were close to public services such as transport, schools and general practices. That is important for a rural area. Could the minister perhaps comment in closing on whether the particular issues that I am raising have been an issue in rural areas?

Furthermore, some families have arrived in the Borders for whom the local authority has had to find emergency accommodation because they were homeless. It would be helpful if there was a formal mechanism to alert local authorities when displaced Ukrainians arrive in the Borders, so that their welcome would be even better than it already is. We know that the Scottish Government has played an important role in ensuring that the schemes have run as smoothly as they can, and I hope that teething problems such as those and the problems with disclosure checks are being worked through.

Of course, the need for such schemes highlights a much larger problem that the world faces. We can congratulate ourselves for the great work that we do in welcoming refugees to our country—and, indeed, our homes—all we want, but as long as oppression and discrimination persist, we are not getting to the crux of the problem. I wholeheartedly welcome the work of the UK and Scottish Governments and the work that they have done together. I am sure that, on all sides of the

Parliament, we would agree that finding solutions to the problems that lead to people having to flee their homes and getting to the heart of such problems must be prioritised.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Will Rachael Hamilton join me in condemning the UK Government on its inhumane policy relating to Rwanda?

Rachael Hamilton: I ask Stephanie Callaghan whether she welcomes the fact that, since 2015, 200,000 refugees, including women and children, have been resettled here, in the UK. That is a good thing. Does she agree that we should ensure that people who create criminal gangs cannot line their pockets through people fleeing from persecution, who are drowning in boats as they try to get here?

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will Rachael Hamilton take an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton: Not just now, but I will see where my time is.

I am very proud of the fact that, as I have just said, we have resettled 200,000 refugees since 2015, although I am sure that there is more work that we can do. I am proud of the work that the UK has undertaken as a member of the United Nations Security Council to promote peace above all else. I am proud of the sacrifices that our armed forces make every day. We are in the lead up to armed forces day, which is this Saturday—yesterday, I participated in a related event in my local authority area. That is important, because our armed forces have been integral in peacekeeping missions around the globe. Scotland can play a leading role in standing up to those who pose a threat to world peace.

I have time in hand, so I will take Pam Duncan-Glancy's intervention.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What does Rachael Hamilton believe that the UN independent expert on violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation will say, when he comes to the UK this year, about the policy to send people, including LGBT people, to Rwanda?

Rachael Hamilton: It is important that everybody is welcome, whoever they are and wherever they are from around the world. We must listen to them and make sure that we continue to be a welcoming country. I hope that we agree that the whole of the United Kingdom—all parts of its nations—is already a welcoming country and that we do not discriminate on the issues that Pam has just highlighted.

I will return to the main theme of the debate. My constituency—and Scotland, on the whole—is a welcoming and tolerant place. I am pleased that today's debate has reinforced that reputation, and

I hope that people who flee war and persecution continue to look to the UK as a place where they can find refuge and build a life for themselves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that they should refer to other members by their full names.

15:02

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to mark world refugee day and to highlight Scotland's efforts to welcome asylum seekers and refugees from around the world to what I consider to be a safe haven, where they have the opportunity to live meaningful lives free from fear and persecution.

I will go on to talk about asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow, but it is impossible to talk about this subject without first and foremost condemning, in the strongest possible terms, the UK Government's latest appalling immigration policy, which is to traffic asylum seekers to Rwanda for their claims to be considered and decided. The policy is inhumane and the Home Office that pursues it is callous, uncaring and in breach of international obligations. As Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, stated:

"The UK Government has breached the foundational principle of international refugee protection."

[Kaukab Stewart has corrected this contribution. See end of report.] Just as I thought that the Home Office could not strip away any more dignity from refugees, it is now electronically tagging them, further dehumanising and depriving human beings of even a moment of peace.

In complete contrast is Scotland's approach to asylum seekers and refugees, which is outlined in the "New Scots Refugees Integration Strategy". The approach places refugees and asylum seekers at the heart of the communities in which they live.

I whole-heartedly celebrate the contribution that asylum seekers and refugees make to this country, and I agree that there are many positive aspects to Scotland's approach and practice. However, I will point out some things that need to be improved.

According to Professor Alison Phipps, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization chair for refugee integration through language and the arts at the University of Glasgow, the UK Government's Nationality and Borders Act 2022 undermines our ability to pursue a compassionate and progressive strategy. Professor Phipps highlights the efforts of Together with Refugees, a coalition of expert lawyers led by the University of Glasgow honorary graduate Dr

Sabir Zazai OBE, who is CEO of the Scottish Refugee Council and of JustRight Scotland. Those groups work tirelessly to advocate for asylum seekers and to unpick the legal impacts on Scotland of the UK Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

I commend to the minister the work done by Refugees for Justice in preparing an asylum dispersal proposal for Scotland. I would also commend it to the Home Secretary, but I fear that all compassionate approaches are far from the hostile environment agenda that is clearly being set down there.

Last Monday, I was privileged to speak with asylum seekers living in Glasgow Kelvin, who had recently been residents in one of the several private establishments that house asylum seekers when they arrive here. Some of their experiences were far from ideal. I was struck by their stories. They had previously been doctors, teachers and other professionals and were all desperate to work and to provide for their families. The right to work should be at the heart of any compassionate system. They paid tribute to the warm welcome that they had received from Glaswegians and were very grateful to Migrant Empowerment, which I note is represented here today, for its assistance.

Hotel accommodation is not part of the agreement between the UK Government and those who are paid to house vulnerable people. The maximum amount of time that any asylum seeker should spend in a hotel is five days; the average stay in hotel accommodation in Glasgow is currently 72 days, and many residents have been there longer, due to a lack of accommodation for placements. That is unacceptable.

Asylum seekers get around £40 a week from the UK Government, via a voucher card that can be used only in certain shops and does not give change. If the card stops working, that can take days to resolve, meaning that the asylum seeker has no access to money. That is obviously unacceptable.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank my Glasgow colleague for giving way on the important point of the income available to asylum seekers, which is hugely constrained compared to that available to other parts of the population. Does she agree in principle that extending free concessionary travel would be a practical way for us in Scotland to help asylum seekers increase their income?

Kaukab Stewart: I agree in principle to looking at any opportunity to provide dignity and respect to all those we welcome here. I further suggest that all immigration policy should be devolved to

Scotland as soon as possible so that we can make those decisions for ourselves.

Children who live in hotels are close to my heart. Thankfully, the policy that said that children could not enrol in school until a permanent catchment area was decided has been changed and children can now go to school from day 1. They now have the opportunity to play, make friends and learn, which is so important. I place on record my thanks to the community, staff and pupils of Garnethill and St Patrick's primary schools, among others, for their welcome to asylum-seeking children. I have had the joy of teaching children from Syria and Afghanistan and have been privileged to see their progress.

I believe that we must move away from a profit motive in our system for asylum seekers and refugees. It is long overdue that the right to bid for contracts to house and care for asylum seekers should be returned to councils, along with the funding to do so.

I am mindful of the time and will skip to my final point. I thank asylum seekers and refugees for their courage and tenacity in challenging the system, both for their own sake and for the sake of those who follow them in calling Scotland their home.

15:09

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the Government for bringing its motion, which I signed, to the Parliament for debate. I also place on the record my thanks to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government and the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine for the constructive discussions that we have had on the issues in recent months.

Scotland has a proud record of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers into our communities. We are a diverse and multicultural society, a society that embraces the benefits that immigration brings and a society that sees refugees and asylum seekers for what they are—human beings who are often fleeing unimaginable horrors and are determined to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Sadly, not all refugees and asylum seekers are treated with compassion after landing on our shores. Determined to stoke division and appealing to people's cruellest instincts, Boris Johnson and Priti Patel have been intent on vilifying and persecuting some of the most vulnerable people in the world. They decided that small boats crossing the Channel should be physically blocked and pushed back by UK border authorities and the Royal Navy. They vilified the

Royal National Lifeboat Institution for doing its job—saving lives at sea without fear or favour. Most recently, they have been trying to send asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing—a move that was rightly blocked by the European Court of Human Rights.

Unsurprisingly, like many of Boris Johnson's deplorable schemes, those plans have turned out to be unworkable, unviable and ultimately illegal. It is therefore heartening to see the Scottish Government taking a more compassionate approach to refugees and asylum seekers. The bombastic rhetoric that we hear from the Tory demagogues in the House of Commons is thankfully not replicated by many of us in this Parliament. However, we cannot pretend that everything is fantastic for asylum seekers and refugees living in Scotland. There is more that the Scottish Government could be doing to improve their lives now.

It is a little over six months since I launched my campaign to extend the concessionary travel scheme to all asylum seekers in Scotland. The campaign has the backing of just about every stakeholder working in the sector, including the Scottish Refugee Council, Refuweegee, Maryhill Integration Network, the British Red Cross's Voices network and others. It has the backing of MSPs across the chamber from Scottish Labour, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the SNP and the Scottish Greens. Most important, it would cost less than £400,000 a year, meaning that it is affordable. At a relatively modest cost, it would improve the lives of asylum seekers across Scotland immeasurably.

To their credit, the refugees minister and the cabinet secretary have engaged positively with my proposal, along with the Minister for Transport. However, there has been no announcement yet of a timeline for the policy to be implemented. I seek a public endorsement from the Government that the proposal is something that it is actively seeking to implement. I would like to have at least the security of an announcement today on the timescale and the principle that the Government is working as hard as it can to do what I have proposed. I urge the Government to commit to it. The Government knows where I am coming from. I am not interested in playing politics with this. I just want to improve the lives of asylum seekers and refugees who call Scotland home.

I have some concerns about the unequal and multilayered system that we are seeing emerge in our asylum system. The situation in Ukraine is horrific and my heart breaks for those families who have been forced to flee knowing that they may never be able to return. The response from both the UK and Scottish Governments to Ukrainians seeking refuge has been admirable. We have

opened our homes, introduced specific visa schemes and, in some instances, sought to provide free travel to Ukrainians in Scotland.

However, we do ourselves a real disservice if we continue to pretend that Ukraine is an isolated and exceptional incident. Vladimir Putin inflicted the same devastation on Aleppo as he did on Mariupol. Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen with impunity, and Israel continues to breach international law with its oppression of Palestinians. Where is our compassion for those countries and their people? Where are the visa schemes for Yemenis? Where is the homes for Syria scheme? They do not exist, and that should give us huge cause for concern.

One cannot truly show compassion to those who are fleeing war and persecution until that compassion is shown regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality or circumstance, but I fear that that is not happening. It may be inadvertent, but the evidence shows that our treatment of people who are fleeing war and persecution has been far from equal. That needs to change.

The Scottish Government's policy is far in advance of the UK Government's when it comes to attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers, but I am sure that most of us agree that that is a low bar. There is undoubtedly more that could be done within the powers that the Scottish Government has available to it to help refugees and asylum seekers now. Let us start by introducing free concessionary travel for asylum seekers in Scotland. That policy is simple and cost-effective, and I can think of no better way to mark this week, celebrating refugees and asylum seekers, than for the cabinet secretary and ministers to stand up in the chamber and unequivocally commit the Government to implementing it.

We can work together to improve the lives of refugees and asylum seekers, and I am convinced that the political will exists among those in this chamber to make that a reality. I truly hope that, along with members across the chamber, the Government shares my ambition for those in our asylum system, who could, if they were given the chance, contribute so much to our society.

15:15

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): On world refugee day, I take the opportunity to show my support for those who have made Scotland their home, travelling to our shores having faced great adversity, risk and challenge in search of safety to forge decent lives for themselves and their families.

We will all have witnessed at first hand the contribution that those who arrived in Scotland have made to the constituencies that we

represent. That is certainly true in my constituency of Maryhill and Springburn. We must highlight and celebrate those successes. That is important, not as an end in itself but rather to challenge the right-wing rhetoric that we get all too often from elements of the press that seek to demonise refugees and asylum seekers who come to our shores. Unfortunately, we sometimes hear similar rhetoric from politicians in Scotland, although thankfully on far fewer occasions in this place.

Asylum seekers and refugees become our doctors, nurses, teachers, care workers and scientists, and work in many other professions. When they are given the opportunity to contribute to our communities, they play their part in full. Nevertheless, many of those who have arrived in Scotland as asylum seekers are not permitted to work. The most basic human right—the right to try to support oneself and one’s family—is simply denied them. That is not only completely wrong, it is an act of downright self-harm to the Scottish and UK economies, given that we face a labour and skills shortage.

I hope that we can agree that that must change, and change quickly. I very much hope that the UK Government will think again on that particular matter.

The motion before us rightly recognises the various paths by which refugees have come to our shores, and it highlights

“people relocated from Afghanistan and displaced people from Ukraine”

Many people who come through those routes, although not all, will have the right to work and will have recourse to public funds. Others are not so fortunate. The UK needs a more humane and consistent human rights-based approach to ensuring that all who are fleeing their countries because of fear of violence and persecution are supported and are permitted to at least try to support themselves.

The motion stresses that integration for refugees and asylum seekers should start “from day one” in Scotland. Unfortunately, that is in stark contrast to a UK Government approach in which some asylum seekers and refugees will, on day 1, begin their struggle to avoid being deported to Rwanda. That is the day 1 reality for many who are coming to our shores now. The UK Government needs to ditch those plans and not seek to offshore both its international and its moral obligations.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to Bob Doris for giving way, and I am enjoying his speech, but I wonder whether he might expand on what we can do collectively in these islands to prevent good people from falling into the hands of wicked human traffickers. What

can we do to stop the dreadful trade in misery that they perpetuate?

Bob Doris: I am glad that Mr Kerr has given me the opportunity to repeat what we have heard already about the need for safe, legal and certain routes for people coming to our shores. Perhaps we need a meaningful partnership agreement with our European Union partner countries to do something more meaningful and substantial in that regard.

This Parliament is well aware of issues with the UK Government and its housing partner, Mears Group, and how that company resources and provides appropriate, and at times not so appropriate, accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees. I will not rehearse those issues, but I put on record the appalling actions that were taken by Mears Group, which effectively kicked refugee families, many of them my constituents, out of their homes at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. A Scottish Covid-19 public inquiry, led by Lady Poole, is about to commence. Although I appreciate that that inquiry is restricted in respect of some of the reserved aspects that it cannot go into, Lady Poole has indicated that it may be open to looking at overlapping aspects impacting on those asylum seekers who were forcibly placed in hotels.

If integration in Scotland is to start “from day one”, we need to look at the impact from day 1 on housing, education, access to health, and children and young people, including what happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. All those areas are devolved to this place.

I will finish as I started, by celebrating those who have made their lives in my constituency of Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn and across Scotland. I want to mention two organisations, the first of which is Glasgow Afghan United, and the work of the now Councillor Bostani, who is my local councillor—if I have a pothole, Mr Bostani, I am coming to you.

Abdul Bostani, who is a good friend of mine, and many members of the local Afghan community have done sterling work, including empowering women to step forward in their communities, not just in Glasgow but across Scotland. Certainly, with the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, Glasgow Afghan United has done a power of work. It is also currently providing humanitarian aid to Panjshir province in Afghanistan, so the organisation is made up of strident, forceful, impressive and inspiring individuals. They are people in my constituency whom I call friends and who came to our shores fleeing violence and persecution, and they are making a wonderful contribution to the communities that I am privileged to represent.

I should, of course, also mention Maryhill Integration Network. It has empowered a vast range of new Scots, refugees and asylum seekers who have come to our shores over the past 21 years. It celebrates its 21st birthday party tomorrow. I am sure that, in her summing up, the cabinet secretary will want to wish Maryhill Integration Network a very happy birthday.

MIN has empowered those who have come to my constituency and Glasgow to make their voices heard, not least through the MIN voices group, whose members have given powerful first-hand testimony about their lived experience. That has included the impact of travel, and I put on record that I fully support giving free concessionary travel to all refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland. I look forward to that being delivered as soon as possible, as it will be significant progress. People have also spoken about the right to work, housing, access to education and healthcare. Their lived experience matters, and MIN has captured that.

As we celebrate world refugee day, I put on record my thanks to those who have made their homes in my constituency and across Scotland for the part that they play in building Scotland and taking Scotland forward.

15:22

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Like some others in the chamber today, I came to Scotland by choice. I found welcome, community, potential and purpose. In making my home here, I had the privilege of agency and choice, and the power of personal decision.

I know what it means to travel far from family and friends, and from a life left behind. I know what it means to retain a strong tie to another part of the world and to miss and yearn for that different life. However, I do not know from personal experience what it means to have to do that: to put my fate in the hands of strangers and to trust, without option, in the systems and bureaucracies of another state to save me from the persecution of my own. Yet, if we are to speak of that—indeed, if we are to be fully human—we must try to imagine how it feels for the past to be a place of pain, the future a blank void of uncertainty and the present, far too often, for far too long, a limbo of empty stasis where one is waiting for a decision.

As public representatives, we need to see the big global picture and to pay attention to the details: the granularity of daily life for those who do us the privilege of seeking asylum here. We need to acknowledge the web of geopolitical connections, the ways in which we and people like us have benefited from global injustices, and the communal responsibility that we unwittingly share.

When, as now, actions are taken in our name that exacerbate the suffering of refugees, punish them for no fault and increase the numbers of those who are forced to flee their homes, we must speak out and go on speaking out. We have a voice and a platform. We have that privilege—and that duty.

The shabby, cynical attempt of the UK Government to buy its way out of its moral and legal responsibilities is a new low even by Boris Johnson's standards. A tiny proportion of the world's refugees make the difficult and dangerous voyage to the shores of Britain. The UK Government has deliberately failed to provide safe routes for them. Now, those forced to use unsafe routes are to be punished further: they will be flown thousands of miles from the support networks that they struggled so hard to reach to Rwanda, a country whose human rights violations the UK itself has recently condemned. The Government is further endangering vulnerable lives and undermining, for the whole world, international law and principles.

The Rwanda scheme—I am sorry, Presiding Officer, but my Surface has just crashed.

The Rwanda scheme is no mere one-off populist stunt. In November, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration published his report into Home Office asylum casework. That report reveals in stark detail the true refugee crisis: a scandal of chronic delays, incompetence, insensitivity and extortionate spending on completely inappropriate and inhumane private sector accommodation. What was the UK's reaction to that revelation? It chose to double down on its cruelty and stupidity with the passing of the shameful Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

In a few short months, Boris Johnson's Government tore up our relationship with the refugee convention, threw away some of the genuinely proudest moments of British history, and flung the pieces into the faces of those most in need of our care, our compassion and basic minimum justice—those in need of our word. Instead of a place of safety, what the UK now offers to those fleeing persecution, including Afghan people escaping the Taliban, is what the Scottish Refugee Council has accurately described as a "refugee punishment regime".

Meanwhile, Boris Johnson's trade policy helps to drive millions more from their homes. The UK supplies more than half of the combat aircraft used by Saudi Arabia for bombing raids on Yemen, with UK bombs, missiles, and even cluster munitions on board. The results are heartbreaking atrocities, evidenced war crimes, famine and disease.

This year, the UN Refugee Agency called the situation in Yemen

“one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises”,

with 4.3 million people displaced internally. That is the reality of global Britain under the Tories—it is a legacy of hunger, loss and pain that is consciously and deliberately continued.

I ask those who support the UK Government to reflect on the distinctions between those refugees and asylum seekers fleeing British-made bombs and the consequences of UK foreign policy decisions, and those refugees and asylum seekers fleeing Russian-made bombs and the consequences of Russian foreign policy decisions.

We have heard this afternoon about the importance of the dedicated schemes that are in place and the work that is being done to support those who are fleeing Putin’s war in Ukraine. Indeed, those schemes are vital. However, I ask—as Paul Sweeney and others might do—where the dedicated schemes are for those fleeing the violence, war and famine in Yemen. Where are the dedicated schemes for those who are seeking safety and a new life because of the illegal occupation of Palestine? Where are the dedicated schemes for those who are fleeing persecution because of their sexuality or gender identity, or because of other conflict or climate catastrophe? What makes those refugees and asylum seekers less worthy of our compassion, love and support?

The xenophobia of the UK’s immigration system should shame us all. Britain has a proud history of offering support; Britain had a proud history of providing love and compassion for those who were most in need. Scotland still has the desire to do that. Collectively, we should work to ensure that we fulfil the aim of showing love, compassion and support to those who are most in need. Scotland welcomes refugees—and so do I.

15:29

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I cannot imagine what it must be like for people who have had to flee their homes due to fear of war or persecution, to leave members of their family behind and then to find themselves in a country where their knowledge of the language and culture is sparse. How terrifying that must be.

We must try to walk in the shoes of refugees while we respond to their needs. We need to listen and act to provide them with refuge from terror. The continuous media focus on the war in Ukraine has brought that home to us. No one could fail to have been horrified by the pictures from Afghanistan of people clinging on to an aeroplane in their desperate need to leave. We could do and must do better by them.

I agree with Foysol Choudhury and Paul Sweeney that there is a huge disparity between how we treat white European refugees and how we treat people of colour from around the world. Many such cases have been highlighted in the debate. All refugees must be treated with care and compassion.

We cannot debate the treatment of refugees without mentioning, as other members have done, the UK Government’s policy of offshoring our responsibilities to Rwanda. Passing our obligations to a country that has fewer resources than our own is despicable. The Conservative UK Government is our national shame. We desperately need a Labour Government to restore our international reputation.

The Scottish Government has stepped in to help Ukrainian refugees. The supersponsor scheme is welcome, but there are issues with it that I will mention shortly. Before I do so, I simply want to make the point that all refugees should be treated equally; they should all be offered a safe place. I feel uneasy that we appear to have two categories of refugee, which is simply unacceptable.

Scottish Labour is aware of a number of issues with our homes for Ukraine scheme. First, women and children, who make up the bulk of refugees from Ukraine, are being left in hotels for far too long. We have a housing shortage, and we must build more homes—not just for refugees but for our own people. We all know that, when refugees are perceived to receive assistance that is not available to our own people who are struggling, we see a backlash, so the Scottish Government must deal with the housing shortage urgently to ensure that that does not happen.

The second issue that I want to touch on is exploitation. I have heard of cases in which refugees who have come to Scotland under the homes for Ukraine scheme have found themselves at the mercy of people who would exploit them. I am pleased that protections are being strengthened to weed out those who would do that.

We already know that offering a place to stay in exchange for sex is common in Scotland, and exploits our own vulnerable people. Therefore, it should be of little surprise that such evil people would do exactly the same to refugees. The checks are welcome, but it is difficult to identify a person unless they have offended previously, especially when such exploitation is not illegal in Scotland. I have heard anecdotally of one case in which a refugee who was being exploited in that way and who contacted the police was told that the police were unable to intervene. We should protect refugees and our own vulnerable women by ensuring that such practices are illegal.

Sexual exploitation is not just an issue where food, accommodation or money are exchanged for sex; it also fuels trafficking. That is because there is demand for purchasing sex, which is legal in the UK—hence the attraction of sex trafficking to feed, and profit from, that demand. Valiant Richey of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe recently wrote a piece for *The Scotsman* in which he highlighted research that the OSCE had carried out in collaboration with Thomson Reuters, which showed that

“there has been a 200 per cent increase in UK internet searches for ‘Ukrainian escorts’.”

That totally undermines the myth that buyers of sex are unaware that trafficked women are being used to fulfil their demands. It shows clearly that, worse than their being uncaring about that, many people are actively seeking to exploit refugee women.

We need to be a country in which no one is for sale and where people who seek to do that are held to account and punished for their abuse. We need to stop being a lucrative destination for traffickers. We know that refugees are easy pickings for them. Too often, refugees have fled without identification. We therefore need safe routes for them to claim asylum in the UK. Without those, they are vulnerable as a ready source of profit to traffickers. Some will be sold into modern slavery to feed our need for cheap labour or to feed the demands of the sex industry.

The Co-operative Party, of which I am a member, has promoted a charter against modern slavery and is encouraging local authorities and organisations to look at their procurement processes to ensure that they are not inadvertently supporting slavers’ activities. However, we all have a role to play, because modern slavery is especially prevalent in cash-based industries. I ask people to remember that trafficking and exploitation go on in plain sight, so, if people suspect something, they should report it. I urge the Scottish Government to act and to make Scotland an unwelcoming place for such activity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stephanie Callaghan will be the last speaker in the open debate.

15:35

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): World refugee day is a day of both heartbreak and hope. It is a day on which to be grateful for the laws that protect the right to seek asylum from persecution and have saved thousands of lives. Everyone has a right to seek safety—whoever they are, wherever they come from and whenever they are forced to flee.

However, safety is just the first step. Once out of harm’s way, refugees need opportunities to heal, to learn, to work and to thrive. As we have heard, Scotland has a long history of welcoming and supporting refugees, and the contribution of refugee communities over successive generations has helped to make Scotland a proud, successful and diverse country.

It is regrettable that the limit of Scotland’s power over the immigration system undermines many of the values that Scottish people hold dear, such as inclusivity, hospitality and, above all, treating people as human beings. Over the past few weeks, we have witnessed the very notion of asylum being radically called into question in the passage of the so-called Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Rwanda deal that has been enacted by the UK Government. People across the UK have responded to those appalling attacks on refugee rights with a loud cry of “Not in my name.”

That fills me with hope. Widespread protests that have been led by ordinary citizens erupted across the UK, from the streets of Glasgow to the roads around Gatwick airport. Alongside those protests, fearless immigration lawyers have been defending the rule of law, while being decried by a Tory party that constantly scapegoats others in its terrifying culture wars.

At such critical moments, we cannot afford to feel passive and powerless. We cannot allow a UK Government that has been rejected time and again by the Scottish people to define who matters and who does not—who is disposable, and who is not. Today, 100 million people are experiencing displacement. Each of them is a person with hopes, dreams and loved ones—a person who is looking to rebuild their life.

I am privileged to be able to relay the story of Mohammed, who was a refugee who arrived in the UK 10 years ago after fleeing persecution. Now in his 30s, Mohammed has no status, social security or right to work. He has been stripped of the very freedoms that our laws set out to protect. For Mohammed, these have been 10 years of uncertainty and suffering, with no ability to plan for the future—being constantly trapped in the present and struggling to survive. His most recent appeal to the Home Office, three years ago, remains unanswered.

Mohammed illustrated his experience eloquently. I do not apologise for these words being hard to hear; they are hard for me to repeat.

“The law is like a stone. It cannot feel us, our humanity or our worth, designed by those who live comfortably in a warm home, perhaps with a family and a career. They do not feel what it’s like to be beaten to within an inch of their lives by a brutal immigration system. It’s like the man who makes bullets would not sell to the gun manufacturers if he

knew those very same bullets would pierce his heart. How can the lawmakers understand what it feels like to be shipped off to Rwanda, or hunted down by immigration officers like second-class citizens? The law is broken. There is no heart in these laws.”

Mohammed wants us to understand that no one chooses to be a refugee—but we can choose how we respond. The harsh UK asylum system leaves people in limbo and completely restricts their freedom and agency, while conscripting citizens here to enforce unjust immigration laws through the hostile environment.

I would like to see the cruelty of such legislation replaced with the compassion of our communities. As a Parliament, we can show the world that Scotland welcomes refugees and rejects the UK Government’s cruel and racist asylum policies. We must champion a shared sense of humanity. I will quote Mohammed again. He said:

“It should not matter if I am Syrian, Egyptian or Ukrainian. I am human. If I donate blood to someone who needs it, it is human blood and I can save someone. Why then does the law place one over the other? Why does it make me feel like I am not a human being? Why does it take decades for someone in the Home Office, who will not understand the plight of my struggle, to decide I have finally had enough suffering?”

The UK asylum system is driving people to suicide. Mohammed just wants to work to support his family and live beyond surviving each day, but he cannot, and he tells me that

“freedom does not like people like me.”

Refugees such as Mohammed should be celebrated for their courage and they should be supported to flourish and contribute to our culture and society.

When they are forced to flee, refugees can physically only carry so much, but refugees bring generations of dreams, experiences and traditions, they are hugely valuable. Across the world, refugees have brought new life, prosperity and rich cultural diversity to their host communities: they have certainly brought them to Scotland. This is a time to thank them and to recognise their positive impact.

The minister and others have gone into detail on the work that the Scottish Government and its partners are doing to support new Scots. I will simply close with this: let us stand together in solidarity with all refugees, let us defend the inalienable right to claim asylum, and let us never lose sight of our common humanity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

15:42

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am proud to close the debate for Scottish Labour. I say to those watching

that, whether you have sought refuge in Scotland from war and persecution, sought asylum here, been relocated from Afghanistan or displaced from Ukraine, you are welcome here.

I am also proud to represent Glasgow. I know that our city is great because of the people in it. Our diversity is our strength. Refugees and asylum seekers are our friends, family and neighbours, and many of them—those who are allowed to work—are our colleagues. It is true that people make Glasgow, and that includes refugees and asylum seekers.

What we have done to support Ukrainian refugees through the homes for Ukraine scheme has been incredible and has echoed that sentiment. People have opened their homes and their arms to offer sanctuary and safety to those who have been forced to flee their homes and livelihoods in the face of Russian aggression. The scheme has shown the very best of us, and it was heart-warming to see how many people were ready to step up. I want to thank everyone in communities across our country who opened their homes, including those who did so in Glasgow, some of whom my amazing office has supported in recent weeks.

However, we should not stop there. We cannot forget those from elsewhere who need our help, our empathy and our welcome. People from other countries have sought refuge, but have been treated with contempt—as Maggie Chapman put it earlier, there is a “refugee punishment regime”.

The differing approach of the UK Government in its treatment of people fleeing Ukraine and people fleeing other places is racist. My colleague Paul Sweeney has set out the many inconsistencies in the UK Government’s approach, including the policy of sending people to Rwanda, which is abhorrent. I deplore the despicable policy of sending people to Rwanda—a country that even the Home Office believes has a poor human rights record. It is a desperate and shameful move from a callous Tory Government that is risking lives. One horrific example is that LGBT people will face persecution just for being who they are, as my colleague Ruth Maguire referenced. On Stephen Kerr’s point about trafficking, we should address that by creating safe and compassionate routes to safety, not by outsourcing our legal responsibilities to countries with terrible human rights records.

Under successive Labour Governments, we were once a country that led the world on human rights. Now, human rights experts are queuing up to condemn a toxic Government policy. However, we cannot allow the actions of the Tories to act as a smokescreen for not quite getting it right here. The gulf between the Scottish National Party Government’s warm words and what is being delivered is growing, and we need to address that.

People who are participating in the homes for Ukraine scheme tell us that hosts and Ukrainians sometimes have different expectations and there is a reality check when people settle in, whether that is about pets and allergies, food choices or anything else that most of us take for granted.

Perhaps most worryingly—we have heard this already—approximately 500 people face weeks in hotels. Integration is key, but those people are being refused the opportunity to integrate. The SNP-Green Government has the power to do more on that, and I hope that it will. That must start by ensuring that, regardless of where people have come from, they move from hotels as soon as possible. Many colleagues, including Bob Doris, Sharon Dowe and my friend Foysol Choudhury, have noted that. The Government must address the fact that Ukrainians arriving in Scotland are being left to navigate the complexities of a new social security system on their own, unless they seek support from third sector integration networks, which are bursting at the seams and working beyond capacity to deliver support, while not receiving the funding that they need to deliver those services.

Neil Gray: I absolutely accept that we have too many people in hotels in Scotland, and I have already referenced the fact that I want us to move much faster in order to get people into long-term accommodation. However, does Pam Duncan-Glancy acknowledge the challenges in Scotland for local government, the Scottish Government and our third sector partners, which have been echoed in the supersponsor scheme in Wales? The Welsh Government has faced the same challenges and has had to pause. We have not paused yet. We want to work through things and ensure that we are able to provide the warm Scottish welcome that people expect us to provide.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I acknowledge the challenges and that there are difficulties ahead, but we have to do everything that we possibly can in Scotland not just to say that people are welcome but to provide them with a home in a place in which they can feasibly integrate into society. There is a lot more that can be done at the local authority level, including by my own local authority in Glasgow.

On the subject of financial support, I echo the calls of my colleague Paul Sweeney for free bus travel.

There is little support for local and community-level organisations to help the integration of Ukrainian refugees. Organisations such as the Glasgow integration networks and the Maryhill Integration Network, which I have had the pleasure to meet and work alongside, are providing lifeline services. It is time that the

Government stepped up and recognised that, and provided sustainable levels of funding for them. I welcome the minister's agreement to meet those organisations.

There is also an urgent need for clear, translated and easily accessible information for Ukrainians, including on social security. There appears to have been no preparation for, or research into, the proportion of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Scotland who cannot speak English. People are now being left to grapple with a system that does not speak their language. My colleague Rhoda Grant characterised that perfectly when she said that that would be terrifying.

Despite what right-wing commentators like to portray and the resulting hostile environment, which Alex Cole-Hamilton has referred to, refugees and asylum seekers want to work, but they are not allowed to. They want to study, too. A radiographer told me that she is desperate to work and that her daughter wants to take up her place at university here but cannot do so because she cannot get her tuition paid for until they have lived here for more than three years. Those people want to contribute, but our rules are stopping them. That is why we should consider removing the list of preferred occupations and take action to ensure that people such as that woman's daughter can study here. After all, education has been devolved since 1985, before the Scottish Parliament existed. I noted my colleague Kaukab Stewart's interest in education. I hope that she will support that action, too.

We know why and how the Government needs to act, so my question, of course, is: when will it do so? We need the Government to urgently consult community-level organisations regarding integration and support for people who arrive in Scotland and to set out what guidance will be given to local authorities regarding the supersponsor scheme and the homes for Ukraine scheme, particularly around safeguarding. Organisations have done that before—Room for Refugees, for example. I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary set out what examples the Government has taken up for the homes for Ukraine scheme.

Given that hosting arrangements will start to end soon, what will happen next? What is the plan for the thousands of Ukrainians who still cannot return to their homes five months into the war? Homes have been destroyed, towns are unrecognisable and Russian troops are still carrying out inhumane and indiscriminate acts. I ask the cabinet secretary to be specific in her response about what we will do next.

We promised refugees a warm Scottish welcome, but it is clear that the reality on the ground is falling a bit short. As Stephanie

Callaghan put it, this is a day of hope and heartbreak. It is a day about human rights. Now, more than ever, members must take our role as human rights defenders seriously and start defending them in deeds, not words.

On Saturday, I had the privilege of attending a celebration hosted by the Voices network UK in the multicultural centre in Garnethill. When the people gathered introduce themselves, they all said the same thing: that they felt lucky to be in Scotland. I replied that they were lucky but also—and I say again to them now—that we are lucky to have them.

15:50

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to be able to reply to the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. When I first read the title of the debate, I hoped that we would be able to push to the side the party and constitutional politics that often plague the chamber and focus on how we in Scotland can continue to help some of the most vulnerable people in the world. To a large extent, I have been gratified by the tone of the debate that we have had.

I say to Neil Gray that I am proud, as we all should be, of the fact that our country—the United Kingdom and Scotland—has never abdicated its moral responsibility for refugees. I agree with my colleagues Sharon Dowey and Rachael Hamilton that we have a global reputation for being a warm and welcoming place. That is why people want to come here. I recognise that.

Foysol Choudhury talked about race-based double standards. I completely agree with him on that point. That is why I am gratified that, in the last full year of accounting, 250,000 people net came to this country from the rest of the world. That means that they have come from far and wide. I am grateful for that. Migrants in general add enormously to the quality of all our lives through what they bring, such as the colour and vibrancy of their backgrounds and their diversity. That undoubtedly enriches all of us.

I was a little intrigued by Alex Cole-Hamilton's references to issues relating to the English Channel, some of which I recognised and some of which I did not. I simply point out to all colleagues that, when people cross the Channel, they are leaving beautiful France. They are leaving not a war zone but a country that is part of the European family.

Paul Sweeney: Does Stephen Kerr accept that there is no legal obligation on asylum seekers to seek refuge in the first safe country that they get to? There is a myriad of complex reasons why someone might want to seek onward travel to the

UK, such as family ties, diaspora connections and the fact that they speak English rather than French. Does he accept that those are valid reasons for seeking a safe route rather than being forced into an unsafe route, such as crossing the Channel?

Stephen Kerr: I do not accept that anyone is being forced into an unsafe route. All the reasons that Paul Sweeney just gave for people wanting to come to the United Kingdom are bone fide reasons for them to be able apply to come and make this their permanent home. No one is, or should ever feel, forced into the hands of the wicked people who trade in human trafficking. We should all be united in standing foursquare against their activities, which are utterly immoral.

Neil Gray: Paul Sweeney helpfully raises the question that I was going to raise and the response from Stephen Kerr does not cut it, to be frank. Unless there is a safe and legal route for people to claim asylum in the United Kingdom, there will always be a business model for the human traffickers that the Tory Government suggests is the modus operandi behind the Rwanda policy. When will the UK Government establish safe and legal routes by which people can arrive in the UK to claim asylum?

Stephen Kerr: The minister knows full well—I know that he does—that there many ways that people can apply for various forms of entry to the United Kingdom. We must not pander to the human traffickers' business model. It is utterly outrageous that we should show any division among us as elected members representing the people of Scotland and give any comfort to the activities of those people, who really are dreadful and wicked.

I am happy to confirm to Ruth Maguire if she is listening—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I will happily give way.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am sure that members agree that we should not pander to the human traffickers' business model.

Does Stephen Kerr recognise that the current working practices of the UK Border Agency—the delay and the atmosphere of disbelief that is adopted when asylum and immigration cases are being processed—often lead to child victims of trafficking who are waiting for their cases to be heard and adjudicated being re-trafficked in this country?

Stephen Kerr: Alex Cole-Hamilton is right to point out that we can improve and that we can be better, but let us not trash everything that this

country is trying to do to make it as welcoming as it possibly can be.

There are areas in which we can do better, and I will speak out as a Scottish Conservative against things that I consider to be immoral and wrong. The number 1 thing that we should have in our sights when we consider the plight of many of the people who are literally being washed up on the shores of these islands is how they got here in the first place. There is horrible profiteering, with traffickers trading in human misery. We should be united, foursquare, against all that.

Paul Sweeney and I have a long track record of exchanging views in various places. He is gifted when it comes to the use of hyperbole. For example, he said that he is not “interested in playing politics”, but that is all that he ended up doing for the major part of his speech. I do not really want to get into the realm of playing politics; I want us to be united in this chamber, as we should be.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will give way, because I have mentioned the member.

Paul Sweeney: In the spirit of unity, would the member agree in principle that—this is a practical solution—the idea of extending free concessionary travel to asylum seekers in Scotland would be a commendable and practical way of helping people now?

Stephen Kerr: As it happens, I believe that we should do everything in our power to assimilate people, so that they can feel that they can make a contribution to the society to which they have come.

Many people have a very romanticised view of what it would be like to live in this country, and we should do everything in our power to help them to have the best possible start. I am not against any measure that assimilates people and allows them to feel welcome and able to make a contribution. Many of the people who come to our country do so with a willingness to work. In fact, in many cases, they are first-class workers who are highly skilled and qualified, and we ought to recognise them as such.

Stephanie Callaghan: Yesterday, the Home Secretary seemed to suggest that migrants are exploiting Britain. Can I take it that the member disagrees with that?

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure whether I understood that correctly. Did the member suggest that the Home Secretary said that migrants are being exploited in this country?

Stephanie Callaghan: No—exploiting Britain.

Stephen Kerr: I do not know that quote—I am not familiar with it. However, I do not necessarily subscribe to that view at all.

I have not even made it past the first paragraph of my speech, Presiding Officer, but there you go.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you have been very generous with interventions, so you can have at least another minute.

Stephen Kerr: Another minute—you are very generous, Presiding Officer.

Our United Kingdom has a proud history of welcoming and supporting refugees. I say again that that does not mean that there is not room for improvement or that are not processes that need to be re-engineered to be more considerate and sensitive to people's needs.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the member give way one final time?

Stephen Kerr: Unfortunately, I cannot give way, because I have got only one minute left and I need to go straight to my conclusion.

I have a number of points that I wish to make about the nature of refugees and economic migration, which is, undoubtedly, a global issue of our time. There are no unilateral solutions to the problem, but it is a challenge with which we need to grapple. People who say—in one-line sentences—that there are simple solutions to the issue are, frankly, kidding themselves.

We need to uphold the dignity of refugees, we must work with our European partners and neighbours and we must ensure that we have a common approach to working with refugees. We need to work together, collectively, to end the barbaric human trafficking that we see across our continent.

Throughout our history, the United Kingdom, and Scotland, in particular, has continuously helped the most vulnerable people, because we understand that it is a human duty to help those who are most in need. Let us build on that reputation and make sure that the United Kingdom, and Scotland, in particular, continues to support the most vulnerable now and in the future.

15:59

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): It is a privilege to mark this year's world refugee day in Parliament and to debate its theme: the right to seek safety.

Before I forget to do so, I join Bob Doris in wishing the Maryhill Integration Network a very happy birthday after 21 years. I join others in

thanking all the organisations and individuals who give their time and, in many cases, their homes to support people who are fleeing war and persecution.

This afternoon, we have reflected on the many people from many different parts of the world who have been forced to flee their homes because of war and persecution and have rebuilt, or are rebuilding, their lives in Scotland. The world is, without a doubt, becoming more complex. People are arriving here in many different ways, including by seeking asylum, through refugee resettlement programmes and through visa routes for displaced people. No matter how they have arrived here, we welcome and support people, and we hope that they choose to stay here and make Scotland their home.

There have been many thoughtful and thought-provoking contributions to the debate, and I will try to refer to as many of them as possible.

People continue to be displaced by war and persecution, and Scotland continues to welcome people who arrive from Ukraine and Afghanistan and those who are seeking asylum from other countries. Scotland is part of their story, just as they are part of Scotland's story.

For nearly a decade, our approach to supporting refugees and people seeking asylum has been framed by the new Scots refugee integration strategy, which was highlighted by Kaukab Stewart. There has been significant change over that time, including the introduction of refugee resettlement schemes, which have resulted in all 32 of Scotland's local authorities welcoming people into their communities. Refugees now live all across Scotland, not just in our biggest cities, and that is how it should be. We have also faced the challenges of a global pandemic and the continued impact of Covid-19, particularly on some of our most vulnerable and marginalised communities.

In the past year, we have witnessed the sudden large-scale displacement of people first from Afghanistan and then from Ukraine, with many arriving in the UK. According to the UNHCR, the total number of people who have been forcibly displaced has exceeded 100 million for the first time. That number includes refugees and people seeking asylum as well as the 53.2 million people who have been internally displaced.

To stand up our support for displaced people from Ukraine, officials have, quite rightly, been redeployed from other areas of the Scottish Government. That will, of course, have an impact on other priorities, although we will try to minimise that impact. However, that redeployment is the right thing to do in responding to the humanitarian crisis.

We hope that our collaborative international response will address the underlying causes of forced displacement. What we can do here and now is support refugees, people seeking asylum and displaced people for as long as Scotland is their home. We have committed to working with our partners to refresh the new Scots refugee integration strategy. We will ensure that it continues to be shaped by refugees and people seeking asylum as well as by those with expertise in supporting them in Scotland. Our new Scots approach is clear that integration should be supported from day 1 of arrival, not only for refugees but for people seeking asylum. The Scottish Government is clear that people seeking asylum must be supported in a way that enables them to rebuild their lives in our communities.

The UK asylum system is increasingly defined by delays and backlogs. Although Covid has exacerbated the situation, it is clear that those issues existed before the pandemic. People are being left in limbo, sometimes for years on end. Stephanie Callaghan illustrated that very powerfully when raising the case of Mohammed. While awaiting a decision on their asylum application, people are subject to no recourse to public funds restrictions and are unable to work, except in very limited circumstances. They might be eligible for Home Office accommodation and financial support, but only if they would otherwise be destitute. Uncertainty about their future and restricted access to services can often compound the impact of trauma that people suffered when they were forced to flee and from their experiences during their sometimes harrowing journeys to seek refuge.

As many people have said, the UK Government's policies set people up to fail, and the end result is too often destitution.

Like many others, I believe that the UK asylum system is broken—as, I think, Foyso Choudhury said. The answer is fixing the delays and improving the system here instead of sending people thousands of miles away. I say to Stephen Kerr that sending people to Rwanda really does not uphold the dignity of refugees and asylum seekers.

Others have said this on many occasions today, so members will not be surprised to hear that the Scottish Government is fundamentally opposed to the UK Government's policy of sending people who are seeking asylum to Rwanda, which is essentially offshoring people. I am seriously concerned that the policy will not stop or reduce dangerous journeys to the UK, and we have already seen that that is the case. The UK Government's latest move, which is to electronically tag the people whom it sought to send to Rwanda, is yet another example of how

people who are already vulnerable are being further marginalised.

Stephen Kerr: The cabinet secretary makes the important point that we do not know whether one particular policy or another will work. What ideas does the cabinet secretary have? Does she agree with me that it would be a good thing if Britain and France could work something out so that we can stem the activities of human traffickers? The UK has given France tens of millions of pounds to create an understanding about co-operative working to that end, but it has not worked. Can the cabinet secretary agree that it would be desirable for that to happen now?

Shona Robison: The best way to break the business model of the criminal trafficking gangs is to provide safe and legal routes to the UK that people can use.

I have a lot of information that I could talk about in a whole other debate on the type of asylum system that we want to create, but allowing people to work would be a fundamentally good start. People arrive here with huge skills and talents but, unfortunately, they are not allowed to deploy those, even though that would benefit our economy. There are a number of ways in which we could build a much fairer asylum system, but establishing safe and legal routes to the UK is absolutely fundamental.

Paul Sweeney rose—

Shona Robison: I will come on to the point that I think the member wants to ask me about in a second.

It is clear that there is a lot of strong feeling about UK Government policy. As I have said before, we have written to the Home Office a number of times to raise all the issues that members have raised this afternoon about the policy and of course the provisions of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

Clearly, we need and want to do more to support people who are here, and a number of ideas have been raised about that. Paul Sweeney, Bob Doris and others talked about concessionary travel. The latest position on that is that we are awaiting a proposal from the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust to provide free bus travel for as many asylum seekers as possible who are not already covered by the existing concessionary travel schemes.

We want to get that proposal in and get help to people where it is needed as quickly as possible. However, we need to ensure that we work through the issues of those who have no recourse to public funds, which Paul Sweeney knows well. I am happy to keep members updated on that. Absolutely, we want to move at pace, but we need

to get it right. The two organisations that are working on the issue know better than anyone else what might work.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the cabinet secretary for that encouraging response. I just want to put it on the record that JustRight Scotland has offered legal opinion that there are ways to circumvent the no recourse to public funds issue and ways of introducing new measures, if they are outwith the list of, I think, 27 defined benefits. Will the cabinet secretary take that into consideration?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I am happy to give you the time back for that intervention and the earlier one, cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Okay. Thank you.

I will ask officials to look at the information from JustRight Scotland that Paul Sweeney has mentioned.

Yesterday was world refugee day. The United Nations has rightly reminded us of the paramount importance of the right to seek safety. In among all the difficulties, there has been a positive refugee festival with the theme of Scotland's year of stories, in which people are telling the positive stories of those who have come here and bringing stories of refugees to life.

That is an important thing to do, in among all the difficulties that we have talked about today. We have to maintain our positive approach as a country of welcome and refuge, we must work together to support people who are fleeing war and persecution, wherever they are from, and we must redouble our efforts to uphold the spirit and intention of the 1951 Refugee Convention by recognising people's right to seek safety. With that, it is a pleasure to close the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on world refugee day: welcoming and supporting refugees in Scotland's communities.

Urgent Question

16:10

Forensic Testing (Delays)

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports from the Scottish Police Authority that 386 cases of potential drug driving cannot be prosecuted because of major delays in forensic testing.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): I was first notified of potential capacity issues last year and, in October last year, I authorised urgent additional funding of £325,000. In late April this year, the Government was alerted to a significant number of cases that had not been processed in time for the Crown to take further action. I instructed my officials to urgently work with the Scottish Police Authority, Police Scotland and the Crown to assess the scale of the issue and determine what immediate and longer-term mitigations were needed. Further exceptional funding of £370,000 was released earlier this month and I fully support a commission from the SPA for Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland to undertake a formal review.

Russell Findlay: Three years ago, Humza Yousaf stage a public relations event alongside a police officer at which he said:

"The police are ready, they have the tools necessary and if you are caught there will be a zero-tolerance approach and you will face some hefty consequences."

The police were indeed ready, except that we now discover that the tools were broken and that hundreds of drug drivers face no consequences for recklessly endangering others on our roads. We know that the Scottish National Party is great at announcements but not so good on delivery, so what is the cabinet secretary doing now to fix this and will he reconsider his planned police budget cuts, which risk making such failures more likely in future?

Keith Brown: First, I mentioned the additional financing that is being provided to the SPA. That involves both a series of tranches of additional funds in terms of resources and additional capital expenditure. It is true, of course, that the estimates for how many cases there are likely to be were formulated by Police Scotland, the SPA and the Crown Office—people who are much more expert in this than me. I cannot do an estimate of how many cases there are likely to be. It is also true that the police, the SPA and the Crown Office will say that it has been an underestimate—there have been nearly double the number of tests done and

people coming forward with positive tests. Those organisations are the experts; they do that. They are also independent—I do not know whether Russell Findlay accepts that fact. We will do the two things that are required of us. The first was to bring forward the legislative tools that they need to do that and to make Scotland a safer place, which they have done.

This is of course a serious error; the SPA has said that. It has a full meeting on Thursday to go over it in more detail. It has had the legislative tools to allow the police to make these stops and get people tested for drugs, which has made Scotland's roads safer. However, they have to correct this, so we have also seen the commitment from the SPA to get HMICS to investigate what more can be done to make sure that this can be fixed now and into the future. That is the right thing to do.

In terms of the resources, the budget cut that Mr Findlay should have mentioned is the 5.2 per cent budget cut that we have had from his colleagues, the Tories at Westminster. Last year, the police had their resources budget protected and I am pretty sure that there were no amendments from the Tories seeking further budget for the police. We will see what happens this year.

Russell Findlay: I will not bother addressing the cabinet secretary's creative accounting. However, three of the dropped cases involved someone being injured. Can the cabinet secretary explain whether those injured people have been told that their case was dropped? If not, will he commit to doing that? Can he provide Parliament with a detailed breakdown of each of the 386 cases, and, indeed, apologise to the victims and all law-abiding road users who have been endangered by this incompetence?

Keith Brown: I note Russell Findlay's point about incompetence. I do not have the full details of the three cases that he mentioned because that information is held by the Crown Office, but I know that, in one of the cases—and possibly the other two—the injury was self-inflicted and did not involve a collision with another vehicle. I am happy to provide more information about the figures—it has taken some time to get the definitive figures that I have already stated—as and when we get that from the SPA and the Crown Office. They are the only ones who will have information on the stage of the prosecution process that they are at, for reasons that I am sure that Russell Findlay is aware of. As I said, I am happy to provide that information when it comes forward.

There is no creative accounting: there has been a 5.2 per cent cut to this Government's budget. However, despite that happening, we protected the police resource budget last year. In fact, in the past two or three years, we have given more to the

police than was even asked for by the Conservatives, and we have more police officers per capita in this country and they are paid a higher salary than police officers in the rest of the UK.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): It is welcome that the Scottish Government introduced drug driving limits and roadside testing in October 2019. However, we have heard that the demand for forensic testing has exceeded supply. Despite the budget constraints that the cabinet secretary alluded to earlier, what funding has the Scottish Government provided to the Scottish Police Authority to build testing and analysis capacity since the introduction of the new offence in 2019?

Keith Brown: Overall, £1.9 million has been provided to the SPA since 2018-19 to assist it in delivering testing for the offence. That funding has been in addition to the core budget that the SPA has received to ensure the delivery of policing in Scotland.

The new offence required new forensic testing machines to be purchased by the SPA, and we provided capital funding totalling £572,000 for the machines. We have also provided more than £1.3 million in resource funding for outsourcing through three tranches of funding, including the £370,000 that I agreed to issue earlier this month.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Are other crimes beyond drug driving affected by the issue? I understand that, in November, the Government paid to outsource 30 per cent of testing to commercial forensic services, to allow about 900 drug driving cases to be dealt with. Is that a long-term solution or is it the plan to return to an in-house service?

Keith Brown: The initial intention was to have an in-house service. I should have mentioned that part of the problem is that the in-house lab that Police Scotland uses suffered a flooding incident during the course of the pandemic, which has caused problems. The outsourcing that took place was in deliberate response to that, to ensure that we had the capacity in relation to that. Part of the investigation by HMICS and the work that we will do with the SPA will be to ensure that we plot out the way forward. The main objective will be to drive out the risk that such things happen again in the future.

As for Katy Clark's question on other crimes, that is for the procurator fiscal's office to answer.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I know that the cabinet secretary accepts that the buck stops with him, but it is disappointing that, in reporting the statistics, he did not take the opportunity to apologise to the public for what is a massive failure on the part of the whole system

when it comes to prosecuting people who have been found to have driven under the influence of drugs.

Keith Brown: I am not sure that there is a question for me to answer there, but I—of course—regret any instance where the opportunity to prosecute a case of drug driving has been lost as a result of the issues that have arisen with SPA forensics.

The whole point is to build on success, which is undoubtedly there, because more than 5,000 people have been stopped who would not have been stopped under the previous legislation. We want to ensure that every case that needs to be prosecuted is prosecuted.

This is not passing the buck, but the SPA, Police Scotland and the Crown Office are independent—I know that the Tories have a hard time getting their heads around that—and we want to ensure that they have all the tools that are necessary to prosecute every case that they have to.

Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a stage 3 debate on motion S6M-05095, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

Before the debate begins, the Presiding Officer is required under standing orders to decide whether, in her view, any provision of the bill relates to a protected subject matter: that is, whether it modifies the electoral system and franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. It is the Presiding Officer's view that no provision of the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill relates to a protected subject matter and therefore that the bill does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

Before I invite Tom Arthur to open the debate, I call Kate Forbes to signify Crown consent to the bill.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): For the purposes of rule 9.11 of standing orders, I advise Parliament that Her Majesty, having been informed of the purport of the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, has consented to place her prerogative and interest, so far as they are affected by the bill, at the disposal of Parliament for the purposes of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will move to the debate. Members who wish to participate should press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible. I call Tom Arthur to speak to and move the motion.

16:20

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I am pleased to open the stage 3 debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, and I start by thanking the convener, Ariane Burgess, and members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for their assiduous scrutiny of the bill during stages 1 and 2 and for their on-going support for its measures and for the small number of amendments that we made. I also thank the Finance and Public Administration Committee for its consideration of the bill's financial memorandum.

We do not often have a bill without any stage 3 amendments. That is a fair reflection of the cross-party support that the bill attracted at stages 1 and 2, and I appreciate the contributions that members have made throughout.

The intention of the bill is to deliver fairness for all ratepayers and ensure that, for all non-domestic properties, any effects of Covid-19 are considered at revaluation. The rateable values of non-domestic properties are periodically updated at revaluations to reflect changes in the general level of rents. The next revaluation is on 1 April 2023. Outside revaluations, amendments can be made to reflect a "material change of circumstances". That material change is typically a physical change to a property, such as an extension or demolition, or it could be a major change to the area in which the property is located, such as localised roadworks.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, more than 40,000 appeals regarding non-domestic properties have been lodged. The timing of that abnormal spike suggests that most of those were lodged because of the pandemic. We do not believe that the "material change of circumstances" provisions are appropriate in relation to Covid-19. Market-wide economic changes affecting property values should be reflected at revaluations, when all relevant impacts on values across all properties will be taken into account. That would include any impact on rateable values arising from Covid-19 or Covid-19 restrictions. That view is shared by the United Kingdom Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly, where similar legislation has already been passed.

In June last year, we announced that we intended to take measures to rule out appeals on the grounds of Covid. The Valuation and Rating (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Order 2021 came into force on 1 December 2021 but has effect only back to 1 April 2021. The bill builds on that order, going back further than was possible through secondary legislation, and it applies the rule that is set out in the order both to rateable value and to the net annual value from which rateable values are derived. It provides that, in calculating the rateable value or net annual value in relation to any property in the 2017 valuation roll, no account can be taken of any matter that occurred on or after 2 April 2020 that is directly or indirectly attributable to the coronavirus.

The bill was introduced last December and amendments at stage 2 clarified and strengthened the policy intention that, should a matter attributable to the coronavirus first occur before 2 April 2020 and continue on or after that date, no account can be taken of that matter with effect from 2 April 2020 onwards. That date aligns with the date from which the definition of "material change of circumstances" was clarified by the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020 to exclude changes in general economic circumstances.

The issue is hugely complex, and the outcome of any appeal is uncertain and may take years. It cannot be assumed that appeals would be successful or their outcome fair for those who are most affected.

We are aware that a number of large and multinational firms that have been largely unaffected by, or even successful during, the pandemic made appeals against their properties after the outbreak of the pandemic. The Federation of Small Businesses has also pointed out that there are not many small businesses among those that have submitted appeals.

We want to ensure fairness among all ratepayers. We believe that the right time for market-wide economic changes to be reflected, including any effects of Covid-19, is at revaluation. The next revaluation is not far away—new values will come into effect on 1 April 2023 based on rental values on 1 April 2022. We chose to delay the revaluation by a year and bring forward the one-year tone date to allow time for the property market to adjust post-Covid. The introduction of three-yearly revaluation cycles and a one-year tone date will ensure that future valuations are more closely aligned with current market values and they should, therefore, take account of any potential changes as a result of the pandemic.

The bill does not apply to changes to the physical state of a property or whether a property should or should not be included in the valuation roll, nor does it remove the ratepayer's right of appeal. It will be for appellants to decide whether they want to pursue or withdraw their Covid appeals. We recently extended the disposal deadline for appeals by one year to 31 December 2023. That recognises that the bulk of appeals remain outstanding and that appellants may not feel that they are in a sufficiently informed position until Parliament has finished its scrutiny of the bill. The extended deadline will enable appellants who have made an appeal on Covid-19 grounds to make an informed decision about whether to pursue their appeal or withdraw it once the Parliament has completed its scrutiny.

We all know that Covid-19 had a major impact on the economy. In Government, we responded swiftly and on an unprecedented scale to support businesses through the pandemic when they needed it most. Businesses have benefited from more than £4.7 billion of support from the Scottish Government since the start of the pandemic, including around £1.6 billion of Covid-related rates relief. We were the only Government in the UK to provide 100 per cent rates relief for retail, hospitality, leisure and aviation for the past two years. To help those businesses to get back on their feet and prevent a cliff-edge return to full liability, we continued retail, hospitality and leisure

relief at 50 per cent for the first three months of 2022-23, capped at £27,500 per ratepayer.

The Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented and its impact could not have been anticipated. Although our economy is recovering, there are still challenges and issues arising from the pandemic that require our attention. On non-domestic rates, we did what we could with the powers that we had to ease the economic effects for many. Now, we have had to act both to mitigate the impact of large volumes of appeals and to protect the public finances more generally. The bill will maintain the integrity of the non-domestic rates system and the stability of the public finances. It will provide clarity, consistency and fairness to all ratepayers.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

16:27

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I start by giving the cabinet secretary my best wishes for her maternity leave. Nothing could lighten this debate more, to be quite honest.

I thank the organisations that contributed to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's work on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, and I thank our clerks for the work that they have done.

The passage of the bill has not been controversial. There has quite rightly been cross-party understanding of why it is needed. We are all acutely aware of the significant impact that the pandemic has had on businesses and on the workload of assessors across Scotland, and of the significant and unsustainable backlog that has built up. As has been stated, since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been more than 49,000 non-domestic rates appeals. That compares with pre-pandemic levels of about 5,700 appeals being lodged.

Scottish Conservatives accept the main principles behind the bill, which are that we should extend the rule to cover both net annual value and rateable value, and to cover the period back to 2 April 2020—the date on which the Scottish Government amended the definition of “material change of circumstances” to exclude changes in economic circumstances.

As I stated at stages 1 and 2, the bill is a sensible measure to update Scotland's non-domestic rates and appeals system. We have also seen changes in England and Wales to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in this regard.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee agreed that, because of the level of scrutiny of the order, an extensive programme of

evidence taking was not necessary. During the bill's passage through Parliament, we have heard concerns from a number of key stakeholders, and I welcome the fact that the minister has engaged with them. Those concerns come from businesses that operate in different sectors of our economy. It is clear that we need to look at how we can improve the appeals system to ensure those rights in the future, and I believe that the Government can take that work forward.

I welcome the minister's assurances that the bill will not remove the right of appeal. That is important for many businesses, and it is a welcome step forward. Finally, I welcome the extension of the disposal deadline by a further year beyond 31 December. That extension was asked for and—importantly—the request was accepted.

The UK and Scottish Governments have both provided unprecedented levels of support to Scottish businesses during the pandemic—for example, the provision of 100 per cent rates relief for all eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties. That is a huge amount of support, which has been very welcome. However, those sectors are already reporting that they are not recovering to the levels that they thought they would. Just today, there were reports in Edinburgh that accommodation bookings for the festival are not where businesses thought that they would be. We know, therefore, that many Scottish businesses are not out of the pandemic hangover quite yet.

The support that was provided, which amounted to around £10 billion in 2020-21, and the announcement that the support scheme would be extended by another three months, followed by a nine-month period of relief at 66 per cent, have been very much welcomed by businesses. Taken together, those support measures have, across Government, been worth £16 billion to the sectors. It is worth reflecting on how both the Scottish and UK Governments have stepped up during the pandemic period.

During the consideration of the bill, I have put on record a number of my concerns about how support schemes have been administered and how we must learn lessons in that regard for the future. There are businesses in much the same field that have been either winners or losers in being able to access support, sometimes simply because they are in different council areas.

It is clear that the processes that councils have used have not been universal. I hope that that issue is coming out of the assessor process, and that the Government will consider it as well. We all hope that we will never face a similar public health emergency again. Nevertheless, we must take

forward the learning from the pandemic in that regard.

I turn to the important issue of support for businesses as we move forward. Scottish retailers have called on the Scottish ministers to lower business rates in Scotland permanently. Firms in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors were fully exempt from non-domestic rates during the pandemic until 31 March. I welcome the SNP ministers' extension of rates relief for the first quarter of the financial year, but we need to consider what additional support could be made available to those sectors that are clearly not recovering to the levels that they thought they would be.

It is clear that the pandemic has had a negative impact not only on our town centres but on many rural communities. Local businesses that were thriving before Covid have closed, are struggling to pay their bills or are finding that the way in which their business operates has completely changed. Significant consideration needs to be given to how businesses can adapt to what is now a very different environment.

As I have said, Scottish Conservatives want the Scottish Government to continue business rates relief. I want to put that on record.

Scottish Conservatives will support the bill to update Scotland's non-domestic rates legislation and we support the committee's recommendations, too. The legislation is similar to that which has been passed in both England and Wales and is, I believe, the most straightforward way to sustain an already overwhelmed appeals system. As I said, the Scottish Conservatives will support the bill at decision time.

16:33

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour will support the bill at decision time, as we did at stages 1 and 2.

As we also did at previous stages of the bill's journey through Parliament, we echo the concern of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and a number of stakeholders about the lack of formal consultation prior to the introduction of secondary legislation. However, I note what the minister has said at various stages about consultation with the sector being an on-going issue on which he and other ministers have been working. Nevertheless, we call on ministers to restate that the omission of a formal consultation does not set a precedent for future legislation.

Non-domestic rates, which are also known as business rates, are a form of property tax on businesses that helps to pay for local council

services. The amount of tax that is paid is based on the rateable value of the property, and the rateable value is based on comparable rental value in the years before the valuation takes place. As the minister said, rateable values are reviewed every few years. If it is passed, the bill will ensure that the impact of Covid-19 cannot be used in determining the rateable value of a non-domestic property from 2 April 2020 to 1 April 2021, unless the impact resulted in a change to the physical state of the property.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee looked at the issues that are raised in the bill when we looked at the Valuation and Rating (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Order 2021. The order does the same thing as the bill, but covers the period from 1 April 2021 onwards. Scottish Labour supported the order at committee. As the minister and Miles Briggs mentioned, the Welsh and UK Governments have made the same change across the rest of the UK.

Scottish Labour absolutely accepts that allowing consideration of a large volume of appeals would have significant workload implications for assessors and valuation committees. We highlight assessors' concerns about potential litigation for appeals relating to the two weeks prior to 2 April 2020, and we flag up the general concerns around assessors' workload that we heard in evidence to the committee.

Stakeholders have expressed fears that the policy decision sets a precedent in terms of retrospective changes to tax policy. Scottish Labour plans to hold the Government to its assurances that the principles of certainty and engagement would underpin any future non-domestic rates policies.

The Government could do more to support our towns and high streets through Scotland's local tax system. We have heard from the Scottish Fiscal Commission and others that we lost almost 20,000 small businesses during a single year of the Covid crisis. Many more will surely follow if the Government does not adequately support small businesses through the recovery phase. We have repeatedly called for retail, hospitality and leisure properties in Scotland to be in receipt of the same 50 per cent rates relief that is being offered to businesses in England in this financial year.

We have also called on the Scottish Government to level up the business rates that are imposed on large warehouses such as are used by the majority of online retailers, in order that we could reduce the rates that are paid by bricks-and-mortar stores from 2022-23. That would support our high streets, which Miles Briggs spoke about.

Aside from some concerns around the process, we welcome the bill and we will support it at

decision time. We look forward to a more wide-ranging debate on how to use the non-domestic rates system to support our high streets and struggling small businesses.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

16:38

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words in support of the bill. I note that there have been no further amendments lodged at stage 3. The stage 2 amendments were minor and our committee supported the bill unanimously. It is only a few weeks ago that I spoke in the stage 1 debate.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the bill's purpose is fairly straightforward: it is to ensure fairness for all Scottish ratepayers. In doing that, it will protect the integrity of the non-domestic rating system from wholesale changes and numerous appeals that could otherwise take place.

The bill proposes that the effects of Covid cannot be used as a factor when considering a property's rateable value, and would not be admissible in terms of material changes of circumstances. That is in line with what is being done in our neighbouring jurisdictions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland—as a few members have already mentioned. If the bill were not passed today, Scotland alone would have to bear the potential losses. One colleague noted that MCC can still be deployed but only in relation to physical changes to a property or if some other major change can be demonstrated. The route is still open for those types of appeals, although not on the basis of the impact of Covid.

The prospect of a huge number of Covid-related appeals coming in probably filled the assessors—and us—with dread. The serious point about having to deal with that and the potential impact on local government finances could not be overlooked. The bill takes care of that issue by providing the much sought after commodities of clarity and consistency of purpose in lawmaking.

We must not forget the comments that were made by the Federation of Small Businesses as we progressed the bill. Those comments reminded us that few of our smaller businesses are likely to be among the appellants because they often do not have the resources or the time to lodge appeals. The risk would be that we could create an imbalance in relation to who could lodge and be successful in appeals—which might be the larger corporates and supermarkets that, it might be argued, did much better during the Covid period than the small business sector did. The consequence of that could be that MCC appeals

might target support where it is needed least. I think that the committee was agreed on that point—as members are today.

I understand that, since the start of the pandemic, 50,000 non-domestic properties have appealed on the basis of a material change of circumstances. If those appeals were to be successful, that could significantly reduce the level of public finance that comes in to support local services; that is not to mention the impact of getting through such a volume of work. The financial memorandum that is attached to the bill sets out how its impact will help to avoid that significant level of risk.

A couple of issues were raised during the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's work on the bill in relation to whether there had been sufficient consultation with stakeholders. The minister was clear in his original remarks at the committee that he had announced his intentions a full year ago, in June 2021, and that extensive consultation had taken place.

It is recognised that the Scottish Government had to act quickly to get financial help out to businesses and that, by and large, that was successful and a much needed source of support. The bill simply provides the clarity and assurances that are necessary to maintain public services, and to ensure that the levels of finance that are needed to deliver them are stable. That will maintain our aspiration to deliver a fairer country by building on the integrity of our non-domestic rating system in order to protect the revenues of our local authorities at this crucial time.

I am happy to support the bill at stage 3. I look forward to the remaining members' speeches as we conclude our consideration of the bill today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Coffey. That neatly concludes the open debate. We now move to closing speeches.

16:43

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): There is unanimous support for the bill, in recognition of what it aims to achieve, so there is not a lot more to add. Instead, I will take the opportunity to talk about businesses.

Miles Briggs spoke of the support for businesses from the UK and Scottish Governments during the Covid outbreak. There is no doubt that businesses have suffered. According to the businesses in Scotland statistical release, it is estimated that, between March 2020 and March 2021, the number of businesses in Scotland fell by 19,805—a drop of 5.4 per cent. That is a worry.

The FSB says that

“this trend implies that the crisis has been particularly difficult for the self-employed and new start businesses. However, Scotland also saw a decline in registered businesses over the same period, with 790 of these firms lost.”

It is clear that businesses are still facing huge financial uncertainties. Parts of the economy have experienced two or even three rounds of closures. Every round of restrictions leaves businesses with smaller cash reserves, increased debt and great uncertainty. Businesses still need as much support as they can get in order to help to rebuild Scotland's economy.

Retail, hospitality and leisure properties will be in receipt of 50 per cent rates relief, up to a maximum of £110,000, in England and Wales in order to support those sectors on their road to recovery from the impacts of the pandemic. Perhaps the minister could look at the fact that the Scottish Government is offering only three months of half rates. That is why Scottish Labour believes that it is fair that we should consider how to support businesses further and provide similar support to prevent economic disadvantage and ensure that such businesses can help to rebuild Scotland's economy.

The minister also has the privilege of wearing the planning hat. We know that the pressures in that area are not just about Covid. For many years, out-of-town centres were supported by local planning authorities, and we can see the impact that those have had, along with online shopping. My point is that people have to choose to go to town centres and often have to pay to park their cars—it is not as easy as it is for them to just drive into a large out-of-town shopping centre, park their car, walk to the shops and do their shopping. We need to rethink, and there is an opportunity here for us to do that.

Another point that I made at stage 1, which I will make again here, is on valuations for small businesses. At the previous revaluation, I dealt with many such businesses that were putting appeals in. They found it difficult to understand why they had a certain rateable value pinned on to them in comparison with those in other towns where there were larger shops and other premises. At one point I was even told that, because a particular shop was on a busy street, that had led to higher rates being imposed. However, the fact that no cars could stop there because there was no parking on that busy street meant that it just did not add up.

If we can bring greater transparency to revaluation, we should do so, because that is important. I am also keen to work with the minister to look at town centres. As he will be aware, across mid-Scotland and Fife, there are real issues about the future of those.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Lumsden for a very generous five minutes.

16:47

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Thank you for being so generous, Presiding Officer.

Non-domestic rates continue to be one of the biggest issues for our local authorities, especially in the north-east of Scotland. I have met many local businesses, to speak to them in order to understand the issues that they face.

As my colleagues have mentioned, the Scottish Conservatives are supportive of the bill in its mirroring of what has happened in the rest of the UK. It is a sensible measure to update the non-domestic rates appeals system. However, I feel that much wider reform is needed. We will continue to press the Scottish Government to meet business leaders to discuss the further reforms that are required.

Although the bill is welcome, it falls short of providing the help that thousands of businesses need, due to the failed system. During the debate in April, I pointed out that, in 2017, businesses in the north-east of Scotland faced huge increases in their rates bills when the valuation was assessed at the peak of oil and gas activity, only for new bills to arrive just as the sector faced one of its biggest slumps. The courts ruled that there had been no material change in circumstance and that businesses would have to wait for the revaluation to take place. Then that was delayed by a year because of Covid, despite calls from many business leaders for the revaluation date to be brought forward. As the minister pointed out, revaluation was the time for the market to be fixed. The delay was so disappointing for the businesses that were waiting. We continue to have a situation in which the non-domestic rates income from businesses in Aberdeen is greater than that from businesses in Edinburgh—a city with twice its population. Many businesses in the north-east simply cannot believe that that is the case.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that were released last month gave worrying news to businesses up and down Scotland. They showed that non-domestic rates income was set to increase by 30 per cent over the next five years, from £2.7 billion to £3.6 billion, at a time when growth will be minimal, which left many people wondering where the extra £900 million will come from.

The forecast also showed that some businesses last year voluntarily handed back Covid business rates relief funds to the tune of £126 million. That was the right thing to do for places such as Asda, Sainsbury's and Boots, whose income seems to

have increased. Some may have thought that that cash would go to local authorities to help struggling businesses on the high streets or that it could have been used to plug some of the non-domestic rates overdraft, but no—instead, the devolved Scottish National Party Government used it simply to plug other holes in its budget. Those were business rate support funds and should have been used just for that purpose.

I welcome the contributions from members from across the chamber. First, I agree with Miles Briggs in sending the cabinet secretary my best wishes for what I am sure will be a busy and joyful summer. Miles Briggs also mentioned that the right to appeal has not been removed. Of course, we welcome that. He also mentioned support. For me, that just masks a failing system.

The issue of town centres was mentioned by Miles Briggs and by Alex Rowley. Town centres have faced difficulties over the past few years, and we have an opportunity to fix some of those things with a new system. Miles Briggs also asked for greater transparency over the appeals system, which would be welcomed by so many.

Mark Griffin mentioned warehouses that are used by online retailers who pay very little in non-domestic rates, compared with others. That highlights that change is needed.

The current system of business rates is outdated, and we need to look at a much greater and broader reform. High streets in our local towns and villages struggled for years before the pandemic and have struggled right through it. We have to look at and work with our local businesses to develop a system of rates that works for them and encourages growth. We need to put the voices of business at the heart of our policy making, and I do not see much of that from the SNP-Green devolved Government. Although I welcome the aims and outcomes of the Barclay review, many have viewed its remit as too tight and not wide ranging enough to give the freedom to look at the full picture.

In summary, we welcome the bill as a first, small step. However, more needs to be done. The Scottish Government has the powers. It needs to stop sitting on its hands and use them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on the minister to wind up the debate. Mr Arthur, I would be grateful if you took us to just before 5 o'clock, please.

16:52

Tom Arthur: I thank colleagues for their contributions to the debate and for using the opportunity, given its consensual tone, to offer their views on matters pertaining to non-domestic

rates and other issues in my portfolio more widely. I will seek to address some of those points in my closing remarks.

First, I turn to Mark Griffin's contribution, in which he asked me to reiterate the Government's commitment to consultation and engagement and to providing certainty and consistency with our framework for tax principles. I take the opportunity to do so. As I said during my committee appearance and the stage 1 debate, any legislation responding to the pandemic is responding to exceptional circumstances. However, in the new framework for tax, which we published last December, we have set out clearly the approach that we will take to decisions on taxation. That can provide a useful framework not just for the decisions that Government takes but for people in the Parliament more widely and for stakeholders, in engaging with ideas around how we can reform and improve the Scottish tax system.

I recognise the specific points that Miles Briggs raised about the appeals process. At the start of next year, we will transfer from the valuation appeal committees to a new tribunal system.

I also recognise Miles Briggs's point that the response from the Scottish and UK Governments was unprecedented and was absolutely required in supporting business. I recognise that there are calls for further support. Members will recognise that our budget is fully committed for this year but, of course, if any further business support becomes available from the UK Government and results in Barnett consequentials, we will carefully consider how that can be used to support business more widely.

The issue of town centres was mentioned, and Alex Rowley referred to the planning system. As members will be aware, we are in the process of considering the extensive responses that we received to our public consultation and the parliamentary scrutiny on draft national planning framework 4.

I reiterate and make clear that I am happy to meet with any member—I have already had opportunities to engage with some members directly—over the coming weeks or over the summer to discuss draft national planning framework 4, because, ultimately, this is an opportunity. It will be the biggest change to planning policy perhaps since the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1947 was passed. Planning will be essential to meeting our ambitions for our net carbon reductions by 2030 and 2045.

I recognise that our town centres face many challenges, but they can provide solutions to many of our problems. We want to see more 20-minute

neighbourhoods, more diverse and thriving town centres and strong regional economies that build community wealth. I am very keen to consider how the non-domestic rates system can play a part in that, and I take the points that members have raised on the matter seriously.

Our small business bonus scheme, which is the most generous such scheme anywhere in the UK, has taken and is taking 111,000 properties out of rates altogether. The Federation of Small Businesses noted that the scheme has been a lifeline for many firms. It is essential that we continue to support businesses the best way that we can. That is why we commissioned the Fraser of Allander Institute to carry out an evaluation, and we very much welcome its report. In response to that report, we are convening a short-term working group that will consider the report's recommendations on collecting information in order to make possible a more robust assessment of the small business bonus scheme in the future. I am happy to confirm that the group will meet for the first time at the end of this month.

As I said during my opening speech, Covid-19 was unprecedented. We know that it was challenging for businesses, and every decision that the Scottish Government has taken centred around ensuring that our businesses and communities got the support that they needed when they needed it.

The intention of the bill is to maintain non-domestic rates as a credible and robust system of taxation and to deliver fairness for all ratepayers. The material change of circumstances provisions are not the right mechanisms for ratepayers to seek reductions in rateable values due to the effect of Covid-19, and we made that clear as early as June 2021, as Willie Coffey noted in his remarks.

The bill makes it clear that when calculating rateable value of properties on the current valuation roll, which is the 2017 valuation roll,

"no account is to be taken of any matter occurring on or after 2 April 2020 that is (whether directly or indirectly) attributable to coronavirus."

That corresponds to the date on which we excluded changes in general economic circumstances from the definition of material change of circumstances, and it is consistent with the approach that is taken across the UK.

At the next revaluation, in April 2023, all relevant market-wide economic changes to rateable value will be considered across all rateable properties. That is the appropriate manner in which any effect of Covid-19 on the property market should be reflected. We have strengthened revaluations following the independent Barclay review of non-

domestic rates to ensure that they more closely reflect market circumstances.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the frequency of the revaluation cycle is now three years, the time between the tone date and revaluation is reduced to one year and we have delayed the revaluation by one year. Those changes have been broadly welcomed by the business community in Scotland.

To ensure that valuations are better understood and more transparent for ratepayers, which was a point that Alex Rowley raised, we have taken steps to require the publication of a draft valuation roll on 30 November and the inclusion of additional information for a large share of properties that will indicate the rental information that is used to calculate the basic valuation rate.

We are committed to making non-domestic property valuation more transparent and intelligible, and we will explore how more property classes and information might be covered in subsequent revaluations. Transparency, certainty, consistency and fairness are all essential features of the non-domestic rates system in Scotland, which the bill supports and delivers. I hope, therefore, that the Parliament will pass the bill at decision time.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the stage 3 debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill.

Business Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-05141, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Wednesday 22 June 2022—

after

followed by Ministerial Statement: Deaths in Custody

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Retained EU Law

delete

5.40 pm Decision Time

insert

6.10 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 23 June 2022—

delete

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Stage 3 Amendments: Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Bill

delete

6.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

7.15 pm Decision Time—[George Adam.]

Motion agreed to.

Motion without Notice

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time shall begin at 5.00 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S6M-05098, in the name of Neil Gray, on world refugee day: welcoming and supporting refugees in Scotland's communities, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament uses the opportunity of World Refugee Day to welcome people who have sought refuge in Scotland from war and persecution, including refugees, people seeking asylum, people relocated from Afghanistan and displaced people from Ukraine; recognises the contribution that refugees, people seeking asylum, people who have arrived under refugee resettlement and relocation schemes, people granted discretionary leave or humanitarian protection and displaced people arriving under specific visa routes have made to Scotland over many years; thanks local authorities, communities, individuals, the third sector and faith organisations that have supported, and are supporting, refugees, people seeking asylum and displaced people to settle in the country; commends the key principle of the New Scots refugee integration strategy that integration begins from day one of arrival, and celebrates the opportunity to connect and share stories through Refugee Festival Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-05095, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:00

Meeting suspended.

17:06

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on motion S6M-05095, in the name of Tom Arthur. Members should cast their votes now. [Interruption.] I apologise. We will look into what is happening.

The vote is now closed.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 112, Against 0, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill is passed. [Applause.]

That concludes decision time.

Motor Neurone Disease (Housing Needs)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-03777, in the name of Bob Doris, on the MND Scotland report, "No time to lose: Addressing the housing needs of people with MND".

The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the MND Scotland report, *No time to lose: Addressing the housing needs of people with MND*, which outlines the challenges that people with MND, including those in the Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn constituency, face when trying to obtain the accessible home that they need through adaptations or an alternative accessible property; understands that MND is a rapidly progressing terminal neurological disease, which can cause those with the illness to lose the ability to walk, talk, eat, drink or breathe unaided, with the average life expectancy being just 18 months from diagnosis; acknowledges that many waiting lists for adaptations and alternative accessible homes are reportedly too long for people with MND with, it understands, some longer than the average life expectancy with the illness; believes that this can leave people with MND unable to spend the precious time that they have left safely and with the dignity that everyone is entitled to, and that, for some, support never comes in time; understands that speed in service provision is critical for people with MND, and notes the expectation that the Scottish Government and local authorities will give meaningful and early consideration to implementing the report's various recommendations, which include fast-tracking people with MND for adaptations and accessible homes, a proactive, not reactive, approach to adaptations, establishing a national definition of accessible housing, and building more wheelchair accessible housing across Scotland.

17:10

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Today is motor neurone disease global awareness day, when people around the world who are affected by motor neurone disease remember those whom they have loved and lost to that devastating terminal disease. Here in the Scottish Parliament, we, as a community, will be no different—there will be friends and loved ones who are no longer with us. During the debate, we will no doubt hear about some of those people. For some colleagues in the chamber, they will include Gordon Aikman, whose loss is still very much felt in this place.

This debate is focused on housing and on how we better support those who are currently living with MND. On that front, I am sure that we will agree that much remains to be done. I thank the many members who signed my motion, allowing

me to secure a debate on addressing the housing needs of people with motor neurone disease. I also thank MND Scotland for its powerful, sobering and challenging report "No time to lose", which gathers much of the vital data and, importantly, captures the crucial lived experience and reality of the individuals who are living with MND and of their families.

My thanks also go to the families who have shared their stories. That includes Marie, whose husband Ian had MND; Beverley, whose husband Alan had MND; and Lynn, whose father-in-law Drew had MND. They all played pivotal roles in MND Scotland's research, and they are in the public gallery this evening. I thank them for their attendance and their contribution. That is exactly where the debate must begin.

I will quote two examples of lived experience directly from the report. The first is one that I raised at First Minister's question time a few months ago. Marie, whom I just mentioned, told MND Scotland:

"My husband lived in the living room with no shower facilities at all. We were washing him out on the decking with buckets of water. No dignity in that whatsoever".

The report notes that,

"11% of people affected by MND reported waiting more than a year for a wetroom".

For some, the wait is longer than the time they have left—we should let that sink in. We must do better.

Among the local authorities that responded to MND Scotland,

"the average waiting time for wetrooms to be fitted in 2020-2021 was 158 days."

However, one local authority reported an 80.7-day average, while another reported a 256-day average—that is three months in comparison with eight and a half months. Every local authority must strive to be better, but such regional variations highlight that improvements can surely be made by learning from best practice.

With regard to the requirement for a ramp, a family member of another MND sufferer said:

"We got in touch to apply for a ramp and we were asked by the local council if he could still walk. He said yes, and so they said, we'll not look into it until you can't walk ... He asked how long the waiting list was and it was 9 months. So, they wanted us to wait 9 months from the point that he couldn't get out".

There has to be a better way to deal with adaptations like that. The approach needs to be proactive, not reactive or heavily delayed. People cannot be prisoners in their own homes.

For ramps, there is an average waiting time of 149 days. However, the report notes that

“one local authority said that they had an average waiting time of”

just

“23 days, while another local authority had an average waiting time of 475 days.”

Again, the regional variations are stark. It cannot be right for people to face a wait of 15-and-a-half months to have a ramp installed when the average prognosis for someone who is living with MND following diagnosis is just 18 months.

The MND Scotland report makes various recommendations regarding adaptations. Understandably, MND Scotland calls on the Scottish Government

“to require local authorities to formally fast-track applications for adaptations for people with MND”,

and it suggests that certain social security forms could be used to underpin such a scheme. That is a powerful call.

Of course, there may be resource implications, and increased investment in resource may be required. I do not doubt that there is a challenge in identifying and securing that resource, and we should not pretend otherwise. However, I very much hope that, with cross-party purpose, we can find a way forward.

We also need to ensure that, even if a property is not externally accessible, that cannot be used as a justification not to adapt it internally. MND Scotland has reported that that has happened far too often. It is hardly surprising that MND Scotland has called its report “No time to lose”. We, in this place, must do anything that we can to allow those who are living with MND to spend as much of the precious time that they have left making invaluable memories rather than having a prolonged fight to have their housing needs met.

The properties that we build today must be future proofed to ensure that they are fit for purpose in years to come. As our life circumstances change, including our health, we increasingly need housing stock that is both accessible and easily adaptable. That should be dealt with at the design-and-build stage. Trying to look for imperfect housing solutions to support accessibility both internally and externally, which can be difficult to resolve, must increasingly become a thing of the past, as must the need for people to move properties in the first place.

I know that Glasgow City Council has been keen to see such future proofing, having championed the Glasgow standard for developments, along with attracting public subsidy and seeking to ensure that 10 per cent of new properties are wheelchair accessible across all tenures. However, I note that I could not get data in relation to waiting times in Glasgow. I am looking to meet

the council soon to discuss how we can work in partnership with it and with housing associations to get that data and drive improvements in that regard.

I also acknowledge the Scottish Government’s work in this area. The Scottish Government is investing around £16 billion to deliver 100,000 additional affordable homes by 2032, with a minimum of 70 per cent of those being for social rent. That offers a real opportunity to ensure that we future proof all new properties for families across all tenures. I know that the Scottish Government is keen to see that happen as it develops a common housing standard as part of its work on the strategy outlined in “Housing to 2040”.

In the meantime, however, there remain significant issues over agreed definitions of what constitutes an accessible home in the first place, as well as various other matters on which more must be done. Likewise, much more needs to be done to ensure that the various allocation policies of councils and various housing associations are better aligned and that the housing needs of those who are living with MND are more consistently taken into account within those policies. For my part, I will—as I have said—arrange to meet colleagues in Glasgow City Council to see what more they can do, in partnership with housing providers, to better meet the housing needs of those who are living with MND.

I know that the First Minister pledged that she would take the time to consider the various recommendations in the MND Scotland report “No time to lose”. I look forward to hearing the thoughts of colleagues on the issue this evening, as well as an update from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government on how the issues in the report are being addressed. In particular, we need robust, reliable, comparable and routinely collected data on the wait for adaptations across all 32 local authorities. We need to see the waiting times reduced and the significant gaps in performance across local authorities narrowing. That needs to include fast tracking as required.

Similarly, we need meaningful comparisons in respect of how local authorities and housing associations use their allocation policies to support the housing needs of those who are living with MND. We also need to build homes that are fit for the future. I know that there is much good work going on, but I am conscious that, as the title of the report suggests, we have no time to wait.

For some of the people who are in the gallery today, time ran out for their loved ones. Together, across parties and across Parliament, we must do better. I thank them for taking the time to listen to my contribution here this evening.

17:19

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Bob Doris on securing this important debate and on his speech, which was very considered. I know that he feels strongly about the issues.

I thank MND Scotland for giving a presentation to the cross-party group on housing, which I am lucky to convene, about the report “No time to lose”. It was a powerful presentation indeed. I welcome representatives of MND Scotland and their guests to the public gallery.

As Bob Doris said, today is global MND awareness day. Actually, every day should be MND awareness day, because we should be alert to the issues all the time—full stop—and be doing something about them. We should not need to give the issue a special badge to do that.

The report raises a number of issues, and there are some stark statistics in it. There is a one-in-300 risk of a person getting MND in their lifetime. That sounds quite high to me. As Bob Doris said, the average life expectancy after diagnosis is just 18 months. That is a really short period of time. That tells us that, when someone is diagnosed, they need fast action. In too many parts of Scotland, we do not get that.

The research was carried out in 2021 and the report makes a number of points. There are extensive waiting times for adaptations. Waiting times for ramps are particularly lengthy. Across local authorities, the wait for getting something done to a person’s property was, on average, 149 days. One council reported an average wait of 256 days to fit a wet room, which is a vital facility, and 11 per cent of people with MND waited a year for a wet room.

People with MND face barriers to accessing adaptations. I will mention some figures from my own patch of North and South Lanarkshire. Bob Doris mentioned Marie Cartwright, who featured on the BBC news talking about her situation with her husband Ian. She stood outside her house and demonstrated how she had to throw buckets of water over Ian to wash him outside. It is heartbreaking that someone had to do that.

North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council were asked for their definitions of accessible housing. North Lanarkshire Council did not reference external documentation. South Lanarkshire Council referred to “Housing for Varying Needs: a design guide”. They were asked what percentage of their local authority or social housing stock is accessible or wheelchair accessible. North Lanarkshire Council said that wheelchair-accessible properties were only 0.45 per cent of council stock and 0.34 per cent of all social

housing stock. That is not good enough. In South Lanarkshire Council, only 0.8 per cent of housing, including sheltered housing, is wheelchair accessible.

Those are really poor figures. I could go on, but I am aware that I am over my time. The figures across both councils on my patch are not good enough. The postcode lottery must end. Government and councils must work together to address the problem so that we do not have to put up with it any longer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mark Griffin, who joins us remotely.

17:24

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate on global MND awareness day. The work of MND Scotland in driving the issue of the availability of accessible housing up the agenda has been completely fantastic. Its report “No time to lose” has been vital in understanding the changes that are needed to secure accessible housing and adaptations that are fit for purpose ahead of the promised review of the “Housing for Varying Needs” design guide. I also thank Bob Doris for bringing the debate to the chamber so that we can all talk about the matter.

It is utterly disheartening that the report’s recommendations are not already a reality. The postcode lottery of support with which people with MND struggle just to get the housing that works for them while battling a rapidly progressing neurological illness, sometimes in their final months, is nothing short of cruelty. I hope that, when the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government speaks, she will confirm that the Government is working across Government and with partners to pursue the badly needed changes: fast-track applications; a common and consistent definition of accessible housing; a 10 per cent target for wheelchair-accessible new-build homes; and real, increased resources for adaptations across Scotland.

The research that MND Scotland conducted for the report is valuable for understanding the task. The Government’s statistics are not up to the job. Like the patchwork of policies, the data is inconsistent and requires a real overhaul if central Government wants to make our housing system truly accessible.

In Falkirk, in my region, MND Scotland found that just 1 per cent of stock is wheelchair accessible. There is only an aspiration to build accessible properties in new builds; there is no target and people who are terminally ill are not prioritised. The average wait in 2020-21 was 675 days, which is almost two years. Graham Simpson

cited the situation in North and South Lanarkshire. Although it takes only 272 days for a disabled person to be housed in North Lanarkshire, last year, it took two and a quarter years in South Lanarkshire. Those are devastating figures for disabled people and people with MND. They mean that some people wait more than 18 months from diagnosis, which underlines how important the debate is.

Scottish Labour has gone into the past two elections committing to a target of 10 per cent of new homes being wheelchair accessible. I welcome the commitment that the Government made last week to deliver a target for all tenures, but I am interested to hear whether there have been any discussions across Government, particularly with the Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth, so that we can secure that target in the national planning framework 4, which is making its way through Parliament at the moment, and, specifically, consider making the accessible housing target a requirement in the affordable housing supply programme. Some registered social landlords and councils up and down the country are making amazing contributions to building more accessible homes, but the policy requires national co-ordination. Addressing that through the affordable housing supply programme would be one way of doing it.

The idea of fast-track allocations and adaptations is excellent. It is commendable of MND Scotland to pursue it, building on the charity's success in securing fast-tracked benefits for terminally ill people during the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. I am pleased to see the charity push that concept further. It is an absolute necessity for people with fast-progressing MND and is a policy area where local and national Government can make strides in making a real impact in supporting people. I am sure that we all agree that the last thing that someone who is terminally ill needs to do is battle with public sector bureaucracy.

The work that is done by MND Scotland and the recommendations that we have debated today will undoubtedly have benefits for all disabled people in Scotland, especially those who require wheelchair-accessible housing. I hope that the Government can undertake to ensure that more support comes in time for people with MND in Scotland.

17:30

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank my colleague Bob Doris for securing this important debate. I recently met MND Scotland to discuss its report "No time to lose", which addresses the housing needs of

people with motor neurone disease, and to hear of the lived experience of my constituent Lynn McCartney, who is the surviving daughter-in-law of MND sufferer Drew McCartney. I welcome Lynn to the public gallery.

At that meeting, I heard about how too many people with MND cannot get adaptations or an accessible home quickly enough because the systems are not designed for people who are living with a rapidly progressive terminal illness. I heard that waiting lists for adaptations and accessible housing in some local authorities are longer than the average life expectancy for somebody with MND, which—as we have heard—is approximately 18 months from diagnosis. As a consequence, people with the illness can be trapped in unsafe homes, sometimes in a single room, living without the dignity and care to which every person is entitled.

I heard at first hand from Lynn about the challenges that she and her family faced when they were trying to secure suitable accommodation for her father-in-law, Drew, after their home was deemed unsafe and about the immense anxiety and stress that that caused the family during the precious time that they had after Drew's MND diagnosis. That experience is, regrettably, all too familiar.

The McCartneys resorted to residing in their towing holiday caravan without central heating or running hot water, outwith their local area and support network, for nearly a year—some members might remember that their story was on the news. They did so to provide Drew with the most accessible accommodation as quickly as they could, once it became apparent that, with many external and internal stairs, their home was no longer safe.

Drew and his wife Helen were eventually rehoused in a lovely accessible bungalow in Cumnock, near family, where he was able to live his remaining life to the full, surrounded by friends and family. His daughter-in-law Lynn was at pains to explain to me that Drew got many more months than the average MND patient. Had that not happened, he might well have passed away while living in the caravan.

I cannot escape the valid points that my constituent and MND Scotland make with regard to the housing struggles that people who receive an MND diagnosis face. In particular, I am struck by the desperately short life expectancy of 18 months from diagnosis.

I drew the family's plight to the cabinet secretary's attention, and she advised me that "Housing to 2040" sets out our vision for housing in Scotland, with a route map to help us achieve that. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that

everyone has a safe, good-quality and affordable home that meets their needs, in a place where they want to be. The strategy covers all aspects of housing and independent living for disabled people.

I am glad to note that actions that are being progressed include improvements to streamline and accelerate the adaptations system and that, as part of that work, the adaptations process will be made simpler and quicker and that there will be options for fast-tracking those with MND and other life-limiting illnesses. In addition, there will be a focus on promoting awareness and greater use of the scheme of assistance to fund adaptations, and consideration of passporting good practice in the allocations process, such as offering options to directly match people with MND and other life-limiting illnesses with suitable accommodation.

The review work will also consider the requirement for a consistent, nationally agreed definition of what an accessible home is and progress on delivering wheelchair housing targets. We have heard from members of all parties that there is currently a postcode lottery in support. We need to have an agreed definition. I am pleased that, as Mark Griffin has pointed out, our new adult disability payment from Social Security Scotland will ensure that those who are facing this illness will be financially supported in a respectful and dignified way.

I have also been engaging with the newly appointed head of housing and communities at East Ayrshire Council, who has agreed to work closely with MND Scotland to ensure that their next housing needs and demand assessment to inform the council's local housing strategy will have MND fully in mind.

Those who are living with MND have no time to lose. It is incumbent on us, in this place, and on those in our council chambers to find solutions that will enable those people to spend what time they have left in pursuing what makes them happiest, with those whom they love the most.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Mackay, who joins us remotely.

17:34

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank Bob Doris for bringing the debate to the Parliament. Last year, I spoke in his members' business debate on MND awareness day, and I recognise his efforts to raise awareness of the condition.

As members have said, MND is a rapidly progressing condition and the average life expectancy is just 18 months from diagnosis. Diagnosis of MND can be devastating for people—

and for their families, who have to come to terms with the fact that their loved one might lose the ability to walk, talk, eat, drink or breathe unaided, sometimes in a very short timeframe.

According to MND Scotland, most people will need adaptations to their home, such as hand rails, ramps and wet rooms. If such adaptations cannot be made, the person might need to move into another, more accessible home. However, as we heard, there are major issues with the availability of accessible housing. According to Inclusion Scotland, many disabled people do not live in a home that meets their needs, and 86,000 households that include a disabled person need an adaptation but do not have one.

For people with MND, waiting lists are often longer than life expectancy, which means that they spend the time that they have left with their family and friends fighting for accessible housing that meets their needs. Unfortunately, some people die before they get such housing.

In its report "No time to lose", MND Scotland has emphasised the importance of early intervention. Too often, local authorities fit adaptations reactively. People are asked not to apply until they need them and are then faced with a long waiting list. The report suggests that adaptations that a person with MND will need, such as wet rooms, ramps and hand rails, could form part of forward planning from the point of diagnosis.

Although there is evidence of good practice in some local authorities, the current postcode lottery is such that some people are told that they are asking for adaptations too soon. Given the rapidly progressing nature of MND, there should be no such thing as "too soon". MND Scotland is calling for improved understanding of the condition among people who work in local authorities. Poor understanding can mean that people with MND miss out on support to which they are entitled and can be traumatised by the experience of having to explain their condition over and over again to multiple key workers.

When good practice takes place, that is often because an individual practitioner, such as an occupational therapist, has a good understanding of the condition and how it progresses, and they have pushed for adaptations to be installed more quickly. The report found that some key workers, including occupational therapists, are doing great work in that regard and are excellent advocates for their patients. Increased awareness and understanding of MND will mean that more patients receive such levels of support.

Where adaptations cannot be made, people with MND might have to move to other accommodation. Leaving one's home can be a

stressful, emotional time, and we need to support people through the process when it is necessary.

MND Scotland's report highlights that applying for an accessible home is often an arduous and time-consuming process. MND Scotland said:

"people are left spending time and energy fighting for homes that meet their accessibility needs and requirements. For many bereaved family members and carers, this meant there was less time spent with the person diagnosed. Instead, navigating forms and arguing for needs took up time that they did not have and took time away from doing things together and making memories."

Support for people with MND who are applying for adaptations or new accommodation must be greatly improved. Processes should be streamlined, where possible, and people with MND and their families should be supported by well-informed key workers who appreciate the rapidly progressing nature of the condition. That will help people to spend the time that they have left with their loved ones rather than fighting for housing that meets their needs.

17:39

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): I welcome global MND awareness day and thank Bob Doris for bringing this important debate to the Parliament today. I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Government, and I will try to address as many points as I can.

This Parliament has a proud record of raising issues to do with MND and, more important, making progress on them. Gordon Aikman was a pivotal figure in doing that, and Bob Doris was quite right to pay tribute to his work.

The important contributions that we have heard today have all raised awareness of MND. We have also heard about the work of MND Scotland and, in particular, its significant report "No time to lose". Members have highlighted the housing needs and aspirations of those who are diagnosed, alongside those of their families and carers.

We want everyone with a life-limiting condition such as MND to be given the support that they need to live at home or in a property that meets their needs. I recently met Rachel Maitland, the chief executive officer of MND Scotland, and her team to discuss the report's recommendations. It was a helpful meeting—it certainly was from my perspective, and I hope that it was from theirs, too. I got some very useful feedback about the good practice around speedy access to adaptations and the practical approaches to finding suitable accessible homes for people with MND. It is important that we replicate that good practice; therefore, I plan to discuss the matter with the new Convention of Scottish Local Authorities team to

ensure that we continue to support the spread of good practice across Scotland. I am clear that we need to make improvements—I have heard a number of members make that point this evening.

I am aware of complex cases in which people with profound mobility issues of whatever nature struggle to find suitable and accessible affordable housing. There are lessons to be learned from that experience so that our homes can fully support our changing needs and expectations.

Graham Simpson: The cabinet secretary says that she will be in discussions with COSLA, which is entirely right, because most of the recommendations in the report relate to councils. However, some of them are aimed at the Government, one of which is that the Scottish Government should

"establish a common and consistent definition of accessible housing."

Will the cabinet secretary say which of the recommendations she will be able to take forward?

Shona Robison: Many of them are already being worked on, and I am happy to provide updates. I will come on to one or two of the recommendations in a second.

On the point about being able to live independently, that is what we would want for ourselves and our loved ones. Living independently helps to ease the pressure on services and on family members. To support that, our homes should be accessible, flexible and, importantly, easily adapted to suit changing needs.

On what we are doing, "Housing to 2040" sets out our long-term vision for housing. The delivery of homes built to housing for varying needs guidance remains central to our affordable housing supply programme. We are reviewing the guidance to ensure that it continues to be ambitious and that it meets needs. That work will help to inform a new tenure-neutral housing standard for Scotland, which was included in the "Housing to 2040" strategy. Initial engagement with stakeholders is already under way. We aim to produce a draft standard next year and to progress legislation after that.

Bob Doris: Really good work is taking place, but, when there are consultations and draft legislation before things become statutory, the process can be prolonged. Will the cabinet secretary be working in partnership with all housing providers, the construction sector and planning authorities, so that those draft standards, even though they might be altered, can be implemented at an early stage, even before they become statutory?

Shona Robison: Yes, I am happy to do that. Mark Griffin made a point about using all the levers, such as NPF4, with regard to new housing developments and the importance of the affordable housing supply programme, which I will come back to in a second.

As members have recognised, local authorities are responsible for assessing the housing needs in their area, and that is quite right, because they know their local areas. They are also responsible for setting out how those needs will be met in their local housing strategies.

Our guidance for assisting councils in preparing their strategies ensures that specialist and accessible homes are central to the local housing planning and delivery process. Informed through joint working with partners, including MND Scotland, we have put in place requirements for local authorities to set targets for the delivery of wheelchair-accessible homes across all tenures. I guess that that is a case of us leading from the centre and working with local authorities to make those changes.

I am pleased to say that 28 of the 32 local authorities have identified wheelchair-accessible homes targets, and the remaining four are in the process of finalising targets. That is important, because increasing the supply will support more choice and flexibility for people and, of course, it will also be fairer.

Backing up the affordable housing supply programme is the £3.6 billion that is being made available in the current parliamentary session. Housing providers have had their five-year allocations, so they know what they have. We need to ensure that the range of homes that are built with that investment meet everybody's needs. We need local plans, we need the targets to be set on the basis of local need, and then, most important, we need those targets to be met.

However, we know that the majority of people in Scotland do not live in social housing. Therefore, although we are making progress with the affordable housing supply programme, we need to make sure that everyone, regardless of tenure, has a home that meets their needs now and in the future. We know that there are issues with the way in which adaptations are being accessed and delivered locally, and we are considering how the process can be streamlined and made easier for people who need adaptations when they ask for them, not months later. It is really important to fast-track people when time is of the essence and people cannot wait for months for their adaptations to be done. We understand that and we need to make sure that action is taken to address it.

We also know that technology is now playing an increasingly important role in supporting

independent living. The ability to remotely control household actions through the touch of a button can make life so much easier. We want to ensure that advances in technology and the responses to the recent consultation on the draft guidance on community equipment and housing adaptations will inform our work to improve the adaptations system.

In the meantime, through our housing strategic partners grant, we provide funding to organisations such as Housing Options Scotland and Care and Repair Scotland so that they can provide specialist advice to help people with disabilities to find the right house or make relevant adaptations so that they can live in a home that meets their needs. I encourage people to use those advice sources, because they are really good.

We know that the best way to resolve the disconnect between adaptations and timing is to ensure that housing, health and social care services are working together to streamline and accelerate the adaptations system. Embedding the person at the centre of that is essential, and it will be essential for the new national care service as it goes forward. Significant steps on the creation of the national care service have been taken this week and we need to get that right to address many of these issues. I can tell members that Kevin Stewart, as the responsible minister, is acutely aware of that need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up, please.

Shona Robison: I close by thanking those who have contributed examples and assure them that the Scottish Government will give full consideration to the report's recommendations to improve the housing outcomes for those who are living with MND.

Meeting closed at 17:49.

Correction

Kaukab Stewart has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):

At col 26, paragraph 4—

Original text—

As Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, stated:

“The UK Government has breached the foundational principle of international refugee protection.”

Corrected text—

As Professor Alison Phipps, UNESCO chair in refugee integration through languages and the arts, stated:

“The UK Government has breached the foundational principle of international refugee protection.”

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