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Wednesday 11 January 2023

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 11 January 2023

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or indicate so in the chat function by typing "RTS" during the relevant question. As ever, I ask for succinct questions, and answers to match, in order to get in as many members as possible.

Independence Referendum (Supreme Court Ruling)

1. Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what further consideration it has given to November's Supreme Court ruling on whether the Scottish Parliament has the power to legislate for an independence referendum. (S6O-01740)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): We have been clear that we accept and respect the Supreme Court's judgment. However, the Supreme Court was not asked to decide, and cannot decide, whether the Scottish Parliament should have the power to hold an independence referendum.

The outcome of that case has demonstrated the weakness of the United Kingdom's constitution. No matter how the people of Scotland vote or how often they elect Parliaments that support a referendum and support independence, they can be told "no" by the UK Prime Minister. A position that does not allow Scotland to choose its own future without Westminster consent exposes as myth the notion of the UK as a voluntary partnership. In a voluntary union, one part does not have to rely on the agreement of another before it is allowed to think about leaving.

The First Minister has made it clear that she is ready and willing to negotiate the terms of a section 30 order with the Prime Minister.

Jim Fairlie: Yesterday's events at Westminster brought into sharp focus why Scotland requires to

be released from the shackles of Westminster. The Tories' anti-strike bill launches an attack on workers' rights, and their Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill threatens to revoke vital environmental protections, food protections and workers' rights without putting adequate solutions in place.

Meanwhile, yesterday in this chamber, the Parliament reiterated its call for the UK Government to respect the right of people in Scotland to choose their constitutional future. How many more times does the cabinet secretary believe that the Tories at Westminster will try to deny democracy before they realise that our cast-iron mandate for a referendum is only growing stronger?

Angus Robertson: I am pleased that a majority of members elected to this Parliament by the people of Scotland backed yesterday's motion calling on the UK Government to respect the right of people in Scotland to choose their constitutional future.

Every member of the Scottish Parliament is here because of the trust that has been placed in us by people in Scotland through their votes. That places obligations on those of us who win elections, and we must do our best to deliver on the mandates that we are given. Should the UK Government continue to deny the Scottish people their right to choose, people in Scotland will have their say on independence at the next UK election.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Scottish Government spent £0.25 million on last year's Supreme Court case. Given that people are struggling to pay their home energy bills and public services are in such a state, has the cabinet secretary reflected over the Christmas period on whether that was a good use of public funds?

Angus Robertson: Of course, there would have been no reason to raise a legal challenge if the UK Government had agreed to a section 30 order, as it did after the 2011 election. That would have been the optimal way forward and the preferred option. It is now for the UK Government to respect the views of this Parliament and the result of the most recent Scottish Parliament election and agree to a section 30 order with the Scottish Government. That would not have cost a penny.

Sistema Scotland

2. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with representatives of Sistema Scotland. (S6O-01741)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Neil Gray, the Minister for Culture,

Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine, met with Sistema Scotland representatives on 12 July 2022, when he visited the organisation's big noise programme in the Raploch centre in Stirling. In addition, I was pleased that Nicola Killean, Sistema's chief executive officer, was able to attend a round-table discussion that I chaired in December. My officials are also in regular contact with Sistema Scotland representatives.

I am proud to support Sistema Scotland, which is a brilliant example of a cultural programme that contributes to many policy outcomes and, in particular, our ambition to tackle child poverty.

Michael Marra: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response and for the efforts that he and his colleague have put into meeting the organisation. They will both be aware of the recent study conducted by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, which found that children and young people who take part in Sistema Scotland's big noise Raploch are much more likely to achieve positive post-school outcomes and more likely to be in employment. What can the Scottish Government learn from that hugely positive evaluation, and what can the cabinet secretary do to ensure that Sistema Scotland continues to be supported by his Government to deliver those positive outcomes?

Angus Robertson: I am aware of the study, which is very encouraging. Do I agree with the member that Sistema Scotland is playing a vital role, including in Douglas in Dundee? Yes, I do.

The excellent work that Sistema Scotland does on targeting disadvantaged communities, tackling child poverty, and significantly enhancing participants' lives, prospects and health and wellbeing—to name but a few—is uncontested. Sistema Scotland is highly valued and supported by the Scottish Government, and I am pleased that it commands so much support across parties in the chamber.

Coronation (Events in Highlands and Islands)

3. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions have taken place with the royal household regarding the coronation of His Majesty the King, in relation to events across the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-01742)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government is liaising with the royal household, the Lord Lyon King of Arms and the United Kingdom Government on planning for the coronation of His Majesty the King. The First Minister has already announced

that an extra bank holiday will be provided for on Monday 8 May to allow for celebrations to take place across the coronation weekend.

As with previous royal occasions, it is expected that any local events held around Scotland to celebrate the coronation will be community inspired and led.

Edward Mountain: Once details have been made available by the royal household, does the Scottish Government intend to have conversations with local authorities to ensure that school pupils learn of the importance and significance of the coronation?

Angus Robertson: Celebrations of this nature are community led in Scotland. The Scottish Government will facilitate communications between the relevant organisations, including local authorities and Scotland's lord lieutenants. Conversations will be continuing.

Historic Environment Scotland (Reopening of Sites)

4. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to accelerate the reopening of historic sites managed by Historic Environment Scotland. (S6O-01743)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Historic Environment Scotland has completed the first group of inspections in its prioritised inspection programme on schedule and is making progress on the next group of prioritised sites. It will continue to put the health and safety of individuals first, reopening sites when safe to do so.

We continue to provide substantial support to Historic Environment Scotland. In the 2023-24 budget, Historic Environment Scotland's total operational budget is rising by 18 per cent to £114.5 million, enabling the organisation to invest in fair staff pay, running and maintaining its properties, delivering grants to the heritage sector and fulfilling its advisory and regulatory functions.

Donald Cameron: More than 60 of the sites managed by HES remain either closed or partially closed, including, in my region, Kisimul castle on Barra and the Bonawe iron furnace in Taynuilt. The number of closed sites has remained consistently high for some time. Can the minister explain why Scotland's historic sites have been left to crumble under this Government's stewardship? What action will he take to protect our vital historic assets for generations to come?

Neil Gray: I do not accept that characterisation by Donald Cameron. Historic Environment

Scotland is making progress and, as I outlined, the Scottish Government is investing substantially with the budget support that we give it in order to carry out high-level masonry inspections and make sure that facilities can reopen. For instance, Dumbarton castle, which is an iconic site, is due to reopen in the spring. Progress is being made. Obviously, I am looking for HES to move as fast as possible and we are making investment for that to happen. I will continue to engage with HES, including when I meet its chair and chief executive next week.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of requests for supplementaries. I will try to take as many as possible, but I will probably not be able to take all of them. I ask for succinct questions and answers.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Kisimul castle in my constituency, the seat of the Macneils of Barra and one of Scotland's most iconic sites, has faced an extended closure, with repair work needed. How will the 2023-24 budget support HES's current high-level maintenance survey and ensure that it is timetabled at a pace that will ensure the safe opening of this site of national importance and others?

Neil Gray: Much as I said in response to the previous question, if Alasdair Allan would like to visit Kisimul castle or any other site in his constituency, I would be happy to facilitate a visit, through HES.

The 2022-23 budget sees HES's costs fully funded by Government grant, and there is rising commercial income, post-pandemic. We provided HES with significant support while the pandemic reduced its commercial income; indeed, the grant for HES for this year is 80 per cent higher than it was before the pandemic. The 2023-24 budget will see HES's total operational budget rise by 18 per cent to £114.5 million, to enable the organisation to continue its fantastic work to protect sites, ensure fair staff pay and make grants. I will continue to work hard, alongside HES staff, to facilitate the reopening of our precious heritage as soon as it is safe to reopen.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Will the minister please advise members of the Scottish Government's plans to ensure that Historic Environment Scotland's properties will be able to open to a sufficient degree to allow HES's revenue to rise as predicted in the budget?

Neil Gray: I thank Foysoyl Choudhury for pointing out an important fact, which is that the commercial income that HES has been able to derive this year is the result of the reopening process that has been under way for sites that had been partially or entirely closed. As a result, HES has higher than anticipated commercial income, so it will be able to enjoy a much higher budget for

next year, as I said. I commend HES and congratulate it on its work in that regard, and I hope that that will continue. I will continue to engage with HES to ensure that it is supported to allow that to happen.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The minister will recall that I raised the HES Jarlishof site facilities project with him in the chamber in November last year. I have been repeatedly raising the issue, since before the pandemic. Will he facilitate an update from HES on the long-awaited toilet facilities and coach parking project for one of Shetland's main tourist attractions?

Neil Gray: Yes, I will be more than happy to do so and I would be happy to meet Beatrice Wishart alongside HES to make sure that her concerns are put across and that the work that she requests is looked at and facilitated as quickly as possible.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): One of the north-east's foremost historic sites is the five-star Peterhead Prison Museum. This week, the museum had to shut its café, with the loss of five jobs—it is important to note that the rest of the operation remains open. Will the minister agree to join me in a visit to Peterhead Prison Museum, to explore ways in which the Government might facilitate the reopening of its excellent hospitality facility?

Neil Gray: I would be happy to look at the matter in more detail and to consider a visit to Peterhead at Liam Kerr's invitation, to consider avenues whereby it might be possible for that facility to reopen. I have talked about Historic Environment Scotland's commercial income success. If it is possible for Peterhead museum to enjoy similar success, I would be happy to look at the issue.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Can the minister confirm or seek confirmation from Historic Environment Scotland that the technical panel that has been established will, in its determinations, give as much importance to the relative national historic importance of properties and their tourism and economic impact as it gives to the necessary technical, health and safety and construction issues? Will he confirm that the panel is properly staffed to do that?

As I have said before, Linlithgow palace, in my constituency, should surely count as a national priority for work, given that it is the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots.

I gently point out that the 80 per cent increase in budget is needed precisely because of the lost commercial income for closed sites such as Linlithgow palace.

Neil Gray: Fiona Hyslop is absolutely right. I was pleased to make a visit to Linlithgow palace

last year, which was hosted by the member and Historic Environment Scotland staff, to see the high-level masonry issues there. I will be more than happy to ensure that her comments and concerns are passed on to HES when I meet the chair and chief executive next week, and to ensure that a response is fed back to her as quickly as possible.

Children and Young People's Theatre

5. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting children and young people's theatre. (S6O-01744)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government recognises the important role that theatre can play for young people. We provide £150,000 per year to the Scottish Youth Theatre, which provides theatre training to young people aged three to 25.

In addition, 29 of the 120 organisations that are regularly funded by Creative Scotland, which is funded by the Scottish Government, actively run programmes in theatres for children across Scotland. In order to improve accessibility of theatre for school pupils, the National Theatre of Scotland, which is one of the five national performing companies that receives funding from the Scottish Government, also manages the Theatre in Schools Scotland project.

Paul O'Kane: In my region, PACE Theatre Company has served children and young people for more than 30 years and has given children and young people opportunities to benefit educationally, socially and culturally from a variety of performing arts experiences. Its alumni include Richard Madden, Paolo Nutini and one Paul O'Kane. It is embarking on an ambitious project in Paisley town centre to turn a derelict site into Scotland's first children's theatre. It has received funding from Renfrewshire Council through the town centre regeneration fund, but it has a way to go. Will the minister commit to supporting that important project, and will he agree to visit the project with me and to meet PACE Theatre Company to see how the Government might support it?

Neil Gray: I will avoid the temptation of making the obvious joke about Paul O'Kane's theatrical ability, but I am happy to endorse the fantastic work that PACE does, based on its merit and because the Minister for Parliamentary Business, George Adam, who is the local MSP, would have my guts for garters if I did not.

I am more than happy to meet Paul O'Kane to discuss the matter. He will be aware that in December 2021, the Scottish Government's

regeneration capital fund awarded Renfrewshire Council £800,000 to help to build PACE's Exchange young people's theatre. Independent theatres in Scotland that run programmes for children and young people and which are constituted as non-profit distributing are eligible to apply to Creative Scotland's open fund. I am happy to discuss all that with Paul O'Kane and PACE, if that would be helpful, and I look forward to corresponding further.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The recent £5.1 million cut to Creative Scotland for 2023-24 will inevitably have an impact on Youth Theatre Arts Scotland, which is in my region. What impact assessment has the Scottish Government conducted to determine the effects of funding cuts on the theatre industry?

Neil Gray: We obviously welcome the fact that Creative Scotland is using the lottery reserves that it has built up to protect the regularly funded organisations in order to ensure that their funding can continue over the next year. We are all facing incredible financial pressures—not least because of the economic situation that we find ourselves in, and not least because of the reckless approach to the economy that is being taken by the United Kingdom's Conservative Government.

We will continue to work with the culture sector. The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture and I meet regularly with stakeholders across Scotland, and that work continues. We will also continue to push the UK Government to make greater investments, which would allow us to do more.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I know from experience that theatre and the arts in general can be a wonderful escape for young people, and that organisations such as the Highland regional youth orchestra allow them to create memories that will last a lifetime. How does the Scottish Government support more young people from less-affluent backgrounds being exposed to the theatre and music?

Neil Gray: I thank Emma Roddick for that important question. As someone who also benefited from access to theatre in my childhood, I appreciate the important role that theatre and music can play for children. Through subsidy from the National Theatre of Scotland and Imagineate, tickets costing approximately £2 per child to Theatre in Schools Scotland programmes are available. Schools in low-income areas can also use their pupil equity funding to pay for access to the programme. The pupil equity funding is allocated directly to schools and is targeted at closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

In addition, NTS has approached various local trusts and foundations to enable free or very low-

cost performances in economically deprived areas. Our youth music initiative puts music at the heart of young people's lives and learning, with particular emphasis being placed on widening access and participation through reaching all children and young people. Within that initiative are funds such as the access to music making fund, which supports out-of-school music making for target groups who might otherwise not have such opportunities.

We have heard about the support that has been provided to Sistema Scotland, which is a fantastic organisation that provides access to music across Scotland. Much work is being done, but there is more to do. I welcome Emma Roddick's input to make sure that the issue is emphasised today.

Creative Industries (Workplace Ownership)

6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture minister has had with ministerial colleagues regarding what support is available for anyone working in creative industries, including the Belmont cinema in Aberdeen, who may wish to take control or ownership of their workplaces. (S6O-01745)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): I have not been approached by creative industries workers about an interest in control or ownership of their workplaces. I would be happy to discuss that with ministerial colleagues, Creative Scotland, enterprise agencies and relevant partners to see what support is available, if we are asked to do so.

An effective worker voice is critical to fair work, and it underpins all other fair work dimensions. Collective bargaining, social dialogue and an effective voice are key to improving terms and conditions, to worker wellbeing and to developing progressive and fair workplaces—which include social enterprises and co-operatives.

Maggie Chapman: The Belmont cinema and its predecessors acted as a focal point for a range of community groups and creative organisations for more than 125 years. The First Minister recently stressed the importance of culture to our communities. We must support not only the big international festivals and organisations, but the local community-owned and worker-owned enterprises. Will the minister meet former Belmont cinema workers and others who are keen to secure a viable and sustainable independent cinema, and will he provide guidance for those who are seeking to protect places like the Belmont for future generations?

Neil Gray: Yes, I will. First, I want to echo the First Minister's feelings about the importance of culture to local communities; I feel that, and the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture feels it. I welcome the opportunity to meet stakeholders who are seeking to secure a future for cultural cinema provision in Aberdeen, which I offered to do previously in relation to the Belmont.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): As we have heard, Aberdeen's Belmont cinema is an important educational and cultural cornerstone. It is wholly owned by Aberdeen City Council, so it is all the more alarming that such a venue has been allowed to close and to go into administration without the option of saving the cinema being considered. Can the minister confirm what obligation there is on the administrators of the cinema to explore such options, and what financial support the Government can make available to support that?

Neil Gray: Mercedes Villalba mentioned that the Belmont cinema in Aberdeen is owned by Aberdeen City Council. There is a legal process under way in the administration of the Centre for the Moving Image; the member will be aware that I am constrained in how much I can say about the process. As I have offered other colleagues previously in relation to the administration of the CMI, I am happy to meet the member to discuss where things are and the concerns that she has—which I share—about ensuring that cultural cinema provision continues at the Belmont in Aberdeen.

Creative Scotland (Budget)

7. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Creative Scotland's actions following the announcement of the draft budget. (S6O-01746)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government welcomes Creative Scotland's decision on Monday 19 December to maintain funding for the regularly funded organisations at current levels next year by drawing on its accumulated national lottery reserves.

We have provided Creative Scotland with more than £33 million over five years to compensate for generally reduced lottery funding. We now face difficult decisions about Government funding, so the time is right for Creative Scotland to draw on the lottery reserves that are available to it.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The minister has just referenced the First Minister's comments on the arts. A headline in *The Press and Journal* on 3

January read, “Nicola Sturgeon urges Scots to back the arts as sector faces uncertain future”. The article described the First Minister as

“an aficionado of books, festivals, music and movies”,

but decisions by her Government have resulted in one in eight Scottish libraries being permanently closed since 2010; Scotland’s winter festival fund being cancelled; live music venues being under real pressure; and the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the Edinburgh Filmhouse and the Belmont Filmhouse in Aberdeen all ceasing trading. Of course, her Government has also just slashed the funding of Scotland’s creative arts agency. Would a better and more accurate headline not have been: “Nicola Sturgeon urges Scots to back the arts because her Government won’t”?

Neil Gray: No. As I already outlined, we are making decisions to support the creative industries and cultural provision across Scotland as best we can, under the economic situation that we face. However, the situation is largely outwith our control. Across the UK, we face an economic storm that is of the UK Government’s making. Its economic recklessness has meant that not only has the Scottish Government’s budget been impacted by inflation, but the creative and culture stakeholders—whom Angus Robertson and I have met during the past months—have also seen their budgets being impacted by spiralling inflation and spiralling energy costs.

That is all because of the recklessness of the UK Government and its failure to actively address the problem, so I will take no lessons from the Conservatives on our investment in and support for the creative industries, when they are doing nothing about it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if I have brief questions and answers.

Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill

8. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent communication it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the potential impact on Scotland of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. (S6O-01747)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): On 21 December, I received a response from Grant Shapps to my two letters. Although I am happy to have finally received his response, I am disappointed that our concerns continue not to be addressed and that our amendments—which were drafted to limit the damaging impact of the bill on Scotland—continue to be ignored.

Scottish Government officials continue to work with their UK Government counterparts as part of the programme to identify devolved retained European Union law, yet we are still operating largely in the dark in terms of what the UK Government proposes to do with retained EU law, and therefore in terms of what powers Scottish ministers might need to use to prevent deregulation and to uphold high standards for the people of Scotland.

Kaukab Stewart: The absence of any attempt at co-operation on a bill of such magnitude for Scottish democracy is truly ridiculous, especially given the Parliament’s overwhelming rejection of the Brexit freedoms bill. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Westminster must urgently acknowledge the threat that its Brexiteer plans represent to devolution and democracy in Scotland, and scrap the bill?

Angus Robertson: I have been absolutely clear that our preference is for the bill to be withdrawn entirely, or for areas of devolved competence to be carved out from the sunset provisions. However, the amendments that we tabled were dismissed by the UK Government in a House of Commons committee.

I agree that the UK Government’s plans to disrespect the Sewel convention should be of grave concern to the Scottish Parliament. We are therefore putting plans in place to identify devolved retained EU law, but it is a significant undertaking that has the potential to impact on officials’ ability to dedicate time to urgent issues that affect the people of Scotland, such as the energy and cost of living crises.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on the constitution, external affairs and culture. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next portfolio to allow front-bench teams to change position.

Justice and Veterans

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is justice and veterans. If a member seeks to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or enter “RTS” in the chat function during the relevant question. Again, in order to get in as many members as possible, I would appreciate succinct questions and answers to match.

Justice System Reform (Support for Victims)

1. Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what can be done to improve the situation faced by victims in criminal court cases who are simultaneously involved in civil proceedings where victim support is required, and how this will be delivered by the

Government's work on reforming the justice system. (S6O-01748)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government's victim-centred approach fund supports third sector organisations to provide practical and emotional support to victims, survivors and witnesses of crime in Scotland in order to achieve better long-term outcomes.

Although there is no direct role for victim support and victim support organisations in civil proceedings, the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 contains provisions on special measures in some family cases to protect vulnerable witnesses and parties.

In last year's consultation on improving victims' experiences of the justice system, we proposed extending the provisions on special measures in the 2020 act to civil cases generally.

Fiona Hyslop: Following the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014, more categories of witnesses were automatically presumed to be vulnerable in criminal cases and now usually have a right to certain special measures when giving evidence. However, in civil cases, the parties themselves must apply to the court for special measures for victim support; there is no automatic presumption that they should be offered such measures.

As the cabinet secretary has just indicated, the consultation on improving victims' experiences of the justice system raised the possibility of special measures being available when required for all civil court hearings in Scotland. Can he confirm whether those measures will be automatically applied to vulnerable witnesses in civil cases?

Keith Brown: On special measures, the consultation to which Fiona Hyslop referred suggested following the model, which is not yet in force, in the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 for family cases. Under that model, a witness will be deemed vulnerable if they have a civil protection order against another party or if the other party has committed, or is accused of committing, certain criminal offences against the witness. In those circumstances, the court will have to make an order authorising special measures or order the witness to give evidence without special measures.

The 2020 act also makes provision so that special measures can be made available in non-evidential hearings. At the moment, special measures in civil cases depend on the hearing being evidential—that is, with witnesses. Many civil hearings are not of that nature, so we will consider responses to the consultation to address the point that Fiona Hyslop has made.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Numerous rape victims whose cases were not prosecuted in the criminal courts or whose cases resulted in unsuccessful prosecutions have had to resort to DIY justice by bringing a civil case against their attackers. Will the cabinet secretary tell me how many such cases are currently before the Scottish courts?

Keith Brown: No, because I do not have that information. However, I can get it and am happy to correspond with Mr Findlay to provide it.

Public Safety (Glasgow)

2. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to improve public safety in Glasgow. (S6O-01749)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): Public safety is a central priority for the Scottish Government. In Glasgow, as in the rest of Scotland, we work for a society in which people feel, and are, safe in their communities. To that end, we will continue with our transformative policies, including those outlined in "The Vision for Justice in Scotland" and the programme for government. In doing so, we will engage with a range of partners, including not only the emergency services but wider community safety organisations such as the Scottish Community Safety Network, Crimestoppers and Neighbourhood Watch Scotland, as well as local community safety partnerships.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the minister for that answer but more can and should be done. Attacks in Glasgow, including in its parks, have become all too common, which has led Radio Clyde to launch its light the way campaign for lighting in parks at night and Unite to launch its get me home safely campaign, which calls for safe and free transport home at night, including by taxi.

What action can be taken to ensure that Glasgow City Council introduces lighting in Glasgow's parks and to support the taxi industry so that there are cabs available to help people to get home safely in the city?

Elena Whitham: I know that Pam Duncan-Glancy is passionate about the issue. I understand that people need to get home safely, so I am willing to continue to engage with all partners, including Glasgow City Council, to ensure that we make progress.

Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (Cost of Non-attendance at Hearings)

3. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what the average cost to the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service

is of non-attendance at court hearings by all parties. (S6O-01750)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The managing of non-attendance is an operational matter for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. It does not record the costs of non-attendance, so an assessment of average costs is not possible. That said, we know that the costs are substantial and the SCTS employs a range of measures to minimise them. The chief executive of the SCTS will write to the member in response to a similar written question that he has lodged.

Mark Griffin: I have a constituent who, along with his family, has gone through the emotional trauma of attending court on six separate occasions to face the person who is accused of breaking into his property, stealing personal items of huge emotional value and setting fire to his home, only for that case to be postponed every time. Will the cabinet secretary say how many cases have been postponed due to non-attendance by an accused person, what the Government's view is on the impact that that has on victims and families and on dealing with court backlogs, and what plans it has to raise the issue with the Courts and Tribunals Service to stop it happening?

Keith Brown: Of course, the SCTS has a degree of autonomy and independence in relation to the matter. The scheduling of trials is its responsibility. It tries to mitigate the impact of non-attendance by overbooking to minimise the court time that is wasted. A number of specific measures are also taken—including the summary case management pilot, which is being undertaken in Paisley, Dundee and Hamilton, I think—to ensure that, if time becomes available because of non-appearance, another case can take the place of that hearing. That minimises the time that is wasted for the courts. It does not directly address the point of concern for Mark Griffin's constituent. However, the management of court cases is for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service to undertake.

To go back to the original point about cost, the last substantial estimate that was made was done by Audit Scotland. It admitted the difficulties that there were in trying to get a definitive figure but it might be interesting to Mark Griffin and might partly answer his question to know that Audit Scotland arrived at a figure of around 5 per cent for the cost of churn—that is, cases that were not taken. I am happy to provide him with more information in writing about the absolute number if we have the daily number for cases that have been subject to non-attendance.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Travel delays and cancellations between the

islands and mainland Scotland are impacting on the justice system. What is the cost of non-attendance at court due to travel delays? How many non-appearances in court are due to the transfer of prisoners by private contractors? What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the SCTS about those contractors and the situation?

Keith Brown: We have had discussions with the SCTS and the Scottish Prison Service, because the matter sometimes involves the transportation of prisoners to court, which can be an issue. There have been issues relating to the transportation of prisoners, not least because of some of the problems with employment that the contractor is currently experiencing due to the constrained labour market.

On costs, I refer Beatrice Wishart to the answer that I gave Mark Griffin. I am happy to look into the issue further to see whether, despite the fact that it is difficult to bear down on the figures and identify the costs—Audit Scotland found that, too—there are identifiable costs relating to people travelling to court, which she mentioned. If that information is available, I will supply it in writing.

Antisocial Behaviour (Central Scotland)

4. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to reduce antisocial behaviour in the Central Scotland region. (S6O-01751)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): The Scottish Government will continue to ensure that Police Scotland and local authorities have appropriate powers to prevent and deal with antisocial behaviour in all Scotland's communities.

Local authorities and Police Scotland are best placed to understand the issues that the communities they work with are facing and to work with them to address those issues through a wide range of options, including the use of antisocial behaviour orders, fixed-penalty notices and formal warnings, alongside positive diversionary and early intervention activities in appropriate circumstances.

Stephen Kerr: I ask about the issue because two elderly constituents of mine in Falkirk are woken every night by their neighbour calling the emergency services—many of the calls appear to be hoax calls. The noise can continue for many hours late at night as the police or people from the ambulance service bang on the door and shout to try to get entry. My constituents have significant health problems that have been caused by living with sleep deprivation and intense anxiety.

The type of behaviour that I have described is not admissible as evidence of antisocial

behaviour. If it is not antisocial behaviour, what is it, and how can my constituents get peace?

Elena Whitham: I am sorry to hear of the issues that Mr Kerr's constituents are facing and I am happy to engage with him directly on that, because people have the right to enjoy their own home and to feel safe and secure in it.

Obviously, local authorities and the police have powers in relation to antisocial behaviour and there is a range of options that the local authority could and should be using in that instance. I am happy to engage with Mr Kerr on that.

Recorded Crime in Scotland Statistics

5. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest recorded crime in Scotland statistics. (S6O-01752)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): Although the latest recorded crime statistics remain at their lowest level since 1974, showing that Scotland is a safer place since this Government took office, as I pointed out to Craig Hoy, when he asked the same question on 21 September last year, there is much more to do. That is why the recent Scottish budget includes plans to invest almost £3.4 billion across the justice system in 2023-24, with a 5.8 per cent increase in the resource budget, which equates to an additional £165 million. That will strengthen and reform vital front-line services, provide support for victims and witnesses and tackle the underlying drivers of offending.

Liz Smith: Nonetheless, the cabinet secretary knows that the most recent statistics from Police Scotland show a 17 per cent rise in non-sexual violent crime in Perth and Kinross, a 12 per cent rise in Fife and a 10 per cent rise in Stirlingshire. I think that many constituents across Mid Scotland and Fife will think that that is completely at odds with the cabinet secretary's claim in the *1919* magazine that

"Scotland continues to be such a safe place in which to live".

What urgent action is the Scottish Government, in line with our police force, taking to address those serious concerns?

Keith Brown: Nonetheless, it remains the case that crime in Scotland has fallen significantly under this situation. Scotland is a safer place since this Government took office; recorded crime is at the lowest level seen since 1974; and homicides are extremely low compared with historical trends.

We have also seen a 25 per cent reduction in non-sexual violent crime, as mentioned by Liz—

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The minister did not listen to the question.

Keith Brown: I do not know whether the member wants to hear the response or to shout instead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is on his feet, so there should be no sedentary chatting across the chamber. He will respond to the question, and we should listen to his response.

Keith Brown: Since 2006-07, we have seen a 25 per cent reduction in non-sexual violent crime, although, as I said in my original answer, we accept that there is much more to do. To help address that, we will continue to fund the police at a higher level in Scotland. Across almost every rank, we will continue to pay our police more in Scotland, and we will continue to have more police per capita in Scotland than there are in the rest of the United Kingdom. As I have just mentioned, we have increased the budget, despite the constraints that we have because of the Conservatives' economic mismanagement in England and Wales.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The number of sexual and violent crimes has increased again, and we know that the number of victims, particularly of sexual offences, who do not report is far greater than the number of those who do report. Therefore, the real figures will be even higher. How will the real-terms cuts to the budgets of the Crown Office, the judiciary, the police and the courts help to tackle that issue?

Keith Brown: I agree with the first two parts of Katy Clark's question. First, there has been an increase in sexual crimes—the number is 6 per cent higher than it was in the year ending September 2021. I also agree with the point that she made about the vast number of sexual crimes that are not reported. We can agree on those two things, but we do not agree on Crown Office funding, which has been increased again—this is from memory, although I am happy to correct it if it is wrong—by more than 3 per cent.

Katy Clark knows full well the constraints of the miserable settlement that we receive from the UK Government, which is, of course, related to its economic mismanagement. Therefore, within a very constrained environment, we are putting more money into the area. I have already mentioned that we fund the police—not only in relation to numbers but in relation to pay—to a greater extent than is done elsewhere. That should help to drive down a problem that is common across the world in many different jurisdictions—a problem that I recognise.

Veteran Medal Replacements Initiative

6. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will

provide an update on its support for the veteran medal replacements initiative. (S6O-01753)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): I announced the launch of the scheme to fund the cost of replacing medals for eligible veterans during the remembrance debate in November last year. I am happy to say that the first veteran to be supported through the scheme has now received his medals. In the meantime, my officials have been working with the Ministry of Defence to formalise the arrangements for the scheme. I should mention that I had asked the MOD if it would do that in the first instance, but it refused to do so. We are now formalising the arrangements with the MOD to fund, on an ongoing basis, replacement of medals for veterans who are resident in Scotland.

Jenni Minto: It is positive to see that the Scottish Government remains committed to investing in its veterans community, and I note that we have also welcomed a new veterans commissioner. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that veterans' voices continue to be represented in policy development?

Keith Brown: Of course, Jenni Minto has pointed out that we are, so far, the first and only Administration within the United Kingdom whose medal replacement costs are being met by the Government. We were the first to have a veterans commissioner and—to get to the point of Jenni Minto's question—we are also the first to have a veterans commissioner who is female. The role is vital for listening to and representing veterans. In turn, the commissioner's recommendations to Government help to ensure that veterans' voices are part of policy development.

The new commissioner is currently involved in the hearing veterans' voices initiative, which seeks to develop better ways of engaging directly with veterans and their families. That will help to build on the work that has been done by the Scottish Government to engage with the veterans community in developing and refreshing our decisions strategy and action plan, as will our regular engagement with veterans stakeholders to ensure that the issues that veterans face are heard and understood.

Police Officers (Mental Health)

7. Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support the mental health of police officers. (S6O-01754)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government welcomes the preventative approach, including proactive measures such as wellbeing

assessments, that Police Scotland is adopting to support the health and wellbeing of its workforce.

Police officers and staff can access a range of services to care for their psychological, physical, social and financial wellbeing through Police Scotland's "Your wellbeing matters" programme. Through the trauma risk management programme, post-trauma support is offered to all officers and staff who are directly involved in potentially traumatic incidents. Police Scotland has also signed up to the mental health at work commitment and standards.

Sharon Dowe: Police officers are often the first to arrive at murder scenes, abuse incidents, suicides and road traffic accidents. In 2021-22, officers and staff in the force missed 76,848 days due to psychological disorders. Given the reports of burn-out, low morale and high turnover among officers, what further steps is the Scottish Government taking to address the mental health challenges that face police officers? Can the Scottish Government update officers on how its proposed police complaints and misconduct handling bill will address the mental health problems that can be caused for officers when police complaints go unresolved for long periods?

Keith Brown: I have previously laid out in the chamber what else we are doing, and I will do so again as we move through the bill process for the police complaints standards initiative that we are taking forward in the proposed bill. The mental health at work commitment standards have, as I mentioned, been signed up to by Police Scotland. They include prioritisation of mental health in the workplace and the taking of a proactive approach to organisational culture—to go back to Sharon Dowe's point about the forthcoming bill—in order to drive positive mental health outcomes. Those form part of Blue Light Together's package of support to change workplace culture with regard to mental health and to provide specialist mental health support to emergency responders and their families.

Police Scotland is also working with Lifelines Scotland to provide mental health and wellbeing training, which aims to raise awareness and to support the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the police workforce.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am pleased that the Criminal Justice Committee held a meeting with Police Scotland officers to discuss the issue last year. More recently, the Scottish Police Authority hosted a conference on mental health and policing. Both provided valuable insight into the challenges of policing, and of the mental health and mental wellbeing of officers and staff.

I welcome the increase in the police budget, which reflects that policing is a priority for this Government. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the higher pay for officers in Scotland shows that the Scottish Government recognises the hard work and utter commitment of our police officers?

Keith Brown: Absolutely. I am not trying to pretend that just being better paid than police officers in other jurisdictions is enough to deal with some of the mental health pressures—of course that is not the case. However, our officers are the best paid in the United Kingdom, and we recognise the hard work and dedication of the police workforce across Scotland. The starting salary for a constable here is around £5,000 more than it is in England and Wales.

In recognition of the importance of policing, we will provide an additional £80 million to the Scottish Police Authority in 2023-24, which will take the police budget to £1.45 billion. That additional funding will continue to ensure that there is a stable basis from which to improve delivery of policing and to enhance the safety and security of communities across Scotland.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): In June 2022, I asked the First Minister what action the Scottish Government would take to support police officers who were struggling with the cost of living crisis. The First Minister responded by saying:

“we will continue to value them not just in rhetoric but in action.”—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2022; c 21.]

Will the cabinet secretary please outline what action has since been taken to support police officers with the cost of living crisis to mitigate the potential impact of financial strain on their mental health?

Keith Brown: There are two points to make in answer to Mr Choudhury’s question. The first is that, as I have mentioned, some of the mental health support also covers support with regard to financial issues. It is very important that police officers are not subjected to extreme financial pressures because of the other dangers of that, particularly in relation to the police’s role. That is done within the police—Police Scotland is the employer and it provides that support.

The Government provides support by making sure that we have the best-paid police officers in the UK. I mentioned that the lowest level—a starting police constable—receives £5,000 a year more than they would in the rest of the UK. That is a substantial amount more than is paid elsewhere. I am not saying that it is the complete answer, but it will help with the cost of living crisis. We will continue to make sure that we support our police officers to a greater extent than we see officers being supported elsewhere in the UK.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Estate)

8. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service estate. (S6O-01755)

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): Currently, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has 357 fire stations, which provide fire and rescue cover to communities across Scotland.

Jamie Greene: Let me give the minister an update, in the absence of one from people on the centre benches. Of those 357 stations, 220 are in poor or bad condition, 150 do not have any shower facilities, 100 lack drying facilities, and 11 have no water supply at all. Is it any wonder that our firefighters in Scotland are 600 times more likely than the wider population to suffer from certain cancers? None of us in this room would work in such conditions; why should our firefighters?

Elena Whitham: Jamie Greene raises very important points, of which I am well aware. We have committed to increasing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service resource budget by £10 million this coming year, and we have protected the capital budget as much as we could.

It is worth noting that, when we merged the former services into one service, that came with a £389 million capital backlog. I will make sure to engage with the service and the Fire Brigades Union in the short term about their priorities for the buildings, fleet and equipment.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Almost £3.4 billion in funding across the justice system was announced as part of the 2023-24 budget to fund vital front-line services. How will that investment support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to deliver the high standard of services that are required to keep Scotland safe?

Elena Whitham: As I mentioned, the draft 2023-24 budget includes a £10 million increase to the resource budget for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to support service delivery and reform. That will bring the total budget to £362.7 million, which is more than £55.3 million higher than the budget for 2017-18.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): A research study of emergency service staff in Scotland, the results of which were published on Tuesday, found that firefighters’ cancer mortality rate is 1.6 times higher than that of others, which is likely due to exposure to toxic substances while on the job. The World Health Organization classifies firefighting as a carcinogenic profession.

Firefighters deserve the best preventative medical care, education, and support to reduce their risk of cancer, but they also need the right equipment and facilities to enable them to properly decontaminate after attending fires. Will the minister commit to producing a plan of action to upgrade facilities and infrastructure at fire stations across Scotland to ensure that those front-line workers have what they need to be safe?

Elena Whitham: I know that Maggie Chapman, like Jamie Greene, has a keen interest in the matter—as do I. Both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service set as a high priority protection of the safety and wellbeing of firefighters. I know that the SFRS is taking action across all aspects of operations to reduce exposure to contaminants, which includes investment in new fire appliances and facilities. I am keen to engage with it and the FBU on the issue. Difficult decisions have had to be taken on allocation of the finite capital budget that is available to the Scottish Government but—as I said—we have protected the capital budget for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as far as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice and veterans. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

National Planning Framework 4

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-07442, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the fourth national planning framework. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak were to press their request-to-speak buttons now. I call Tom Arthur to speak to and move the motion for up to 13 minutes.

14:53

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I am delighted to open this afternoon's debate on Scotland's fourth national planning framework. We are in a somewhat novel situation, with Parliament having created a statutory role for itself in approving the final version of the framework without then specifying what that role should involve. Thankfully, we have managed to work it out for ourselves.

I was pleased to lay before Parliament the revised draft of the fourth national planning framework—or NPF4, as we all know it—on 8 November 2022. There was then more parliamentary scrutiny led by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, at which I and other stakeholders gave evidence. The committee has now published its report, and this debate represents the final part of the process. I hope that Parliament comes together later this afternoon to unanimously approve NPF4.

During the process, people told us that, although they broadly supported the draft NPF4, there was scope to significantly improve the policies, the practicality and, importantly, the clarity of intent of the document. I gave my commitment that the Government would take its time and consider carefully the views expressed by the Parliament and by everyone who responded to the consultation—and that I would make sure we get it right and return with a revised NPF4.

That is what we have done. I am pleased that the committee recognises that and welcomes the revised draft and the improvements that we have made.

We listened, we reconsidered and we acted on what people told us. In that, I warmly welcome the committee's conclusion that

“It is clear ... that the Scottish Government has listened to the comments of the Committee and stakeholders”.

Yes, we did, and the revised NPF4 is so much the better for it.

I also welcome the committee's intention to monitor delivery, and I very much look forward to

continuing to engage with the committee on that in the months and years ahead.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): In light of the minister's opening remarks, does he accept that there has been a substantial change between the first draft and the revised draft of the NPF in the way that wild land areas are treated, which moves away from a presumption against development in wild land areas? Can he tell us who has been lobbying him to make that U-turn, and can he give us clarity now on what that means?

Tom Arthur: I would, in the first instance, refer the member to the explanatory report that we published in November along with the revised draft of NPF4. It sets out in considerable detail how the consultation process led to the changes that we have made. What we have seen is a strengthening of the policy that is absolutely consistent with our ambition to put climate and nature at the centre of Scotland's planning system.

The delivery programme that we published alongside our revised NPF4 in November is, so to speak, a first edition. It is very much intended as a live document, to be constantly actioned, reviewed and updated. It will play a crucial role in bringing together all of the actions to support NPF4's delivery. It sets out an approach to governance, to new legislation and guidance, to facilitation of investment in development, and to the vital monitoring of progress that will inform future actions and subsequent iterations of the programme. I have already committed to undertaking the first review of the NPF4 delivery programme after six months, and then annually thereafter, to ensure that we get off to a strong start and then maintain the momentum throughout the lifetime of NPF4.

I also note the concerns that the committee heard about getting the balance right where there appear to be potential conflicts between certain policy areas. That balance will be key. However, in essence, is that not what planning has always been about—seeking to get the right decisions about how we manage and develop places to meet a range of policy needs? Those tensions are inherent in the very concept of planning.

Yet, if we are to deliver on this Government's ambition to make Scotland fairer, greener and more prosperous, it is right that we prioritise key, national policy objectives through the framework's policies. As I have stated, it was always our intention to put climate and nature front and centre in our planning system. Having listened to calls for greater clarity and strength on that, we introduce in NPF4 a new national planning policy number 1 to ensure that, in all planning decisions, significant weight will be given to the climate and nature crises. That new policy sets out our intention to

ensure that positive action is embedded right across the planning system.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The NPF4 refers to the fact that the A9 and A96 will be improved for reasons of safety. However, one word is conspicuous by its absence from the text, namely the sole word "dualling". The Scottish Government has commitments to dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness and the A96, in my constituency, from Inverness to Nairn. Can the minister confirm that the absence of a reference to dualling in this planning document implies no dilution of that commitment and that it remains absolutely rock solid?

Tom Arthur: I am very grateful to Mr Ewing for the intervention. I am absolutely delighted to give him that commitment, on the record, here in Parliament.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Tom Arthur: Very briefly. I have a lot to get through.

Douglas Lumsden: Fergus Ewing mentioned the A96 between Inverness and Nairn. Can the minister commit that the A96 will be fully dualled between Inverness and Aberdeen?

Tom Arthur: The commitments that the Government has made on dualling of the A9 and the A96 remain. Considerable work is being undertaken to ensure that we can deliver on those commitments.

It was always our intention to ensure that climate and nature were front and centre in our planning system, and we understand what that means for future developments across Scotland. NPF4 does not shy away from the hard decisions that we will have to make about our future, but it enables different opportunities to be realised that will transform our economy and society, such as the redevelopment of renewable energy technologies. NPF4 will support the sustainable growth of the renewables sector while continuing to protect our most valued natural assets and cultural heritage.

I welcome the comment from Scottish Renewables that recognises the revised draft NPF4 as

"one of the most supportive planning regimes for renewable energy in Europe."

However, that does not mean any development in any place. Wind energy is not being supported in national parks and national scenic areas. Drawing on consultation responses, we have, as was touched on earlier, included a more explicit policy position on wild land, subject to an impact assessment and appropriate mitigation,

management measures and monitoring. That also recognises that wild land areas are partly included in national scenic areas and national parks. Wider NPF4 policies also include protections for peatland, nature conservation sites and protected historical assets.

Another key objective of NPF4 is to help people live well locally in the future, by embedding the principles of local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods into how we design and create places and communities. I note some stakeholders' concerns that that approach might result in the entrenchment of inequalities in neighbourhoods, but is that not what the current system—as well as much wider social and economic change over time—has inadvertently resulted in, particularly in many urban areas?

Our fresh approach to spatial planning will allow us to create places that have improved access to the facilities and amenities that people require in their daily lives and which support thriving, sustainable, healthy communities and protect and enhance our environment. The aim is to create more balanced, diverse communities and neighbourhoods.

However, I acknowledge the need for clarity on how the local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods approaches can be applied in rural settings. Scotland's geography and population sparsity demand that the application of the template differs according to the unique circumstances, opportunities and aspirations of individual places.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I am afraid that I do not have time, but I am happy to take an intervention when I conclude the debate.

To support that important principle for new development, we will publish and invite views on new guidance on local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods.

It will take extensive collaboration and commitment across sectors to deliver NPF4. Local authorities are key partners. The strength of NPF4 is in connecting planning with wider work, through the place principle, which involves everyone. To aid that work, a new planning, infrastructure and place advisory group is being established to oversee the delivery and support the implementation of NPF4.

The committee rightly highlighted concerns about capacity and skills, and we are already acting to address those issues. Last April, I increased planning fees to provide additional resource for planning services across Scotland, and a further increase was implemented last

month to support the assessment of applications under the Electricity Act 1989. I have been working closely with the high-level group on planning performance to explore how planning fees can move towards full cost recovery, in order to more accurately cover the cost of handling applications.

However, funding is only one part of the solution. I agree with the committee that

“all endeavours must be made to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of planners in place to deliver on the ambitions of NPF4.”

Work is already under way with the high-level group to enhance people resources and skills. The future planners project, which sets out a number of practical actions, is a good example of that. I am also liaising with the relevant Government ministers to ensure that planning features in the recently announced skills review and as part of our green skills activity.

I also note that, in its conclusion, the committee states that

“It is not satisfactory to simply assume that planning policy is now set for ten years and can be left as it is”.

I assure Parliament that no such assumption has been made by me or this Government. This year, we will bring forward regulations that will set out how we can make changes to NPF4 in the future.

NPF4 is not an aspirational document; it is a plan for action, to be proactively pursued and delivered. If approved today, and once adopted, NPF4 will form part of the statutory development plan and have a substantial influence on all planning decisions.

Should the Parliament give its approval to NPF4, the Government will move quickly to adopt it next month. I will first lay regulations in the Parliament to commence the provisions of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 so that NPF4 becomes part of the statutory development plan immediately following its adoption. I can confirm that, prior to adoption, we will also issue transitional guidance to help to smooth the shift from the old system to the new one over the early weeks and months. In the coming weeks, I will also lay regulations and publish related guidance that will pave the way for the new-style local development plans that will sit alongside NPF4.

It is important to remember that NPF4 is one part of a wider statutory development plan. In all cases, NPF4 will be taken together with local development plans to form the basis of decisions, and decision makers will also take into account material considerations. With those intrinsic links between planning policy at both the national and local levels, the detailed reforms to local development planning, alongside NPF4, will set

the arrangements for producing stronger place-focused plans and will reinforce the plan-led system.

There is no doubt that there is a lot still to do to turn NPF4 from good intentions into reality. Although much of planning is procedural and practical by its very nature, we risk losing sight of its purpose if we focus solely on its component parts. Planning is far from prosaic. It helps to form the very foundation of policy making. From it, all else flows.

Planning is undoubtedly about place, but it is also about people. It defines and enables development in every aspect of our lives. It informs the where, what and how of living, working and travelling. It plays a crucial role in attracting investment and in facilitating the type of development that we will need in order to build a wellbeing economy, and, by necessity, it deems what we should not do, where we should not do it and how to prevent undesirable development.

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, minister.

Tom Arthur: That last aspect is crucial to a country such as Scotland, where we are blessed with a rich and abundant natural environment and landscape. We have assets that are worth protecting and nurturing, and they will help us to effectively tackle the twin crises of nature and climate, while creating new economic and social opportunities for future generations.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I must ask you to conclude at that point.

Tom Arthur: In conclusion, the fourth national planning framework seeks to further our ambition for Scotland—

The Presiding Officer: Minister, please conclude now.

Tom Arthur: —to be a fairer, greener and more prosperous country by changing how people in Scotland will live in the future through planning.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, minister.

Tom Arthur: I am proud to move,

That the Parliament gives its approval, as required by section 3CA(1) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, to the draft revised National Planning Framework 4 laid in the Parliament by the Scottish Government on 8 November 2022, enabling the Scottish Ministers to proceed to adopt and publish the Framework in accordance with the provisions of that Act.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ariane Burgess to speak on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

15:07

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate, in my capacity as convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, by underscoring a few points that the committee has made.

Today, the Parliament is invited to approve NPF4, but that should not be seen as the end of the process of parliamentary scrutiny. The critical part of NPF4 will be how it works in practice. Throughout the session, as a committee, we will continue to hold the Scottish Government to account on the effectiveness of NPF4.

Although we are yet to see the impact of NPF4, the committee welcomes the improved clarity and consistency in the document—in particular, its focus on the climate and biodiversity emergencies. It is clear to the committee that the Scottish Government has listened to the comments of the Parliament's committees and stakeholders, and the minister and his officials should be hugely commended for their efforts.

Although this draft reflects a significant improvement on the previous draft, stakeholders have highlighted to us ways in which it could be further improved. Although the minister has been clear that this will be the final draft, we welcome his commitment to consider changes and updates following implementation. The test will now be in how NPF4 is implemented and whether it delivers its ambitions.

The committee welcomed the delivery programme that accompanied the draft. However, we had very limited time to consider it and, therefore, we welcome the opportunity to revisit the programme in six months' time. We will also be closely scrutinising its effect throughout the parliamentary session.

Most critical, if the ambitions of NPF4 are to be fully realised, we need properly resourced and staffed planning departments. The absence of a sufficient number of planners is clearly the greatest obstacle to the delivery of NPF4. However, it is not just a case of having more planners; it is about having planners with the necessary skills—such as expertise in climate and biodiversity planning—to deliver on NPF4. I was therefore heartened to hear the actions that the minister is taking to ensure that there are sufficient planners in place and with the right skills to deliver on the ambitions. We will be closely monitoring that.

NPF4, as conceived, should have a transformational impact on Scotland. For that to happen, it should impact all aspects of life. If that is to be achieved, the Scottish Government needs

to adopt a cross-cutting approach. The committee notes that, in Ireland, cabinet ministers must set out how their departments intend to deliver policies that are set out in their equivalent framework, and we would welcome a similar commitment from the Scottish Government.

The success of NPF4 is also reliant on how it is translated into local development plans by planning authorities. The guidance and regulations on local development plans must be brought forward as a matter of urgency. I would welcome an update from the minister on when we should expect to see guidance and regulations.

As I said previously, this is not the end of the process of parliamentary scrutiny of NPF4. We welcome the minister's commitment to lay an annual report before Parliament, and we will scrutinise that report. We are also keen to hear from all stakeholders on their experience of NPF4 and the extent to which it is achieving its intended outcomes. In particular, we will be keen to hear from local communities about how they are able to shape the places in which they live through local place plans.

This is a much improved document and one that provides a sound foundation for shaping Scotland for the next 10 years. However, we have a long journey ahead to ensure that it makes the transformational change that it seeks to achieve, and the committee will closely monitor the effectiveness of NPF4 in making that change.

15:11

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Without wanting this to sound like an Oscar awards speech, I start by thanking the clerks of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for their help and support during the passage of NPF4 through Parliament, as well as the hundreds of individuals, charities, interested parties and organisations that have provided incredibly helpful briefings and input in trying to improve NPF4. It has been a pleasure—I am sure that the minister agrees—to engage with all those people, who have a passion for our planning system and really want to contribute to the conversation on how to improve it.

From the outset, we, on these benches, have engaged constructively, and I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has made many changes. I specifically put on record my thanks to the minister for the positive approach to discussions that he has had, which has been—sadly—a refreshing change from how the Parliament sometimes operates. Indeed, in recent years, we have seen limited outreach from Scottish Government ministers following the Bute house agreement and the formation of a Scottish

National Party-Green majority Government. I hope that we see a change in that situation after this new year. I put on record my thanks to the minister for how he has conducted himself during the passage of NPF4.

We all recognise the importance of tackling both the climate emergency and the nature crisis through our planning system. However, from the outset, I have called for the housing emergency to be central to the development of the new NPF4 if we are truly to ensure that Scotland's housing needs are met in the future. As Homes for Scotland says in its briefing, it

“remains disappointed that the housing crisis is not specifically mentioned”

and is

“concerned over the seeming lack of ambition”

in NPF4

“to address it.”

It is most likely that housing—whether private or social—will be delivered in spite of NPF4 rather than because of it, with underwhelming minimum all-tenure housing land requirements doing little to drive forward the number of new homes that Scotland requires.

To date, we have seen a lack of transitional guidance, which risks causing considerable unnecessary delay to applications that are already in the planning system and to decisions on those applications.

The fact is that the SNP-Green Government has failed to address Scotland's housing crisis, which is making it harder for people to get on the property ladder and get the homes that they need. The Scottish Government's latest housing statistics, for example, reveal that housing completions across all tenures in Scotland are still below pre-Covid levels.

Why does putting the housing crisis in NPF4 matter? Today, there are 28,000 homeless households across Scotland—32,592 adults and 14,372 children are registered homeless. I hoped that NPF4 could help to address that situation and could ensure that our focus is not just on the climate and nature emergency, but also on the housing crisis. I do not think that we have achieved that, which is disappointing.

Fergus Ewing: On the issue of housing, does the member agree that, although the content of NPF4 in respect of housing in rural Scotland is, to some extent, to be welcomed, it is still very restrictive and very caveated, that it is very difficult to build houses in rural Scotland and that there are strong arguments that rural Scotland—farmers, in particular—can do much more to address the

housing crisis, which I think we all agree is a serious one for Scotland?

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree with that point. A key aspect that needs to be addressed is that, given the additional costs faced by small-scale builders, many of which might not survive any coming recession, we need to look at the potential for more small-scale investments to be supported. I would like there to be a rural homes delivery agency to drive forward progress on the targets in the way that Fergus Ewing mentioned.

NPF4 has the potential to help to drive sustainable growth and deliver new jobs in key sectors, especially in the renewables sector, where we have seen a shift, which I welcome. However, I am concerned that the housing sector could be impacted negatively by NPF4, as Fergus Ewing indicated. I have outlined to the minister on a number of occasions my concern about future land supply. There is still no mechanism in NPF4 for fixing a land pipeline that is underdelivering if longer-term sites cannot be found to fill the gap. It is unclear how an underdelivering pipeline can or will allow further land to be found in the event that there are no deliverable brownfield sites.

I do not want to rehearse the arguments that I have made in relation to Edinburgh, but there is real concern that most development sites that we have in NPF4 and in local plans in Edinburgh are currently being used by viable businesses such as car dealerships. There are such businesses throughout the Seafield part of the city, which I represent. The sites in that area are allocated for housing, but there is no future development plan showing where those businesses are meant to go in order to allow those houses to be realised. Ministers must look at how that will be delivered.

Planning policy should be clear, concise and written in such a way as to not allow or result in misinterpretation. I hope that the minister has taken on board the key concerns that businesses have outlined in that respect. There continue to be concerns over a number of specific policy areas, including the inclusion of policy 27(d), which is unnecessarily restrictive and puts at risk future job creation. Although I welcome the comments that the minister made in committee about working to make sure that that policy is not misinterpreted, the guidance will need to provide clarity and must be sufficiently specific in order not to result in unintended consequences.

Tom Arthur: I said in committee that I would meet stakeholders. I have met stakeholders, including a large organisation that has many drive-through premises, and I have committed to my officials working together with their team to ensure that we get the guidance on that absolutely correct. My officials will—as will I—meet other representatives of sectors that are affected by the

policy in question. I give the reassurance that we are actively taking forward the commitment that I gave.

Miles Briggs: I very much welcome that. To avoid unintended consequences of any policy that the Parliament introduces, it is important that the guidance does not result in a potential slowdown in the economy or in job creation. None of us would want that to happen.

We also want there to be a better focus in the planning system on the delivery of community projects and infrastructure. In Edinburgh, I have been campaigning to take forward the development of an urban greenway along the old Powderhall site. From the outset, NPF4 should have provided an opportunity to make it easier for communities to pursue planning applications for such developments. That has not really happened, and I would like there to be more focus on that. The minister said that he is willing to consider having more consultation on how we can transform that situation and give communities the opportunity to present their own plans for the development of infrastructure. I do not think that that has been captured in NPF4. The minister has touched on the issue and I hope that there will be more focus on it in the future.

The Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland and Planning Democracy have made it clear that we can deliver proper planning only by having properly resourced local authorities. I welcome what the minister said about planning departments and the funding of planners. However, the sad fact is that many planning departments are underfunded and understaffed at present, and their budgets have been allowed to be cut over many years. We can see the consequences of that situation. That must change, and I welcome what the minister said about that.

I do not think that anyone believes that the passing of NPF4 today will signal the delivery of the planning system that Scotland needs to meet all the challenges that communities currently face. The delivery of the plan will be possible only through system change, as the convener outlined in her remarks. NPF4 should be a key document that influences the Scottish Government's decision making across all portfolios—most importantly, perhaps, the health portfolio—and that serves as a core for future policy development in Scotland.

The devil will always be in the detail. I hope that the minister will now work to deliver the critical guidance that industry asks for and communities demand, and that we can see the flexibility that will ensure that any potentially needed changes and fixes are brought forward as soon as possible.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Mr Briggs.

Miles Briggs: Although I welcome much of what has been changed in NPF4, it is not acceptable in its current form, and therefore the Scottish Conservatives will not support it at decision time.

15:20

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): NPF4 is a vitally important document—not for Parliament or Government, but for the communities, local decision makers and businesses that desperately need long-overdue detail about how planning will work for the next decade.

I echo the thanks for the considerable input from stakeholders—especially the communities most affected by the planning framework—that has got us to this point, as well as for the work of the committee clerks, the minister and officials.

Organisations such as the RSPB, Homes for Scotland, Heads of Planning Scotland and Scottish Renewables have welcomed the significant improvements since the first draft. The revised draft delivered necessary improvements to structure and readability, and to the clarity and consistency of policies and the flexibility around them. As we set out at committee, the original draft was not the greatest. The committee concluded that

“there are still elements of NPF4 that could be improved”,

that a cross-Government approach to implementation is still found wanting, and that a decimated planning profession lacks a pipeline to deliver on the ambition in the framework.

We have heard reports that one of our higher education institutes will be ending its undergraduate planning programme, which will leave only a single higher education institute in this country with a planning school. If that comes to pass, that will put even more pressure on the pipeline of planning professionals.

Our most fundamental concern is that the framework does not do enough to tackle Scotland’s housing crisis. The fact is that we need to build more homes, because our housing crisis has got worse since the previous framework, not better.

We need to build more homes that are warmer, safer and more accessible for an ageing, changing population in which people are living alone in greater numbers. That needs to be done while balancing the views of local people and protecting our natural and existing environment.

Homes must be built in greater numbers, because too few have been built for years now. Under the previous Government, an average of about 24,000 homes were built each year by both

the private and social sectors. Despite the Government’s ambitious affordable housing supply programme, barely 18,000 new homes a year have been built since the previous framework was introduced.

Miles Briggs: I agree with what Mark Griffin is saying about the numbers of homes, but the types of homes are also critically important. A freedom of information request by the Scottish Conservatives has shown that there are 24,000 disabled people on housing waiting lists. That is up from 9,700 in 2017. The types of houses need to change, and we have not really seen that in NPF4.

Mark Griffin: Absolutely. That is the point that I made about the changing demographics of this country. We have an ageing population of people who are living alone more and more, and we do not seem to reflect that change or the needs of our disabled population when planning the houses of the future.

The NPF4 document does not offer a great deal of comfort to the 180,000 households who are on a waiting list for a home or the 30,000 households assessed as being homeless or threatened with homelessness last year.

One element of the housing market is that, since the previous framework was approved, the number of homes that are empty on a long-term basis has grown by 12,000—so 12,000 more homes have been taken out of the property market. If we include second homes and short-term lets, we find that 3 per cent of homes are not being used for their primary purpose—that is, for people to live in—so we have to build more to compensate for that.

The lack of housing is an issue that my constituents in Central Scotland raise week after week. They see the connections when policies such as NPF4 are launched. They see that the housing crisis seems not to be given the recognition that it deserves. They see family homes lying empty. Homes that their sons, daughters, nieces, nephews or friends could be living in right now are going to waste.

Much is made of 20-minute neighbourhoods in the framework. That is an admirable objective, but my constituents want homes near their support networks and families, who can help with childcare or drop in with some messages or for a quick catch-up. That is what makes things easier for people and makes for a better quality of life.

When the revised draft was published, I asked the minister why the Government had dismissed concerns that the all-tenure housing targets are based on historical, secondary data, which was gathered through the housing need and demand assessment process. The process is not robust or

evidence based. It is estimated that up to 86,000 households, particularly households of young adults who are still living at home but want to get their own homes, have not been counted. They might be concealed households, living in their childhood bedrooms, or overcrowded households, in a home that is too small for the adults who live in it. The crucial point is that such households are not counted unless they are both concealed and overcrowded. That leads to a huge undercounting.

It is estimated that about 1 million households are uncounted in England, so the problem is not unique to Scotland. However, it is a problem that we have not addressed. The Government asserts that the HNSA tool is the optimum tool at its disposal and that the minimum land requirement is simply a minimum, with planning authorities expected to go beyond those numbers. However, it ignores the fact that the numbers are treated as targets. The result is a lack of robust data, which means that inappropriate developments can be driven like a horse and cart through local development plans.

We will support the motion on NPF4 at decision time, but we are clear that it is by no means a finished document. We look forward to scrutinising the transitional guidance that the minister has committed to produce.

15:28

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This has not been independently verified but, if there was a prize for the most passionate and enthusiastic Holyrood planning minister ever, I think that Tom Arthur would get the award. He made a comprehensive and passionate speech earlier and I admire him for that, because this is a difficult policy area that involves myriad documents from all parts of Government. He has to try to bring all that together—his passion is needed to make that work.

The NPF process has been ratcheted up in the two decades since it was created. It has more weight and significance now, and the power that it gives to central Government is much greater than it was when the process began. I am cautious about that. I am not necessarily against the measures in the document, but I am cautious about the transfer of power from local communities and local authorities to the centre. It is good to encourage and spread good practice but, as a Liberal, I am anxious about approaches becoming statutory and centralised. Over time, we must check ourselves when it comes to the accumulation of powers to the Parliament and the Government. However, the significant weight given to the global climate change and nature crises is a significant change that should be welcomed.

To achieve what is wanted, we will need to have robust policy that gives confidence to not only councillors but planners to make the right decisions. They already face challenging decisions, so to add to their area of required expertise will make things more challenging.

That adds emphasis to the points that other members have made about the resourcing and expertise of planning departments. It is not as if the nature and climate crises have not been a factor for planners before, but the greater emphasis now requires greater expertise. As we all know, planning departments have been bedevilled for years by the lack of experience, constant turnover and shortage of staff. Some of the lead times for planning applications go on for ever, which does not give anybody great confidence.

The minister set out that he has a high-level group that will make some real changes, and difficult decisions will have to be made on full cost recovery, if we are going to pursue that. How can we make sure that we keep the best planners in planning departments and that they are not attracted to go off to work in construction companies, which often offer better pay than planning departments ever could? I hope that there is a change, because getting the 600 to 700 extra staff it is estimated that we require will be a big challenge for the high-level group to achieve.

After the statement in November, I asked a question about permitted development rights. The minister replied enthusiastically—as he always does—that he is making real progress on permitted development rights for renewables, particularly solar. I hope that, in summing up, the minister makes reference to the progress that he has made. He said that an update on progress would be available early in the new year. This is the new year, and it is early.

A business called Metaflake in Anstruther is keen to put solar panels of more than 50kW on its roof, but it has to apply for planning permission and pay extra business rates. Those are two disincentives. I know that the second one is changing, but that should not be the case. England has been marching ahead on the matter for some time. It has greater limits for solar across its policy areas. I hope that the minister will respond positively on that.

The minister is right when he says that planning is all about competing demands. It is about meeting various competing demands, but they are even greater now. Building homes on brownfield sites can often be expensive—let us be blunt about that. They are difficult-to-access areas, and perhaps land needs to be reclaimed or cleaned up. The environmental costs of that are not cheap.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I take Willie Rennie's point that it is difficult to build on brownfield sites. That is one of the challenges that I have found. Does he agree that we need to enable our laws to support local authorities to do whatever they can to address brownfield sites?

Willie Rennie: Emma Harper is absolutely right. The challenge is what we do. To be blunt, some of those sites require extra money, because they would not wash their face financially if it was left to the open market. Will Government funds be used to incentivise companies to build in difficult-to-build areas?

That includes flats above shops. We would have thought that those flats would be full of people. There is nothing to stop those properties being developed, so why are they not getting done? That is because that is difficult and expensive, and there are security issues. There are planning restrictions on the frontage of the buildings that mean that developing them is more expensive. Rather than putting extra burdens and requirements on them, what will the state do to incentivise that development to happen?

We will produce more documents like NPF4 for decades on end, but nothing will actually change.

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I have a lot more to say, but I will stop.

We need to review the document. The ideals are brilliant, and I embrace an awful lot of them, but the deliverability will be an awful lot more challenging. That is the message from today, and I am sure that the minister, with all his passion, will be able to deliver.

15:35

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this afternoon's debate as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. The committee has held numerous evidence sessions, received many briefings and held many individual meetings during the past year or so. I thank the minister, Tom Arthur, for the open and consultative approach that he has taken to get the national planning framework 4 to this stage. I also thank the chief planner, Dr Fiona Simpson, and her colleagues for their support, as well as my fellow committee members and the committee clerks.

We cannot overestimate the impact of NPF4 on Scotland's economy and its climate. I am disappointed that the Tories are not supporting the motion, as the committee's approach has been very collaborative. Willie Rennie touched on the point that NPF4 is a document but there are many

policies around it, such as HNDA and the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement, which we have talked about. The committee is aware of the process and its role in that, and the minister is also aware of that.

One of the key issues is how all of that fits into the national strategy for economic transformation, which states:

"Scotland has extraordinary economic potential. Our natural resources, heritage, talent, creativity, academic institutions and business base in both established and emerging sectors are the envy of many across the world.

Every citizen holds Scotland's economic potential in their hands. Our economic growth and prosperity over many decades has been the result of entrepreneurial, talented and motivated workers in every sector".

NPF4 has to give us the right balance to enable us to fulfil that. It is important to note that NPF4 will raise the framework for local development plans. That is the next stage and, again, it will drive forward local economies.

The foreword to the strategy goes on to say:

"This strategy recognises the opportunities and the challenges facing Scotland. It sets out how, over the next ten years, we aim to deliver economic growth that significantly outperforms the last decade, so that the Scottish economy is more prosperous, more productive and more internationally competitive."

It says that the Scottish Government will do that

"in collaboration with ... other partners, building on our strengths in sectors like energy"

and housing, as we have heard. It also says that we will look out for new opportunities in

"technology, space and decarbonisation."

To achieve the objectives that are set out in the national strategy, we need a national planning framework that sits alongside it and will help Scotland to become a more prosperous and greener independent country, and NPF4 will continue to do that.

I want to focus on a few issues in the time that I have left, and the first is renewables. Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Michael Matheson, stated:

"We are at a pivotal point in Scotland's transition to net zero and the strategy charts a clear course for the transformation of the energy sector—one of Scotland's most important industries—to 2030 and beyond. That transition must be achieved in a way that delivers for the people of Scotland to enable us to embrace the opportunities of a green economy.

This is a time of unprecedented uncertainty in global and national energy markets. High energy prices are impacting people, communities and businesses across Scotland."—*[Official Report, 10 January 2023; c 48.]*

I agree with him. We need to have energy security and to grow the sector, and the NPF needs to be able to support that.

Earlier, we heard from the minister about the endorsement of Scottish renewables. Scotland's rich renewable resources mean that we can not only generate enough cheap, green electricity to power Scotland's economy, but generate a surplus and open new economic opportunities for export. I believe that NPF4 will allow that through its support for renewables.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): The member is talking about a very important aspect of NPF4. Will he acknowledge the work that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has done to identify and provide additional advice and push the Government to support the renewables sector a bit further? Only this morning, that was supported by Claire Mack, chief executive of Scottish Renewables, when she gave evidence to the Economy and Fair Work Committee, which is also taking a keen interest in the issue.

Paul McLennan: Absolutely. One of the key aspects of our consideration of NPF4 was to seek input from other committees such as the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, and the minister has taken a collaborative approach. I note the endorsement from Claire Mack.

The other important issue that I want to mention is climate change. Part 1 of NPF4, which is entitled "A National Spatial Strategy for Scotland 2045", states:

"The world is facing unprecedented challenges. The global climate emergency means that we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the future impacts of climate change. We will need to respond to a growing nature crisis".

In his opening remarks, the minister talked about the importance of tackling climate change in moving that forward, and he also talked about biodiversity.

The NPF4 goes on to say:

"Scotland's rich heritage, culture and outstanding environment are national assets that support our economy identity, health, and wellbeing. Many communities benefit from great places with excellent quality of life and quality, affordable homes. Many people can easily access high quality local greenspaces and neighbourhood facilities, safe and welcoming streets and spaces and buildings that reflect diverse cultures and aspirations."

We have already talked about 20-minute neighbourhoods, which the document also mentions. I believe that NPF4 gives us the opportunity to deliver the change that we need.

On Monday, I met the Royal Town Planning Institute to discuss resource. The RTPI previously gave evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and it sent us a briefing for today's debate. It estimates that, over the next 10 to 15 years,

"the planning sector will have demand for an additional 680 - 730 entrants into the sector".

That additional resource would support not only economic development in our areas and in relation to housing, but the renewables sector, which is incredibly important. I know that the minister is well aware of those issues.

One of the key things that the RTPI talks about is the need for the Scottish Government to

"provide additional resource and enhanced support".

It wants to ensure that planning fees, which the minister talked about, are ring fenced and used to support planning purposes. It also wants the Scottish Government to

"increase planning fees to ensure they meet ... costs, or introduce a subsidy for planning authorities to overcome this shortfall".

I know that the minister recognises the need for additional resource and is engaging with the RTPI and others on that issue.

The minister also mentioned the committee's desire to monitor NPF4 on an on-going basis. We are discussing with him how we can continue to monitor it over the next 10 years. It is a working document, so how we will monitor it and work with the minister on it is an important matter.

The national planning framework 4 will help us to deliver a more prosperous, fairer, greener and more inclusive Scotland, and I urge all members to support it.

15:41

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to scrutinise the revised national planning framework 4. These are challenging and uncertain times, and Scotland is facing challenges from many different directions. With an on-going housing shortage, with the nature of our town and city centres continually changing and with the reality of the journey to net zero becoming clearer than ever, there has never been a greater need for an effective planning framework.

There will, no doubt, be different opinions from members across the chamber regarding the proposals. However, Parliament will be in agreement about many of the stated priorities in the framework.

It is surprising that certain important aspects of planning are not featured in the revised NPF4 as prominently as they should have been and as we thought they would be. For example, a successful planning framework should be clearer about how it will improve the form of buildings as well as their function.

We can all agree that principles such as ensuring a just transition, promoting local living and revitalising rural communities fully deserve to be placed at the centre of this important framework. Indeed, given the importance of NPF4, it is perhaps disappointing that stakeholders were not given more time to fully scrutinise the proposals. Certain stakeholders, such as the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers and Heads of Planning Scotland, have even suggested that the process has felt rushed. Planning authorities need clarity about the direction of NPF4, but it is important that stakeholders are fully involved at each stage of the process and that they are given enough time to fully reflect.

That being said, I welcome the fact that the revised draft includes improvements compared with the original draft that was published in November 2021. Those improvements were made in response to an array of stakeholder comments, as the minister acknowledged in his opening remarks. I particularly welcome the addition of a delivery programme for the framework, although, as stakeholders such as Scottish Renewables and Homes for Scotland have highlighted, much more still needs to be done on that. The programme has been recognised by many in the sector, but we need to think about what is planned.

Heads of Planning Scotland is right to highlight that the current delivery programme fails to provide enough clarity on issues such as funding for local councils and partner organisations. For example, there is still uncertainty about the resourcing of local authority planning departments. That point has already been raised by a number of members and I have no doubt that it will be raised again before we conclude this afternoon.

Heads of Planning Scotland has also stated that there are still "serious concerns" about resources. That has to be looked at in the context of the current situation. Our Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has stated that the issue appears to be the biggest obstacle to delivery of NPF4 and that clear assurances are needed from the Government on how things will be funded.

NPF4 states that planning authorities will be key stakeholders in delivering the framework. That is correct. However, as things stand, it is not clear whether departments are equipped to step up to the role, which is disappointing, and addressing the issue has only made some of the challenges more fundamental.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has set out that the Scottish Government's most recent budget means that council services will be at breaking point. The risk that that will have a knock-on effect on the delivery of any future planning framework should be understood. Going forward, the onus will be on the Scottish

Government to ensure that successful delivery of NPF4 is not hindered by local government funding cuts.

I will touch on how the framework might affect small businesses, and particularly those in the tourism sector. The Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers has pointed out that the traditional self-catering sector is already facing an increased burden due to the introduction of the short-term lets licensing scheme. Policy 30 and the further restrictions that it might impose on the sector risk adding a further regulatory burden. That is not where we want to be when we are trying to support small businesses.

In taking NPF4 forward, the Government must ensure that it carefully considers how policy 30 will work in practice and whether the self-catering sector will be able to properly thrive. Members on the Conservative benches have made it clear that NPF4 must be a framework that protects the interests of local communities. It must deliver on housing and on environmental and biodiversity goals, and it must achieve that while ensuring that businesses have the freedom that they need to fully prosper. They need to survive and thrive, and the framework should be there to ensure that they do that. However, certain areas in NPF4 are causing businesses real concern.

To support businesses, the Scottish Government must ensure that local government is properly resourced. It must ensure that it listens to the feedback of all stakeholders and businesses. Clarity is important when it comes to communities, which want to see the process work. Communities across the length and breadth of the country have engaged with the process, but they remain concerned that there is still some way to go.

Although the Parliament will, no doubt, have a role to play in improving the framework in the future, communities should be placed at the centre of the process. That is an important idea behind the framework. As things stand, however, more work still needs to be done and more communities need to be listened to. When the framework is delivered, it must be community led and it must be delivered according to the priorities that have been set. We are not yet sure that that will be the case.

15:47

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I start by warmly thanking the minister for his unequivocal reaffirmation of the Scottish Government's commitment to dualling the A9 from Perth to Inverness and to dualling the A96 in my constituency. That commitment is very welcome, so I look forward to his ministerial colleagues coming before the Parliament in a matter of weeks to flesh out the details of how and when that

dualling will be implemented. In exchange for the minister's commitment, I will support the motion, just to allay any frisson of concern to the contrary that might exist in the whip's office. *[Laughter.]*

Seriously, though, I have caveats. Without in any way to detract from the good work that the minister has done, which has rightly been recognised across the chamber, I will raise a serious matter that needs to be looked at carefully—certainly in implementation of the framework, if not in the framework itself—regarding some of the detail in the wording. The matter relates to rural Scotland—its housing, farmers, crofters and land managers.

In the NPF4, which I read this morning—I do not pretend to be an expert—I saw references to aquaculture, forestry, and life sciences in rural Scotland, and there is a lengthy section on tourism, which is welcome. The document says that those are really important to rural Scotland. However, there is one glaring omission: farming. I could find scant reference to it. In fact, I could see that farmers were mentioned once—although maybe I missed mention elsewhere.

However, perhaps more important is that there is no clear statement that we value what our farmers, crofters and land managers do. They look after the land and our soil, they conserve water, they produce healthy food and they are the caretakers of mother nature. Before the term became common parlance, they were conservationists. They did not realise it, but they were, and have been for centuries. Furthermore, they have the collective responsibility for looking after nearly 80 per cent of Scotland's land.

The first point that I make to the minister is that there should be high-level recognition that we value farmers, that we value the food that they provide for us and that we value the contribution that they make to food security, which we can no longer take for granted. With war in Ukraine, Brexit and global disruption, we cannot assume that everything will be on our plate and that everything will be on the shelves of every supermarket every day. The world ain't like that anymore.

I urge the minister to consider stating those high-level commitments. That would show farmers that we care and that we value what they do—I think that, by and large, that is the case across the chamber—because farmers feel beleaguered, at the moment.

Miles Briggs: During his time as cabinet secretary with responsibility for rural affairs, Mr Ewing will have been aware of the need for new entrants to enter the sector, often to replace older farmers who leave farming. I feel that that issue has been missed in the national planning

framework. Does he support calls for the Government to do more work on that?

Fergus Ewing: There should be a greater emphasis on that. To be fair, it is mentioned in the detail of the section on rural places, but I agree that more needs to be done in that regard, although doing it is not easy.

As well as high-level commitments, some detail is needed. When I was not a humble back bencher, but an important person like the minister, I sought to ensure that we could do what is being done in England. We should be able to learn from England sometimes. In England, there are permitted development rights for every farm to have up to five houses. There are, I admit, caveats to that, but why do we not have that policy?

The average net worth of an owner-occupied farm in Scotland is £1.4 million, and the latest statistics that I have seen state that the average net worth of a tenanted farm is £373,000. There are 50,000 holdings in Scotland, so those figures amount to tens of billions of pounds of capital that is sleeping.

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: I would like to, but I do not have time.

Why not put that capital to work by allowing farmers, crofters, land managers and estates to use their land more flexibly and with less difficulty? In rural Scotland, development is the Cinderella issue. I have learned that over the course of 23 years of struggling on behalf of constituents who desperately want to do something with their land, their lives and their property to benefit their families, but are all too often held back by pettifogging matters that are of microscopic significance.

To be fair, the policy makes some progress, but I think that the restrictions are far too complicated. A farmer can erect housing on their farm, but only if it is affordable housing. What about mid-market rental housing? If farmers want to diversify, they have to prove that that will not harm the farming effort. How do they do that, and why should they have to do it, since diversification adds significantly to the income of farmers, raising it from £37,000 for a non-diversified unit to £53,000?

I hope that I have got my point across to the minister today. Again, I thank him for, and note the collegiate agreement to, the commitment regarding the A9 and the A96. It might be that I will mention that issue again in Parliament, before long.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I am sure that you will, Mr Ewing.

15:53

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I rise to support in principle the idea of the national planning framework and what it is trying to achieve, but I cannot help but continue to feel that it is a bit of a missed opportunity, because a lot of what is described in it is not exceptionally different to what has gone before. In many cases, we see the same generalities; that is what worries me.

Although, on the face of it, nothing is desperately concerning, how the framework translates into local development plans will be the test of whether it is successful. That is where we still have great potential for NPF4 to fall flat, particularly given that the context is that it will be loaded on to planning departments that have already had vast cuts to their resources.

I am thinking in particular of Glasgow, which has had a headline budget cut of 10 per cent over the past decade. When that is projected on to the planning department, we see that there has been something of the order of a 60 per cent cut over the decade, because planning is the kind of back-office function that councils try to hammer first, in order to protect services such as social work.

I am worried that attempts to get the framework working will fall on fallow ground, in terms of resources. Although aspects of NPF4 are laudable, I worry that such things get hacked quite regularly by pretty canny developers. Within the national spatial strategy, a good example is the discussion of reusing vacant and derelict land, enhancing natural and built environments and protecting heritage assets. I declare an interest as a trustee of the Glasgow City Heritage Trust, and as someone who regularly spars with developers that are trying to destroy Glasgow's built environment. The four definitions in NPF4 of what constitute permissible reasons to demolish a listed building are regularly abused and hacked by developers. I encounter that quite frequently.

Here is a good example. One reason is that a

“building is incapable of physical repair and re-use as verified through a detailed structural condition survey report”.

Those surveys are regularly produced by people who are in cahoots with the developer, who completely lack professional integrity and who will lay it on thick to justify demolition of perfectly salvageable buildings in order to maximise profit for the developer who wants to build something more cheaply. By doing so, they avoid incurring VAT at 20 per cent for renovation of the building, and instead incur 0 per cent VAT for demolishing it and building something new. That creates a perverse incentive. Frankly, there is a whole ecosystem of corruption around that, which militates against preservation of our historic

environment. I am afraid that the four rules that are defined in the framework are so vague and loose that they are regularly hacked by pretty unscrupulous characters.

I encourage the minister to look at that matter in particular, and to engage to tighten it up. One example of how the system could be improved would be to ensure that surveys of buildings—on whether they are structurally capable of repair—are carried out by conservation-accredited structural engineers. Only two firms in Scotland are conservation accredited, but if that were made a statutory requirement it would immediately improve the integrity with which the process is carried out.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I sympathise with the point that the member is making about VAT and perverse incentives. Would he call on the United Kingdom Government to remove that perverse incentive?

Paul Sweeney: Absolutely. I regularly made that plea to the Chancellor of the Exchequer when I sat in the House of Commons. Certainly, there are other ways that the Scottish Parliament could address the issue. For example, I know that Historic Environment Scotland has been looking at ways to create an offset or VAT rebate scheme for buildings that are on the buildings at risk register. Perhaps there are targeted ways in which we could try to ameliorate that issue in Scotland.

An interesting proposal for a demolition levy—which Paul McLennan, a member for East Lothian, has been looking at—has been made by the Chartered Institute of Building. That levy could, at least, move the playing field the other way by ensuring that someone who wants to demolish a building would have to pay a fee. That would offset the perverse incentive. The institute suggests that the levy would raise a conservative estimate of £1.5 million per annum, which could supercharge Historic Environment Scotland's heritage and place fund, for example.

There are things that we should be looking at. I encourage the minister to look at how we connect that suggestion to economic incentives and price signals in order to drive good behaviour and bake it into the standards that we set for local development plans. The provision of an overarching national framework, through something like a demolition levy, could help to reinforce what local authorities can achieve.

Similarly, that could be achieved through measures such as compulsory sale orders, as opposed to compulsory purchase powers, which actually represent a significant financial constraint on local authorities. They tend to pursue compulsory purchase only for buildings such as the Barclays complex in Glasgow's Tradeston,

where one of the minister's predecessors, Patricia Ferguson, successfully protected the Beco building from Glasgow City Council's attempt to demolish it about 20 years ago. That building has now been converted into Barclays Eagle Labs. The B-listed warehouse came off the buildings at risk register, despite the efforts of Glasgow City Council 20 years ago. That was done as a result of back-to-back compulsory purchase orders to clean up the messy ownership. There were 20 or 30 owners, some of whom were dead or living in the Virgin Islands or Cayman Islands.

In order to clean such situations up and get ownership packaged and transferred so that buildings can be developed, we need to start bringing such mechanisms into the system so that we achieve effective and positive outcomes and get buildings off the buildings at risk register. About 108 buildings in Glasgow are on the register. As we speak, there are 2,659 empty homes in Glasgow and, in the city centre, there are more than 3 million square feet of unused floor space and 450 vacant buildings, which is equivalent to the size of the Freedom tower in New York.

Glasgow city centre itself has the lowest population density of any city centre in the United Kingdom, with only about 30,000 people living there. Manchester city centre has more than 100,000. That low density introduces all sorts of problems when it comes to creating so-called 20-minute neighbourhoods. Therefore, to crack the issue, we need to get price signals sorted, which is where I think NPF4 does not connect properly. Although, on the face of it, the framework is good, we need to do much more to get price signals sorted, because there are so many perverse incentives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is no time in hand, so members will have to stick to the time limits, including if they take interventions.

16:00

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): As the minister said in opening, planning is not just about place but about people. The final national planning framework 4 makes it clear that Scotland will not compromise on the climate crisis and empowering communities. Although the document and this debate might not get much public attention, NPF4 is really important to how we live, work and play. It is a plan for the type of Scotland that we want to live in.

Welcome proposals in NPF4 include enabling more renewable energy generation to support the transition away from reliance on fossil fuels, while protecting national parks and national scenic

areas and supporting emerging low-carbon technologies, such as hydrogen and carbon capture, and developments that unlock the transformative potential of offshore renewable energy. As the cabinet secretary laid out in his statement yesterday, the opportunity that that provides to grow Scotland's highly skilled energy workforce and increase jobs in energy generation and the supply chain, while enabling communities and businesses to prosper, is vast and welcome.

Over and above protecting national parks and national scenic areas, which are, of course, very important, I am keen to see brownfield sites used for such projects, and I would welcome—as I believe would the majority of my Ayrshire constituents—the use of previously developed land that is not in use, rather than having new developments on land that is currently used for farming or leisure, wherever that is possible.

In the chamber, I have previously mentioned my constituents in Lylestone, who told me that they feel that they are in a David and Goliath fight with a company that is proposing to build a large solar farm on farmland next to their village. They expressed worry and anger about the fact that the company concerned was acting as though the project was a foregone conclusion. I sought and received reassurance from the Scottish Government that that is absolutely not the case, and that the concerns and objections of residents of the village who would be most impacted by the proposed development would be taken seriously. Impact assessment and mitigation remain vital to community wellbeing, and I note that NPF4 policies do not give a blank cheque to developers to build on wild land.

Community consent to large-scale renewables projects is important, and I think that there is more work to do in that regard, particularly around so-called community benefit. A few thousand pounds for a community council to distribute does not cut it any more, I do not think. Citizens should benefit from clean, green energy being produced.

NPF4 facilitates active travel infrastructure, low-carbon transport, and more green spaces, which is good news for the nation's health and wellbeing.

Tom Arthur: To pick up on that last point, would Ruth Maguire welcome the introduction of a dedicated policy on community wealth building? From her part of the world, she will be very familiar with the tremendous work that is under way in community wealth building. Does she agree that that is a mechanism by which we can harness many of the economic benefits to come from increasing our onshore renewables?

Ruth Maguire: Absolutely. There is huge potential in that, and I welcome it.

NPF4 facilitates active travel infrastructure, low-carbon transport and more green spaces, which is good news for the nation's health and wellbeing. We know that opportunities to be outdoors and active not only have a restorative impact on those with existing physical and mental health issues but can prevent ill health in the first place.

I note that, in developing active travel infrastructure, it is crucial to consider all users who will be walking, wheeling or cycling. The news this morning highlighted a shared space not far from us here, in Leith Walk in the capital, that does not seem to do that. That underlines the importance of meaningful consultation and dialogue and consideration of all citizens in developing our public spaces.

NPF4 adopts a planned and evidence-based approach to delivering good-quality and affordable homes that benefit communities. Good-quality affordable homes, as well as being good for health, support valuable local jobs. They are an excellent example of the wellbeing economy that we want to create. I note what colleagues have said about the targets within that, and I acknowledge that M stands for "minimum". Evidence-based minimum requirements set an achievable starting point. I think that local development plans can be more ambitious, and it is locally that the knowledge about the scale and mix of housing that is required in our communities will sit.

A fairer and greener planning system can tackle long-standing challenges and inequalities to the benefit of all our communities in Scotland, the environment, and our economy. Better places will be an important part of our response to the strategic priorities of net zero, addressing child poverty, and growing a wellbeing economy that benefits all our citizens. Planning can also play a critical role in delivering the national strategy for economic transformation—and, again, the community wealth building that the minister mentioned.

At NPF4's core lie measures that will reduce carbon emissions, tackle climate change, and restore nature while providing our communities in Scotland with sustainable, liveable, and productive places. It is time to get NPF4 in place and begin implementation at pace to the benefit of Scotland's communities, environment, and economy.

16:05

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): This fourth national planning framework comes at an absolutely critical time—2023 must be the year of transition and change, and of bold action to protect people, communities and our planet. Put simply, we cannot afford to waste any

more time in making that transition. Of course, what we plan today could either lock us into climate pollution for decades to come or free us from fossil fuels over time.

It is therefore crucial that, for the first time, the climate and biodiversity crisis has been placed at the heart of the national planning framework. We have got a better strategy as a result, which will help us meet our targets on climate change and nature recovery in the years to come. It sets the groundwork. This is no longer a plan that prioritises only economic growth above everything else; our climate, our nature and our wellbeing are finally being considered on an equal footing in the planning system.

Critically, all planning decisions must now give significant weight to the climate and nature crises. Development proposals must minimise greenhouse gas emissions as far as possible, and they will have to contribute to biodiversity enhancement. This NPF is finally putting us on the right path. However, like previous frameworks, it of course sits alongside and in tandem with other strategies, including the strategic transport projects review, the biodiversity strategy and, of course, the new energy strategy that was announced for consultation only yesterday. Taken together, those strategies will chart the course for Scotland's net zero future.

The NPF also sits alongside the fresh commitment that the Government has made to develop a net zero budget test to accelerate spending away from high-carbon and towards low-carbon capital projects. The picture here is that everything now must point in the direction of net zero, and NPF is a critical part of that landscape.

Let us consider energy policy in the NPF. We are in a climate crisis and we desperately need transformation. NPF4 lays the ground for significant expansion of renewables in Scotland. Onshore wind is the cheapest green energy source and it has a huge role to play in cutting emissions and our energy bills at the same time. Expanding our onshore wind capacity was a central commitment in the Bute house agreement. The onshore wind policy statement that was announced last year confirmed the ambition to install an additional 8GW to 12GW of onshore wind capacity, which would be a huge increase.

Scotland has an abundance of wind resources and this new policy will put them to use while ensuring that local communities and the whole country benefit from investment and green jobs. NPF4 will help us get there by transforming our planning system to facilitate the expansion of renewables while protecting our beautiful natural environment.

Paul Sweeney: Mark Ruskell is making a very important point. I want to ask him for more detail about district heat networks, particularly the potential for one building to meet the requirements by putting in air-source heat pumps but, in doing so, undermine the critical mass needed for a community district heat network. Perhaps more definition could be delivered in the local development plans to make sure that we do not undermine that potential and have a tragedy of the commons.

Mark Ruskell: That is a good point. I think that the member will be aware that the local heat and energy efficiency strategies that councils have been tasked to complete will be looking at that mix of installation of embedded renewables in buildings alongside district heating. It is an important thing that councils need to plan for at that level.

Development proposals for all forms of renewables, including solar and wind, will obviously be supported in the planning system. There will also be protection against inappropriate development in national parks and national scenic areas. All developments must minimise the negative impact on natural places, local landscape and wild land through improved mitigation measures. We are seeing an NPF that has been strengthened by a biodiversity policy that ensures that it pays attention to the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy and learns from a lot of the good practice that is out there. Developers must also minimise negative impacts on local communities and consider issues such as public access through the implementation of walking and cycling routes.

Those changes in planning have been recognised, in the words of the renewables industry, as “a remarkable ... step forward”. It is clear that acceptable renewable developments, in the right places, must be accelerated instead of being let to languish in the planning system for years on end. There is simply no time to waste.

NPF4’s success will be measured by what it delivers, not by what it says on paper. The review of the delivery plan after six months will be a critical checkpoint. To turn the vision into reality, we must support everyone who is involved in that delivery, as much in council planning departments as in our local communities. People must feel empowered to shape the spaces around them. We must also ensure that NPF4 facilitates the action that is needed to tackle the climate and biodiversity challenges. Those things do not need to be in conflict.

A number of members have mentioned the resourcing of planning authorities. That is an incredibly important point. Westminster also needs to understand the importance of renewable energy

and to ensure that, in its planning systems, it is not approving developments such as new coal mines but is looking progressively at renewable energy sources such as onshore wind, which can make a lasting contribution to the UK’s ambitions to cut climate emissions and deliver energy security.

The Greens welcome this national planning framework. We welcome the scrutiny that Parliament has given it, and we welcome the progress and the action that are to come on the back of it.

16:12

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am very pleased to speak in the debate in support of the fourth national planning framework.

I thank all the organisations that provided briefings for the debate, including First Bus, Scottish Land & Estates, Homes for Scotland, Scottish Renewables and others. For me, they were an extremely important additional source of reference. They also illustrated the breadth and reach of NPF4 in underpinning reform in our planning system so that we are positioned to play a key role in addressing the challenges of climate and nature.

The revised draft NPF4 reflects a range of changes that were made in response to the representations that were made during the consultation and the report that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee prepared. I commend the committee’s follow-up report, which contains its response to the concerns that were raised about the original draft. I will come back to the work of the NZET Committee on NPF4 later in my speech.

I note the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee’s positive response to the significant improvements that were made in the revised draft: the new emphasis on climate and biodiversity, and the increased clarity and focus that that will offer decision makers. On the monitoring of NPF4, I am pleased to note the committee’s desire to hear from planners on their experience of applying climate change and biodiversity principles and the extent to which they have sufficient clarity and support to make their decisions.

The north-east is rightly positioning itself as a centre for energy transition. However, I believe that, to date, the debate on that issue has derived from an industry context. NPF4 now offers an important opportunity to refocus the debate on how our transition will impact our land use and development.

In my north-east constituency, planning continues to appear front and centre in constituent concerns and inquiries. For example, there is the transport infrastructure around the new south harbour that is under construction, which is featured in NPF4, and there are pollution concerns relating to an energy-from-waste plant that is under construction. Perhaps the biggest issue is the inclusion of a community green space for development in the Aberdeen City local development plan that is likely to be the subject of a future renewables planning application. Those are all significant projects, and they all are within metres of some of the lowest-standard council housing in the city.

Therefore, it is no surprise that local folk feel that, to date, there has been little evidence of a planning system that supports

“our quality of life, health and wellbeing”,

enables community benefit for everyone, and improves and strengthens

“the special character of our places”.

Those descriptors were included as suggested questions in the Scottish Government guidance for community events on NPF4 in order to stimulate thinking about how the planning system might be delivered.

Planning really matters to our communities—as others have highlighted—to our businesses, to public services and to the future wellbeing and prosperity of generations to come. I welcome the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee’s view that

“For NPF4 to succeed it is critical that communities are not only engaged in the planning process, but that their ambitions for the areas in which they live are realised.”

Paul Sweeney: Does the member agree that the lack of accessibility of the planning system is a massive impediment? There are often huge, very complex documents to digest, and the onus is on communities to organise themselves to deal with all of that in fleeting moments. Does she agree that we need to look at making the process more accessible for communities?

Audrey Nicoll: Yes, I agree 100 per cent. I thank the member for his intervention. I totally agree with that, and I have had a lot of contact with constituents who have had that very experience. I wholly welcome anything that makes the process more accessible.

I am sorry—I have lost my place. As I said, those significant projects are all within metres of some of the lowest-standard council housing in the city. Therefore, it is no surprise that people feel developed on.

Earlier this week, the Scottish Government published its “Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan—delivering a fair and secure zero-carbon energy system for Scotland”, which outlines Scotland’s transition away from fossil fuels. In its briefing, Scottish Renewables outlines that NPF4 provides a key opportunity to deliver a net zero-driven planning system that will support Scotland in reaching its net zero target while also supporting low-carbon investment, caring for our environment and, importantly, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels.

I will pick up on the point made by the NZET Committee about the delay and churn that are associated with the fact that applications take too long, which potentially puts projects at some risk. I have raised that issue in the chamber in the past, and I will monitor it closely going forward, so I am interested in any comment that the minister has on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Audrey Nicoll: I welcome the draft NPF4, and I look forward to hearing the minister’s response to the issues that are raised in the debate.

16:19

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to take part in the debate today. The very fact we are having the debate is down to amendments for which I was responsible and which were voted through during the passage of the Planning (Scotland) Bill in the previous parliamentary session. Members might do well to reflect on the fact that, if that bill was going through Parliament now, I do not think that those amendments would get through. However, it is good that they did.

Kevin Stewart was the minister responsible for the bill, and it was certainly a stressful time for him. We ended up with a bill that was better than it was at the start, although it was not perfect, and I think that that is where we are today with NPF4.

The first draft NPF4 was flawed in many ways. The final version is better, although it still has some holes in it. However, we have in Tom Arthur—for whom I have a lot of time—a minister who has listened and made changes for the better. Any minister who does that should be praised, and I do praise him, but in planning, as he knows, we can never please everyone.

I will start with the good bits. I strongly believe that the planning system has not been robust enough when it comes to protecting the environment, particularly in three areas: woodland, wild land and the green belt. Wording matters when it comes to planning policy, and woolly

wording provides developers and landowners with loopholes that they can exploit. Paul Sweeney made reference to that. The first draft of NPF4 would have made it too easy for woods to be erased and for wild land to be built on.

I met the John Muir Trust and the Woodland Trust—of which I am a member—to discuss what we could propose to the minister to make the wording better. We came up with something, and I sent the wording to Mr Arthur. Mr Briggs and I then had a virtual meeting with him and one of his officials. I heard nothing after that, but the revised draft is considerably better and people are generally happy, because the wording is better than it was.

However, policy 6c is an example of the woolly wording that I referred to. It says:

“Development proposals involving woodland removal will only be supported where they will achieve significant and clearly defined additional public benefits in accordance with relevant Scottish Government policy on woodland removal.”

Canny developers will be able to argue that their fantastic scheme with footpaths and swing parks will achieve just that, when it will not.

Fergus Ewing: Does Mr Simpson acknowledge that forestry operations, including those relating to felling and planting, are very much controlled by forestry standards, which are not part of the planning system and ensure good practice, and that the ills that were committed in the 1980s relating to misplanting and so on cannot take place now? NPF4 does not set out to control the mischief that he is arguing exists; it is not the responsibility of NPF4 to do that.

Graham Simpson: I am sure that Mr Ewing is right, but I was referring not necessarily to forests but to areas of woodland, which are slightly different.

The policy goes on to say:

“Where woodland is removed, compensatory planting will most likely be expected to be delivered.”

Most likely? That is pretty meaningless and, in any case, compensatory planting will never be the same as what was there previously. The wording is better, but it is still not quite good enough for me.

The references to wild land are much better, and policy 8 on green belts looks pretty robust. However, in relation to Fergus Ewing’s earlier point about farmers, it should not be the case, as it is at the moment, that farmers have to pretend that new houses are being built for workers in order to get them built.

The planning system can play a huge role in helping to drive down emissions, and I note the gushing response of Scottish Renewables to Mr

Arthur’s offering, but I will never agree with the Scottish Government’s view that nuclear should play no part at all in that.

Miles Briggs and others have mentioned the lack of policies to deliver enough housing of the right quality in the right places. A big debating point has been around targets, how to set them and how to ensure that they are then delivered. I have to agree with the house-building industry that there are flaws in NPF4, which will not deliver enough housing. As the RTPI has said, it is vital that enough resources are provided, because councils will have to deliver on all this.

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced 49 unfunded duties on councils. Those duties could cost up to £59 million over 10 years to implement, but councils are not being given the money. How on earth are they meant to deliver all Mr Arthur’s exciting policies if they do not have enough planners? The NPF4 is good, but it could be better.

16:25

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The way in which we use land and the type of development that we allow are vital matters for all communities. The questions of whether we have industrial development, whether we build houses and how we construct them, and the issues around the demise of our town centres, the continuing closure of high-street department stores and the expansion of out-of-town shopping centres, are all affected by the decisions that we make here and the detail of NPF4 and local development plans. As has been said, the process transfers power from communities and local councils, so we need to get the detail right.

This is an important debate, not least because the planning system is imbalanced and communities do not have the same rights as developers to appeal planning decisions. As has been said many times in the debate, the resources that developers have create an imbalance also. A number of community campaigns with whom I have been meeting attempt to consider hundreds of pages of documents in order to respond to proposals that affect their communities. Hundreds of community and environmental groups back the campaign for equal rights of appeal, which are still absent from planning law in Scotland. That is an important aspect of the debate. I therefore welcome the repeated comments by the minister, the convener of the committee and many others about the importance of engagement and consultation.

Like many others in the chamber, I have spent literally hours with campaigns, community organisations and individuals in trying to get their

voices heard in the planning process. Sometimes, they have been successful with their campaigns. I listened with interest to what Mark Ruskell and Ruth Maguire said in relation to planning applications for renewables, because one of the local community campaigns that was successful focused on the proposal for the Rigg hill wind farm near Skelmorlie, which almost every part of the community for many miles around opposed and which took many years to defeat. Most of us would agree that it is only when constituents have something happen near them that they begin to realise the importance of the debate that we are having today, NPF4, the local development plans and all the work that goes into those documents and how they affect people's lives.

I welcome the fact that the Government has looked again at the initial proposals that came forward. All the representations that have been made say that considerable improvements have taken place in the documents that we are considering today. However, much needs to be done to improve our planning process. Several references have been made to the cuts to staffing levels in planning departments, which is a real issue that affects councils up and down the country. The real-terms cuts to local government core revenue budgets will obviously not help in ensuring that adequate resources are put in place around the issues.

We all know that we are in the midst of a housing crisis. At any time in this country, an estimated 112,000 properties are unoccupied, nearly 30,000 of which have been empty for more than a year, and more than 130,000 people are homeless or on housing waiting lists. Homes for Scotland has pointed out that

"There is still no mechanism for fixing an under-delivering land pipeline if longer-term sites cannot come forward to fill the gap".

I know that a different approach exists in England, where there are proactive attempts to get building in certain places. Given that we are talking about local development plans that are set to last for another 10 years, the position that we are in is concerning. We need to seriously consider how we can intervene to ensure that land is available for housing development where it is needed. That is the case in areas where we have brownfield sites and on islands such as Arran, where a shortage of land for housing is a major problem.

It is welcome that the Government has made changes to the draft NPF4. I note everything that has been said about the incorporation of climate change and environmental standards, which must, of course, dictate the operation of the planning regime. However, we must also consider how we ensure that the voices of individuals and communities are far stronger in planning

processes and that it is not a top-down system that does not reflect what communities say. Communities often know what is best for their locality, and we must ensure that they have a strong voice in the process.

As we move forward with the framework and the local development plans, we must consider how we can ensure that the voices of individuals and communities are heard strongly when individual decisions are made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final speaker in the open debate will be Emma Harper. We will then move to the closing speeches, for which everybody who has participated in the debate will be expected to be in the chamber.

16:31

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased that we are having this debate on national planning framework 4, which clearly focuses on empowering communities to make change, and I support the motion.

The revised draft NPF4 lays out sustainable policies to guide Scotland's net zero planning approach for the next decade. I have been actively involved in NPF4 in two specific areas, which I will focus on in my speech: vacant, abandoned and derelict sites, especially in our rural towns, and permitted development rights. The minister has been very supportive of my position on both of those matters.

I will turn first to vacant, abandoned and derelict sites, which is an issue that I brought to Parliament's attention just before the recess. The legacy of Scotland's industrial past means that almost a third of the Scottish population currently live within 500m of a derelict site. There are 11,000 hectares of derelict land, which is equivalent to 9,000 football pitches. The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee took evidence on the fact—research shows this—that living near an eyesore or a blighted or derelict site affects the mental health of a community, so the benefits of addressing derelict sites are obvious. The Scottish Land Commission says that heels are being dragged when it comes to bringing about the change that is needed. It also says that the task of addressing derelict sites has been dumped on the "too difficult" pile. It is interesting that the commission believes that the issue is seen as being too big, too complex and too expensive to fix. That simply is not true. We need to stop telling ourselves that it cannot be done, and we need to recognise that transforming derelict sites is a massive opportunity.

Paul Sweeney: As 1,000 of the football pitches that Emma Harper mentioned are in Glasgow, it is a big issue for my city, for sure. Does she agree

that we need to look at ways in which we can communicate to the owners of such sites the negative way in which they transmit blight to a community? Perhaps we could do that through a punitive rates charge, for example, so that such owners are forced to do something with the site or sell it on to someone who will.

Emma Harper: Paul Sweeney makes a great point. I will come on to issues around owners.

Many proposals in NPF4 make reference to policies that will address derelict sites, such as incentivising brownfield regeneration, including for derelict sites, which will allow brownfield sites to be transformed into housing, community spaces or whatever the community chooses. I can give two examples of regeneration: the Clyde gateway project, which the minister visited recently, and Cunninghame Housing Association's transformation of the vacant primary school in Lockerbie into a community hub. I would be happy to facilitate a visit by the minister there, too.

The revised NPF4 makes it clear that Scotland will not compromise on the climate crisis and empowering communities. We have many derelict sites in Dumfries and Galloway and in the Scottish Borders, such as the George hotel and the east pier in Stranraer, the Interfloor/Gates factory in Dumfries, the Central hotel in Annan, the Mercury hotel in Moffat and the N Peal and Glenmac buildings in Hawick, as well as many others. In trying to address those sites, I have faced numerous challenges with the owners and local authorities. Councils respond to me by saying that they have limited powers, and it is hard even to elicit a response from registered owners. One of the challenges is in figuring out what we can do about that.

I want to highlight what local authorities can do, and then I will show how that is enhanced by NPF4. Local authorities can issue a waste land notice that requires an owner or a responsible person to take specific action on a site. If the responsible person refuses, the local authority can carry out the work itself and claim back the cost from the owner under the Town and Country (Planning) (Scotland) Act 1997. Under the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, councils can issue a dangerous buildings notice. Additionally, the local authority or community can make a compulsory purchase of a building or land under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. Those are not unsubstantial powers, and the Government is committed to introducing compulsory sale orders in the future.

Miles Briggs rose—

Emma Harper: I do not think that I have time to take an intervention from Mr Briggs. I am sorry.

NPF4 will be powered through significant public and private investment, with cross-Government co-operation. It will identify funding streams through the infrastructure investment plan and the place-based investment programme. It will open up the possibility of local authorities and private investors accessing funding streams, which could allow the transformation of our derelict brownfield sites. That is welcome, but I ask the minister to clearly communicate with local authority and private sector partners regarding what the funding possibilities are and how NPF4 can transform our derelict sites.

I will turn briefly to permitted development. I welcome the fact that NPF4 will address a legal loophole that has caused numerous issues in my region. Shooting activity, including shooting using high-velocity weapons of up to 50 calibre, is currently allowed to take place without planning permission because permitted development rights are used. Permitted development rights for class 15 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (Scotland) Order 1992 allow the temporary use of land for a different purpose for up to 28 days in a calendar year, other than as a caravan site or an open-air market. The 28-day rule has been capitalised on for a range of shooting activities. I thank the minister for listening to me on that matter and for the commitment in NPF4 that permitted development will be reformed. I look forward to seeing progress on that.

NPF4 marks a turning point in Scotland's planning system and a boost to our just transition journey. It is time to get NPF4 in place and begin implementation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:37

Mark Griffin: In my opening speech, I said that NPF4 is not the finished product. I made it clear that we will give our approval at decision time but will look for the minister to make good on his commitments to deal with the issues that we feel are outstanding. We still do not have the confidence that we should have that the framework will be enough to end the housing crisis that is gripping our country, which is particularly affecting young people, who are largely ignored by the HNSA figures. We think that fewer starter homes that families can rent or purchase as their first home will be built as a result of their being ignored in those figures.

In his speech, Miles Briggs alluded to the fact that, this morning, the Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland issued its verdict on NPF4. It welcomed the framework but said that success

depends on there being planners to do the job and that new resources to support the delivery of NPF4 are required, and it gave the stark reminder that planning department staff have been cut by a third since 2009. Speaker after speaker in today's debate has hammered home the fact that those cuts have consequences.

The waiting time for the processing of major housing development applications, of which there are not enough to tackle our housing crisis, was an average of 54.3 weeks last year. That number has spiralled in a way that is probably inversely proportionate to the number of staff we have in local authorities to deal with applications.

The institute says that planning authorities are overstretched and that

“significant upskilling of the planning workforce”

is needed. It says that the delivery programme, which is still wanting and needs to be made fit for purpose, should include

“a comprehensive skills and resource strategy”.

According to the RTPI's research, the profession already has a stretched pipeline and more than 680 entrants into the sector will be needed over the lifetime of the new framework. Given the 49 unfunded duties for local authorities, which could cost almost £60 million over the same period, planning departments are creaking at the seams. That will have a huge impact on the delivery of many laudable ambitions that we support and would like to come to fruition.

I have asked the minister about that in the past. He told me that he is working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Heads of Planning Scotland to make sure that there is a common understanding of the pressures that planning services face. Fees have increased, but it is the opinion of planners that they do not stretch far enough.

I echo the points that were strongly made by a number of members about progress on promoting and protecting our natural environment. The extent of nature depletion in Scotland over recent decades has been frightening, so it is right that priority is given to the nature and climate crises throughout the document.

Many speakers welcomed measures in that regard. The RSPB has also welcomed the measures and thinks that the framework can deliver positive effects on biodiversity. However, the RSPB has outstanding concerns about a key area: the wording of policy 4(b), which relates to European sites. If the issue is unresolved, the RSPB thinks that there could be significant risks for our most important protected sites for nature; it thinks that the wording should be tightened.

I have had representations from West Lothian Council, which expressed concern that its local nature reserves, which have statutory designation under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, are not included. Given that such sites will be key nodes in the make-up of nature networks and delivery of the 30 by 30 target, that should be rectified.

The proposed natural environment bill presents an opportunity to bring in a legal requirement to enhance biodiversity. In England, the Environment Act 2021 has established targets and created a step change in attitudes to and action for biodiversity in planning and construction.

As I said, NPF4 is by no means a finished product. There are outstanding issues to do with guidance and monitoring and there is a need for a proper delivery plan and resources. Scottish Labour will approve the framework at 5 o'clock, but we look to the minister to deliver on his commitment to deal with the outstanding issues. He has his work cut out.

16:43

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank all members for an interesting debate. I also thank the organisations that emailed helpful briefings to all members over the past couple of weeks.

I congratulate the minister on two things. First, it is obvious that he listened to concerns about the previous draft and came back with an improved version. The revised draft is better, but it still falls short in key areas, as we heard from previous speakers. Secondly, I congratulate him on his foreword to NPF4, where he admits that planning is “fully devolved” but says that everything would be better if we were independent, thereby showing, in black and white, that this SNP-Green devolved Government will take any topic and try to turn it into an independence debate.

Emma Harper rose—

Douglas Lumsden: I first encountered NPF4 as a council leader at COSLA, where many concerns were raised. To be fair, it is heartening to see that many of those concerns have been addressed.

I agree with Graham Simpson that the planning system has not been robust enough when it comes to protecting the environment and that there remains a disconnect between local communities and residents, and our planning system. I recognise that the NPF4 attempts to bridge that gap, but only time will tell whether it will be successful or not.

I welcome the fact that the minister will come back with details on how 20-minute neighbourhoods can work in rural areas. It is too

simplistic to ask communities to abandon their cars and move to public transport when no public transport is available, or when there is, it is unreliable, slow and often uncomfortable. Roads will still be important.

Graham Simpson: Does Douglas Lumsden have any idea what a 20-minute neighbourhood is? Because I do not.

Douglas Lumsden: The member raises a very good point. I hope that we will find out more when the minister responds.

As Fergus Ewing once said, we should be anti-emission, not anti-car. I welcome the fact that the minister said that his Government is committed to fully dualling the A9 and A96. I remind him that the commitment was to fully dual by 2030. Like Fergus Ewing, I will remind the minister and his colleagues about that commitment. I note that *The Press and Journal* is reporting today that the free ports will be in the Forth and in Cromarty, so the A96 dualling will be vital for the north-east.

One place we will not need a road to is drive-throughs, because it seems that the devolved Government wants to ban drive-throughs. Once again, the junior partner in this coalition of chaos is pulling the strings. The ban seemed to come from left field, with no opportunity for the affected businesses to give comment, because the policy had never appeared before.

Tom Arthur: Will the member give way?

Douglas Lumsden: No, I will not.

The minister may not like drive-throughs, but they bring jobs, pay rates, bring investment and provide a service, so the policy is just plain wrong. I welcome the minister's earlier comment about a potential U-turn, but we should not be in this situation.

Tom Arthur: I am conscious of the reports following the publication of the revised draft of 8 November. To be categorical and absolutely clear, there is no ban on drive-throughs. I have been very grateful for the opportunity to meet representatives of the sector, and my officials and I will be undertaking work with the sector to make sure that the transitional guidance and the guidance on local development plans are clear.

Douglas Lumsden: As I said, I welcome that, but surely we should not be in a situation where many organisations feel that a ban is coming. I hope that the minister can clear that up.

I agree that we should have a town centre-first approach, but I am concerned that the framework will make it hard for businesses such as garden centres that need to be out of town to be granted permission. Time will tell on the interpretation, but

I would have liked to see guidance issued on what out-of-town development will be permitted.

Mark Ruskell: Will the member give way?

Douglas Lumsden: I do not have time; I am sorry.

Another area of concern is housing. I have been a member for 20 months now, and housing is a topic that comes up time and again. We have a housing crisis, but this Government continually misses its housing targets. We need to build good-quality, affordable and energy-efficient homes, and we need to build them faster, but to do that we need land to build on. I do not see enough in the framework to solve our housing crisis.

As Miles Briggs told us, there are 28,000 homeless households, and Mark Griffin said that the actual number could be a lot higher. Miles Briggs also pointed out that land that is earmarked for housing is occupied by car dealerships and the like. Where will those businesses be sent?

Willie Rennie and Emma Harper mentioned brownfield site issues. It is not easy to develop on those sites, and it is expensive. What incentives or, as was also pointed out, penalties may be put in place to encourage those developments?

Emma Harper: I was up on my feet earlier attempting to intervene. We have talked about derelict sites, and Paul Sweeney made a valid point on VAT. You said that planning is completely—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please, Ms Harper.

Emma Harper: The member said that planning is completely devolved, but VAT is not, and it is an inhibitor for developing sites. Will the member reflect on that?

Douglas Lumsden: I will reflect on that; let us see what comes forward in the future.

Another issue that I want to raise—and it has been raised time and again during the debate—is the capacity of councils to deliver the changes and the policy. When I looked at this as a council leader at COSLA, we asked over and over whether extra resource would be available, but we have seen cuts to local government in successive budgets. Colleagues such as Alexander Stewart pointed out that that will be an issue with the framework. The SNP-Green devolved Government continually pushes more burdens on to local government by removing its funding and capacity to deliver. In the words of a COSLA resource spokesperson, council services are “at absolute breaking point”.

Today, we have heard concerns from Fergus Ewing about the impact that this policy will have on farming and rural communities. It lets them

down and it lets down our towns and cities and our Government partners. I look forward to seeing how this will progress in future, as it will need to improve.

16:50

Tom Arthur: I begin by thanking colleagues across the chamber for their measured and thoughtful contributions this afternoon and all colleagues who have engaged with me—directly or through the work of the committee—during the long process of getting NPF4 to the state in which we are considering it today. I thank the committee for its diligent work, which was highly constructive throughout the process and strengthened the NPF4 that we are considering today. I also thank the more than 740 people who responded to our consultation following publication of the draft NPF4 in November 2021 and all those who engaged with our original call for ideas and responded to the draft position statement that was published in November 2020.

I want to give two other, particular, thank yous. I thank the chief planner, Fiona Simpson, and her team in the Scottish Government, who have been absolutely magnificent and have delivered an incredible piece of work. It has been a mammoth undertaking, much of it carried out against the backdrop of Covid, which—as it did for every other facet of government—led to huge challenges for our planning system. I commend all the officials in the Scottish Government who worked so hard to deliver NPF4.

Finally, I want to pay a very personal tribute to and thank my predecessor as planning minister, Kevin Stewart, who initiated the process. Without his hard work, both in piloting the Planning (Scotland) Bill through and in setting the ball rolling on the draft NPF4, we would not be at this point.

A number of issues have been raised during the debate, and I am afraid that time will not allow me the opportunity to respond to them all in detail. I will try to cover as much as I can, as well as respond to some specific points that members raised.

Housing is one of the most contentious areas in the planning system; we all recognise that. In planning, we really learn what the meaning of opportunity cost is, because a piece of land can be used only once. There are those who would favour a more liberal approach and those who would prefer a more regulated approach. Through the NPF4 process, and in fulfilling our statutory commitments under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, we have sought to ensure both that we have a plan-led system for housing in Scotland that is suitably flexible and dynamic enough to respond to

circumstances and that planning plays its role in delivering the houses that we need.

I suggest that planning has a role to play, but planning alone does not make up the totality of factors that enable housing to be delivered. There are a range of factors, and all members will be conscious of the significant impacts on the construction sector caused by supply chain difficulties, challenges in labour recruitment and escalating costs due to the cost crisis—indeed, there are challenges in market appetite for housing as a consequence of rising interest rates. A number of factors come into play in ensuring that we develop the housing we require.

Miles Briggs: I understand what the minister is outlining, but is he not concerned that there is no mechanism for fixing underdelivery in the land pipeline, and that NPF4 should have taken that forward? Will he commit to outlining how that will be monitored, because we need those homes.

Tom Arthur: The member is absolutely correct to recognise the importance of monitoring. I met Homes for Scotland shortly before Christmas to discuss the issue in detail. He will know that I gave an undertaking at committee that my officials would engage with Homes for Scotland on its proposals for review of the HNDA system. That is important because, ultimately, the proof of NPF4 will not be in the high ideals that it embodies but in its delivery—that will be the imperative. Monitoring will therefore be important.

Guidance and clarification could be used to respond to any issues raised through monitoring. Local development plans have a significant role to play and there will be provision to allow for the amendment of NPF4, should that be required.

However, in the first instance, it is important that we observe carefully what is happening on the ground following NPF4's adoption—subject to Parliament's agreement this evening.

Fergus Ewing: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: Very briefly. I am pushed for time.

Fergus Ewing: I have one simple point to make. Does the minister agree that, if farmers are allowed more flexibility to provide housing, such housing could be provided at scale and without any significant cost to the taxpayer because the cost will be met by the farmers, using the capital that is tied up in their landholdings?

Tom Arthur: It is important to clarify two points. Agriculture is not classified as development for the purposes of planning. The existing permitted development regime that we have in Scotland is almost identical to what exists in England, which is not about the construction of houses but about the conversion of agricultural buildings into homes.

However, I am more than happy to meet the member to discuss these important matters in detail, because rural repopulation and the retention of the rural population are key policy imperatives.

The incredibly important issue of communities was raised. Our new local development plans will play a key role through the evidence-gathering process in advance of the gate check that precedes actual development and proposed plan creation. The local place plans will also be an incredibly important improvement. That is something that I encourage all members to engage with their constituents on. Provisions on local place plans were commenced last year, but, as we move to the new-style local development plans over the coming years, and as local authorities and planning authorities take them forward, I encourage members to engage on that area.

The issue of resources has come up time and again, and I repeat the commitments that I have already given Parliament. This is not something that lends itself to any easy or quick fix. It will be challenging, but part of our broader work on developing a partnership agreement and a fiscal framework with local government will provide tools that will help us to ensure that our planning authorities are resourced to the required level. There is also the work that we do directly with the planning profession through the high-level group, the RTPI and the Improvement Service on the future planners project.

On the specific point that Willie Rennie asked about with regard to permitted development rights, that will happen early in the year. I still need to take forward the regulations from the phase 2 review, which I know will be of interest to members. Phase 3 will follow on shortly from that, but it will happen in the first half of this year. I am happy to engage with any member on that.

On state support, we are already providing £325 million across this parliamentary session through the place-based investment programme. There is also the £50 million vacant and derelict land programme, which is supporting areas across Scotland to remediate existing derelict land. That can help with a range of things, including community activities and green infrastructure, and can de-risk and incentivise private investment. Again, I am happy to discuss those matters in more detail if any member would care to do so.

It has been a privilege to lead this process on behalf of the Scottish Government. I hope that I have lived up to the commitments that I gave to liaise closely with the Parliament and its members and to engage meaningfully with planners and local authority representatives and with so many people and interests across Scotland.

I am especially grateful to Scotland's planners and planning community for giving so generously of their expertise and their time. They have embraced the call and the need for change, and I am acutely aware that delivering on the framework's policies and aspirations will fall largely to them. I am determined to support them to do that, and to help foster a new generation of planners to create a system for the future that faces up to and addresses the greatest challenges of our time. We will chart this new direction together.

NPF4 is to be Scotland's development plan, making sure that, in our actions and decisions, we stand up for our commitments to climate and nature recovery, for our towns and countryside, for greater community wealth and for our transition to a wellbeing economy.

However, increasingly, we also recognise the global significance of the decisions that we make through planning and how we must act positively and responsibly in relation to interests that extend well beyond our own borders. There is much international interest in the approach that we in Scotland are taking, with many keen to follow us.

Likewise, in NPF4's implementation, I want us to continue learning from best practice elsewhere. The framework sets out how choices that we make in planning can, and must, guide Scotland's development on our journey to net zero by 2045. That has been our guiding light throughout the preparation of the plan, and it will continue to be so in the plan's delivery.

It has been suggested that the fourth national planning framework represents the biggest change to our approach to planning in Scotland in 75 years. Indeed, NPF4 marks a turning point for planning: it is not a general policy update; it is about change and planning with courage and determination to make some of the difficult decisions that may lie ahead.

We have had the 75th anniversary of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1947, which gave birth to our modern planning system. NPF4 is the biggest change that we have seen to our planning system since then, and it will change the wellbeing of our people, our businesses, our places and our communities. It will help to make Scotland a fairer, greener and more prosperous country. I hope that members will vote to approve it. In doing so, they will give a resounding statement from Scotland's Parliament about how we embrace change and plan places for the future.

Business Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-07457, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 17 January 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Improving the Education and Life Chances of all Children and Young People

followed by Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee Debate: Petition PE:1865 Suspend all Surgical Mesh and Fixation Devices

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 January 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Covid Recovery and Parliamentary Business; Finance and the Economy

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 January 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Net Zero, Energy and Transport

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Carbon Neutral Islands Project – First Steps Towards Decarbonisation

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 24 January 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 25 January 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs and Islands; Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 26 January 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice, Housing and Local Government

followed by Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: Scottish Budget 2023-24

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 16 January 2023, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-07458, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the timetabling of a bill at stage 1.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Charities (Regulation and Administration) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 28 April 2023.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-07459, in the name of George Adam, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Winter Heating Assistance (Low Income) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.—[George Adam]

17:02

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I rise to speak about winter heating assistance, which is a new benefit that the Scottish Government is bringing in to replace a previous one. We have been waiting years for it. With regard to its design, the Scottish Government said that it would leave no one behind and that it would be more appropriate for Scotland. However, when the Social Justice and Social Security Committee took evidence just before Christmas, we heard a damning reflection of what the benefit would bring. Energy Action Scotland was very clear that the benefit will make people who are experiencing fuel poverty worse off than they would have been under the existing scheme. The benefit has been years in its design, yet it is making people worse off.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): For many of the reasons that the member has stated, Scottish Labour abstained on the regulations in committee. Voting against them would have meant that people got nothing, so we abstained, and we will be doing so again today. The current system needs to be improved, but what is on offer is nowhere near what is needed. As the member has highlighted, the new system could leave approximately 120,000 people about £50 worse off this winter than they would have been in 2021, under the previous system, and we have already experienced the lowest temperatures in the past 10 years. That is exactly why organisations such as Energy Action Scotland have said that the new system will have less impact on fuel poverty than the one that it is set to replace.

Does the member agree that the Scottish National Party has had the potential to make a difference to people who are hardest hit by fuel poverty but that, instead, it has taken a half-hearted, ill-thought-through approach that leaves tens of thousands of people worse off?

Jeremy Balfour: I agree with what the member has said. The irony is that, as the committee was taking evidence regarding the regulations, the snow was falling outside and the temperature had plummeted. People in England and Wales were

getting money in their pockets, yet, four days later, people in Scotland had received zero.

This benefit will particularly affect people with disability, as not all disabled people will get it. People who need the money because they stay in their houses longer than other people and therefore need to heat them for longer will miss out. We are calling on the Scottish Government to come up with a new scheme for next year that is designed to help vulnerable people in Scotland.

We heard evidence from Social Security Scotland and the minister about the lack of ministerial involvement in the design of the scheme. They seem to have been quite happy to leave it to their officials to do all the work and to simply not engage with the difficult issues. Perhaps most damning is the fact that, when giving evidence, neither the minister nor Social Security Scotland could guarantee that people would get their money in February—and why is that?

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Mr Balfour says that we cannot guarantee that there will be a payment in February. Does he recognise that there is no guarantee that people anywhere will get a cold weather payment in any given year?

The Presiding Officer: Wind up, please, Mr Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour: If the member looks, she will see that everyone got money in December after that four-day period, but there is no guarantee from the Scottish Government. That is why we, on the Conservative benches, will abstain in the vote on the regulations. We plead with the Government to think of the most vulnerable people and to come back to us with something new.

17:06

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): If Parliament passes the regulations today, around 415,000 people will be paid an annual and reliable benefit to support them with their winter energy bills each and every year. For 2022-23, that payment will be £50 and will be paid automatically from next month, as long as Social Security Scotland receives the necessary data from the DWP in a timely way. As I emphasised to the committee, it is critical that the DWP delivers on its commitment to provide client data to Social Security Scotland by the agreed date of 31 January.

The winter heating payment will be an improvement on the cold weather payment, which is the unreliable system that it replaces. Under that DWP scheme, to receive a single £25 payment, the eligible person has to live in an area where the

average mean daily temperature is 0°C or below for seven consecutive days. The temperature is identified through 27 weather stations across the country, which often do not represent local conditions. Because of that, many people in Scotland have previously received little support through cold weather payments. However, people require support regardless of whether it is exceptionally cold for just under a week or marginally above 0°C.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The minister has highlighted some concerns around the weather stations and the cold weather payments. Did he have any conversations with the Met Office when trying to design a better system, or did he just decide that that would be too difficult?

Ben Macpherson: I refer the member to my evidence to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on that issue and to the point that I have emphasised about the fact that the weather stations do not necessarily reflect the cold conditions in some places—particularly in the Highlands, where there have been low numbers of cold weather payments despite people feeling the cold due to wind chill and so on.

Our new benefit will provide guaranteed support regardless of the weather, so that people will not have to hope for a period of cold weather to be sustained to trigger a payment. Indeed, the winter heating payment will be an automatic and reliable payment that will support people with their energy bills this year and in winters to come.

I am aware that there has been a period of exceptionally cold weather this winter. However, I also know that that is not always the case. For example, last winter, no cold weather payments were made in the areas of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Shetland, Orkney, Wick or Fife. Indeed, last winter, only 11,000 people in Scotland received the DWP's cold weather payment. By comparison, as I have already said, our winter heating payment will provide a reliable payment to 415,000 people on the lowest incomes, no matter the weather.

Between 2015-16 and 2021-22, an average of only £8.3 million was spent on cold weather payments in Scotland, which supported an average of 185,000 people.

The Presiding Officer: The minister must wind up.

Ben Macpherson: By comparison, our new, stable benefit will be an investment of more than £20 million next year for all those who are eligible, and we will uprate it in the next financial year.

Overall, the winter heating payment will be an improvement and will reliably support people more than the cold weather payment system has done.

For those reasons and many others, I urge members to vote for the regulations today.

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

The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-07460, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy and Debt Arrangement Scheme (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.—[*George Adam*]

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

Decision Time

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-07442, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the fourth national planning framework, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a brief pause to allow members to access the digital voting system.

We will now proceed with the division on motion S6M-07442. Members should cast their votes now.

Before I close the vote, I call Kaukab Stewart to cast a proxy vote on behalf of Stuart McMillan.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): On behalf of Stuart McMillan, I vote yes.

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

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer!

The Presiding Officer: I can assure you, Mr Kidd, that your vote has been recorded. [*Laughter.*]

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app was not working—I tried to change my vote from abstain to yes. I would have voted yes, had I been able to reconnect with the software.

The Presiding Officer: Your original vote has been recorded, Mr Bibby.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have not been able to connect with the app. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (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)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse)
 (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)

Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Doney, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-07442, in the name of Tom Arthur, is: For 88, Against 30, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament gives its approval, as required by section 3CA(1) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, to the draft revised National Planning Framework 4 laid in the Parliament by the Scottish Government on 8 November 2022, enabling the Scottish Ministers to proceed to adopt and publish the Framework in accordance with the provisions of that Act.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-07459, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

Before I close the vote, I call Kaukab Stewart to cast a proxy vote on behalf of Stuart McMillan.

Kaukab Stewart: On behalf of Stuart McMillan, I vote yes.

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

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have abstained.

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

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

Sarah Boyack: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the app. I would have abstained.

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

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my vote was recorded.

The Presiding Officer: I confirm that your vote has been recorded, Mr Choudhury.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

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

Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-07459, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, is: For 66, Against 0, Abstentions 52.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Winter Heating Assistance (Low Income) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-07460, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of an SSI, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy and Debt Arrangement Scheme (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

A75 Improvements

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-07301, in the name of Finlay Carson, on long and short-term improvements required on the A75. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the view that the Scottish Government needs to work with the UK Government to deliver what it considers much needed improvements on the A75, which were identified and recommended in the Sir Peter Hendy Union Connectivity Review and the Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2); further notes the view that, given the recent accident in Crocketford village, average speed cameras should be installed in what it understands to be the only two communities still not served by a bypass on the whole length of this international European E-road E18, running from Craigavon in Northern Ireland, through Scotland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, before ending in St Petersburg, Russia, and notes that, according to figures from Transport Scotland in its report, *Transporting Scotland’s Trade*, the A75, along with the A77, carry an estimated combined total of £67 million worth of goods on a daily basis which flow through the port of Cairnryan.

17:22

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am delighted to be in a position to bring this important debate to the chamber, but I am dismayed that, after years and years of Scottish National Party promises, we are still having to highlight the failures of the Scottish Government in getting shovels in the ground.

Just hearing the term “A75” conjures up a spectrum of emotions for my constituents in Galloway and West Dumfries, and indeed for people across the south of Scotland—including me, as I have been living only a few hundred yards from the road for almost every one of my 55 years—the commuters, the haulage and delivery companies that use it every day, and our tourists. Most poignantly, there are far too many people for whom hearing the term “the A75” brings back memories of tragedy, with family and friends killed on what was once called “Scotland’s killer road”.

It is, however, undoubtedly the artery that feeds the beating heart of my region. To put it into perspective, the A75, as the main route from the United Kingdom mainland to Belfast and on to Europe, carries around £17 billion-worth of freight every year, and yet—rather bizarrely—it is a single carriageway for the vast majority of the 100 miles between Stranraer and Gretna. In addition, despite repeated calls for change, we still have a 40 mph speed limit for heavy goods vehicles.

That European route, which runs from Craigavon in Northern Ireland and ends some 1,170 miles later in St Petersburg in Russia, has, remarkably, in Dumfries and Galloway, the only two stretches of the road with 30 mph speed restrictions, at Crocketford and Springholm villages. In addition, there are several places where, during the summer, the road is regularly closed to allow local farmers to transfer cattle and sheep from one field to another. It is little wonder, therefore, that the road has gained the undesirable nickname of “the goat track”.

Despite years of promises from the Scottish Government, the upgrading of the A75 just has not happened, while elsewhere there has been significant investment in such UK port roads.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In 2011, the SNP promised to dual the A96. In a recent poll in *The Press and Journal*, 93 per cent of respondents demanded that the SNP fulfil that promise, not least because, statistically, dualled roads are safer and more environmentally friendly than what is currently there. Does the member agree that that poll shows that it is time for this Government to finally listen to the people of the north-east and get the A96 dualled?

Finlay Carson: I absolutely agree, and I think that any polls carried out across Scotland, in particular in our more rural areas, would show huge support for improvement in our roads, which in too many places are like goat tracks.

However, there has not always been a lack of investment. Bypasses have been built on the A75 to alleviate the suffering experienced by residents in Glenluce, Newton Stewart, Carsluith, Creetown, Gatehouse of Fleet, Twynholm, Ringford, Tarff, Bridge of Dee, Castle Douglas, Dumfries, Collin and Annan; they were all sanctioned and built by the UK Government, under the Conservative Scottish secretaries George Younger, Malcolm Rifkind and Ian Lang. Since devolution, however, investment has been almost non-existent. We are now regarded as the forgotten or ignored part of Scotland, with the whole of the south-west attracting only 0.05 per cent of recent national infrastructure spend.

More recently, however, the desperate need to improve the road was recognised in Sir Peter Hendy’s “Union Connectivity Review—Final Report”, which recommended that the UK Government should provide cash to upgrade it. The SNP Government, which, unlike its counterparts in other devolved nations, failed to get involved in the union connectivity review—regrettably—has now seen the light, and Transport Scotland officials are now engaging with their opposite numbers at the Department for Transport to drive matters forward. Tomorrow, they will meet again to work up a business case.

That is the right and sensible way forward. The UK Government needs that business case to demonstrate the good use of taxpayers’ money, and the cost of the work on it will come out of the £5 million package that the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced last year. My understanding is that those talks are progressing well. I hope that the Minister for Transport, Jenny Gilruth, and the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Michael Matheson, will stop using the “them and us” rhetoric, put constitutional grievance to one side and get behind that project, which could, in the long run, bring tangible benefits to not only the south of Scotland but the whole of Scotland and the United Kingdom.

After all, 10 years ago, the former Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, Keith Brown, had no trouble with writing to the UK Government to request that it make funding available specifically for a number of A75 priority schemes, including Hardgrove to Kinmount, that, in his words,

“would improve infrastructure and provide jobs.”

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Does the member recognise that the Scottish Government has committed to substantial improvements to the A75 through the strategic transport projects review 2 and is taking those forward?

Finlay Carson: The member may say that, but we had a commitment years ago to massive investment in Cairnryan, and we have yet to see that happen. STPR2 has come up very short.

In addition, Emma Harper was “constructively” writing to the UK Government to ask for more money for the A75, which makes a complete mockery of the stance that the current cabinet secretary and minister are taking. It is in everybody’s interest that we forge ahead and put politics aside to improve this vital route. We heard about STPR2, but now that we have it, we see that it was not really worth waiting for.

A coalition of Stena Line, P&O Ferries and Belfast Harbour has been calling for major improvements to the A75 and A77 for decades. For the past few years, it has engaged in private discussions with the Scottish Government about specific and targeted improvements, culminating in a fully researched proposal, entitled “Safer, Greener, Better”, for 20 targeted improvements. Sadly, STPR2 pledges to make only three of those 20 improvements in full.

In a joint statement, the coalition said:

“We are deeply dismayed at the Scottish Government’s proposals. We have engaged in what we felt were very productive discussions for over three years”.

It went on to say:

"We felt we had a mutual understanding of what was required, and a mutual commitment to making the necessary improvements ... We carry about 1.75 million passengers, 500,000 cars and 400,000 freight vehicles every year on our 26 daily crossings. Each one of them has been let down."

Worryingly, the coalition insists that it cannot avoid the inevitable conclusion that

"STPR2 poses a material risk to future investment."

One major road haulier, AM Logistics, which has already confirmed that it has reduced the amount of freight that it ships via the A75, said that it currently uses several shipping routes because of its geographical location in Larne. For many years, it had always chosen Cairnryan. However, over the past few years, it has slowly migrated to using the routes from Heysham and Liverpool to Belfast, one reason being the issues with the A75.

The company states:

"The condition of the road is not good enough for HGV or regular road users. The speed limit is reduced to 40mph in many areas ... This makes it frustrating for other road users."

Critically, its spokeswoman, Sarah, suggests that,

"This frustration ... leads to rather aggressive and dangerous driving to get around the HGVs. Making the road dangerous. A solution here would be to increase the speed limit to 56 mph ... where applicable."

Montgomery Distribution admits that it has had numerous accidents on the A75 and it stresses that the road is dangerous in parts because HGV traffic incites dangerous overtaking manoeuvres by cars and motorcycles.

Nick McCullough, managing director of Manfreight, employs more than 80 drivers at Cairnryan. He wants to double the number of employees but will not do so while the road is in its current condition. He said:

"The road for a long time has not been fit for purpose—a majority single lane route with speed restrictions, a very dangerous road."

Indeed, there is a casualty every three days on the A75 and A77. More recently, two HGVs crashed in Crocketford with one of the vehicles narrowly missing a house, the impact of which could have been catastrophic.

People in the communities of Crocketford and Springholm have genuine fears over their safety every time they step out of their homes. More than 70 people attended a recent public meeting that I organised in order for them to voice their concerns. Both villages desperately need bypasses. As an interim measure, they are asking for average speed safety cameras to be installed.

Rarely does a week go past when the A75 is not closed to traffic because another traffic accident is being cleared up. The situation cannot be

tolerated any longer. I ask the minister to once again look into the possibility of putting average speed cameras on the whole route in the short term.

I call on the Scottish Government to commit to working with the UK Government to deliver the upgrades that we need in the face of health and safety concerns, and to act to avoid the looming economic disaster that has been set out clearly by businesses. The Scottish Government should be innovative and forward thinking and transform the A75 into a green, clean route to sustainable economic growth in the south west of Scotland.

17:31

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Finlay Carson for securing the debate, and start by agreeing with him that it is time for much-needed upgrades on the A75 and A77. We have campaigned for such upgrades for years. I agree with so much of what Mr Carson said, and we have spoken about the A75 and A77 many times in previous debates and questions in the Parliament. The upgrades are needed to improve those main arterial routes and they should be done on the grounds of safety and efficiency.

My condolences go to the families of the people who have lost their lives on those roads. Those losses show the absolute need for safety to be a primary concern and the reason for improvements to be made.

I also pay tribute to the A75 and A77 action groups and welcome their continued campaigning efforts.

We have now seen the publication of the Scottish Government's STPR2, as well as the UK Government's commitment to providing additional funding specifically for the A75. Mr Carson mentioned that I wrote to the UK Government. Part of the rationale for doing that was that the infrastructure investment—the cost of widening or dualling the roads or whatever we need to do to them—would be a phenomenal amount of money and Scotland cannae borrow under the current fiscal arrangements, so I was asking for that option.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): How does Emma Harper explain why it has been possible to dual and improve roads in other parts of Scotland but it has not been possible for her party, which has been in government for 15 years, to find the money to do anything in the south of Scotland, and on the A75 in particular? Nothing. Zero.

Emma Harper: Investment has been made in infrastructure in the south-west of Scotland. I never said that that was impossible.

I lodged an amendment to the motion today, not because I disagree with Mr Carson but because I believe that the motion would benefit from more detail. While Mr Carson's motion rightly cites the need to improve the A75 and points to recent road accidents, including the most recent one in the village of Crocketford, it does not acknowledge the commitments that the Scottish Government has made for the A75 in STPR2. The motion also doesnae call for timescales for the improvements to be carried out. STPR2 includes many important recommendations for the A75 and A77 improvements that many, including the A75 and A77 action groups, have been calling for, for many years.

Ah am no disagreein wi the Opposition here. I also get a lot in my mailbag about these things, so I think that we need to work together to look at how we can lobby for improvements to those roads.

We know that STPR2 has considered

"improving junctions and enhancing overtaking opportunities".

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: Looking at the time, I do not think that I will.

We need to consider widening carriageways and realignment to alleviate pinch points and so on.

The STPR2 includes bypassing the villages of Springholm and Crocketford, as well as improving Cuckoo Bridge roundabout in Dumfries, which is a wee bit further east than Mr Carson's constituency. It is worth mentioning that Springholm and Crocketford are the only two villages in the UK through which a major European route goes directly, so the recommendations for bypasses for the villages are extremely important.

Instead of focusing on negativity about the time that those recommendations have taken to come forward, I want to focus on their implementation, although I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer.

I know that transport is devolved, and in the absence of borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament, funding from the UK Government could further enhance the commitments that have been made in STPR2. I would therefore be grateful for an update from the minister on the timescales for investment in the A75 and A77.

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Emma Harper: I am sorry, but I think that my time is up.

17:36

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am pleased to see this important debate take place in the first week of the parliamentary new year. It should not have to take place at all; the improvements should have already been made. However, given where we are and given some of the other issues that have been debated in recent days, my constituents will at least be reassured that, thanks to the member for Galloway and West Dumfries securing this members' business slot, we are seeing something of importance for our region on the Parliament's agenda.

Improving connectivity rather than erecting barriers is the positive and constructive way to take things forward, and it will certainly deliver more jobs than erecting border posts. The importance of the A75 to the whole of Dumfries and Galloway cannot be overstated. The failure to properly upgrade the route has compounded our status as Scotland's forgotten region. Delivering this vital upgrade would significantly boost the region's economy and help reverse the trend of large-scale employment moving towards the motorway network and out of our region altogether.

Anyone who has driven on the A75 at the wrong time—or at any time—of day will understand the problem. In a small region, journey times between our communities can be a joke, particularly given the fact that many services, leisure pursuits, and employment opportunities are concentrated in Dumfries or Carlisle. After 15 years of SNP Government, many individuals and businesses have given up hope.

There have been so many false promises. What happened to the SNP manifesto promise to link Dumfries with the motorway network? Are some manifesto promises more important than others? What progress has there been on any transport infrastructure?

Emma Harper: A couple of years ago, I proposed that Dumfries was made a city. Part of that commitment would involve better infrastructure investment to connect cities to regional roads. However, Oliver Mundell opposed that proposal. Does he not think that we could have considered working together on that, to improve infrastructure investment in our main town in Dumfries and Galloway?

Oliver Mundell: That shows how poorly Emma Harper knows her region. As far as I am aware, Ayr is not a city, but it has significantly better transport links through the A77. The links are not great, but for a town of its size—it is comparable to Dumfries—it has seen a much better deal. The same is true of other towns across Scotland that are not cities. Dumfries has been left behind by

the SNP; we have seen zero progress since the transport summit, which was much heralded in 2016, but did not even manage to happen within the 100 days of the election, as had been promised. It was a waste of time anyway, as predicted by local residents at the time.

All the more galling for those people who live and work in Dumfries and Galloway is that before the SNP was in government, it used to claim—locally, at least—that upgrading the A75 was its top priority. In fact, it claimed that it was the only party that was committed to doing so. However, the truth is that the SNP is the only party in government that has failed to deliver anything at all on that vital route.

I have sympathy for Emma Harper, because I do not know how she explains to local voters why her Government has done nothing. She makes the case in the chamber, but I do not know what she is doing to influence ministers behind closed doors, because they seem to be prioritising projects for her colleagues elsewhere in the country.

It is not too late for things to change, but despite the continued interest from the UK Government and its offer of support remaining on the table, the Scottish Government has been slow to even have a conversation with it. As Finlay Carson has set out, modest progress has been made, but it is not consistent with the level of support or effort that local people rightly expect. Will the minister commit to giving the project a green light and to turbocharging talks with the UK Government, and will she get personally involved in those talks and make the project happen?

I would be keen to hear specific plans and a timetable from the minister, but I doubt we will get that this evening. Instead, she might be willing to explain in straightforward terms to people who are living and working in Dumfries and Galloway why they deserve a second-class road network and why they should watch as investment is made elsewhere in the country as our region falls further behind. I suspect that under the SNP Government, we will not see anything that will come even remotely close to meeting the needs of people in Dumfries and Galloway, because the truth is that the SNP does not care about the region, and it does not care about the south of Scotland. That is why we see nothing.

17:41

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Finlay Carson for lodging his motion. It is impossible to understate the growing anger that there is about, frankly, the Government's utter contempt towards improving transport infrastructure in the south-west, and the resultant neglect for the local economy. That neglect is now

enshrined as the Government's policy for the next two decades as a result of a wholly inadequate strategic transport review. Even after years of delay in delivering that review, the vague, minor commitments to realign the A75 around Springholm and Crocketford and to improve the A77 from Turnberry to Girvan and Ballantrae to Smyrton come with no detail of exactly what those plans are, or even when they will happen. In fact, it is not even clear whether those are firm commitments, given that the report says that those are simply examples of possible improvements.

However, we know that those commitments will not lead to the meaningful improvement in journey times that we all want to see, especially if the Government is as short-sighted as it was when it developed the Maybole bypass and failed to dual parts of it in order to provide adequate passing places. Bypassing Crocketford and Springholm will be a positive step for the communities that badly need that investment. However, by the time the roundabouts are built and the road is rerouted around those villages, it will make no difference to the time that it takes to travel the 100 miles from Gretna to Cairnryan, and it will make no difference to the safety on the vast majority of the road.

The volume of HGVs that use the A75 means that, at best, it is a 40mph road. It will still take twice the time to travel the same distance on the A75 as it would on the M74. The SNP-Green Government has argued that building new roads increases traffic and that it takes people away from using other more environmentally friendly forms of transport. However, there is no railway to use between Gretna and Stranraer, and the Government has ruled that out as part of the strategic transport projects review. Even the Green Party, which claims to want new railways, failed to support the reopening of that line in the long list of "rail for all" policy commitments that it has made. The SNP and the Green Party have failed to recognise the potential to make the area a green transport corridor. Loch Ryan to Northern Ireland is the shortest crossing of the Irish Sea and it has the lowest emissions from ferries. We know that many businesses choose to send their goods on longer road journeys to ports in England and Wales because the road infrastructure makes the journey quicker, but it is certainly not more environmentally friendly.

For far too long, the south-west has been Scotland's forgotten region when it comes to investment in its transport infrastructure. Although the Government is committed to investing what may be more than £4 billion into dualling the A9, which will be welcomed by the communities that that will affect, not even a fraction of that investment has been promised for the A75 or the A77. Of the £10.5 billion that was invested in road

infrastructure between 2008 and 2020, only 0.4 per cent went into the A75 and A77.

It seems that that neglect will continue. It is no wonder that the south-west continues to have the lowest wages, the lowest level of business-led inclusive jobs growth and the lowest gross value added figure in Scotland. When Stena invested more than £80 million in its new terminal in 2011, this Government promised it investment in the three Rs: rail, regeneration and roads. We have seen cuts in what rail services there were between Glasgow and Stranraer. There has been no investment in the regeneration of Stranraer and no meaningful investment in improving the A75 and A77. That is not a case of the three Rs, but of the three Fs: fail, fail, fail.

In a debate about who should fund that, my constituents do not care whether the funding comes from the Scottish Government or as result of the review of UK connectivity. They just want to see that funding happen. They want to see those improvements to those key roads, and they want to see that now.

17:45

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Finlay Carson for securing time in the chamber to once again highlight the huge inequality in transport infrastructure investment between the central belt and the south-west of Scotland. Depressingly, Mr Carson, Mr Mundell and I, along with others from across the chamber, have been here many times before, trying to highlight to the Government the plight of the south-west. This SNP-Green coalition ignores part of Scotland.

Time and again, transport minister after transport minister has said that they were listening, going all the way back to 2010 when the then First Minister, Alex Salmond, in opening the new port at Cairnryan, promised significant investment to improve the transport infrastructure to and from the port—the A77, the gateway between Ireland and central Scotland and beyond; and the A75, the gateway between Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Several transport secretaries later, and we have Jenny Gilruth, who has inherited the “keep talking while kicking it into the long grass” brief. STPR2 has cost the taxpayer hundreds of thousands of pounds and has delivered the square root of nothing for the south-west. It is as though—as we have all long-feared—it is a ploy to withhold crucial investment from the south-west. Head south of Ayr and we enter the land that the SNP and the Greens forgot.

I want to look at the consequences of a transport policy developed by urban MSPs—those

very same MSPs who advocate 20-minute communities, which speak to our drive towards net zero. As Colin Smyth has just highlighted, areas of the south-west have some of the lowest average incomes. It is difficult to attract businesses, because of the difficulty in getting goods in and out of the area, coupled with the difficulty of attracting a workforce. People in that workforce—especially young people—are migrating away from the area to chase a career. Recently, that migration has predominantly been to the central belt, but where are the most polluted areas in Scotland? It is the cities.

The solution, of course, from the SNP-Green Government is to create low-emission zones in the cities that only low-emission vehicles can access. However, it fails to recognise that people still need to access and move around the city and so does nothing to enable that. The Government has cut train timetables and taxi numbers are reducing because taxi drivers cannot afford electric cabs. The net result is that it is increasingly difficult to access the cities, meaning that city economies and businesses are dying and the night-time economy is crashing. I am dismayed by the deterioration of Glasgow over the past few years. Anyone walking through it will notice the number of “To let” signs.

The young workforce now needs to look even further afield for jobs and careers, and it is little wonder that there are some 750,000 Scots living and working in England. We are witnessing a hotchpotch of transport policies that are not even remotely connected and which are driven by a green ideology that seems to work on the premise of preventing people from going anywhere. That is leading to the demise of our economy across Scotland. I am convinced that this green ideologically led Government will not be happy until we have no economy and everybody lives up a tree in the Trossachs and forages for nuts and berries.

There is an alternative approach that could supercharge and drive our net zero economy and really develop that green economy for the whole country, including outside the central belt—yes, life does exist outside the central belt.

We need to develop a transport infrastructure that promotes green travel. We need to bypass the towns and villages on the A77 and A75 to divert the hundreds of 44-tonne vehicles that trundle through towns and villages every day, and create electric and hydrogen superhighways along those routes. While we are at it, we should do the same for other routes, such as the A96. As Liam Kerr said, that would reduce emissions, because there would no longer be a line of heavy goods vehicles doing the stop-start routine.

While we are at it, we should develop the single-track rail line and have passing points so that more than one train can go on the route at one time. For goodness' sake, we should also build a spur to Cairnryan so that goods can also be transported by rail. In turn, that would encourage businesses to develop along the routes and create a new economy.

That is how we get to 20-minute communities and how we develop the economy across the whole of Scotland. The Scottish Government needs to stop procrastinating and delaying. I say to the Scottish Government: we see you. It is time to develop a transport policy that works for the whole of Scotland.

17:50

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I congratulate Finlay Carson on securing this members' business debate. I know that he has a particular constituency interest in the A75, as we have discussed in recent weeks. I will respond to some of the points that were made in the debate. I am aware that Mr Carson organised a public meeting last month. I was unable to attend that, but I am more than happy to meet him, as I mentioned to him in correspondence before the end of last year.

I have listened carefully to the discussion and fully appreciate the passion that members have for future improvements on the A75. I heard Mr Whittle talking about the potential central-beltism of the Scottish Parliament. I represent a constituency that I would not consider to be in the central belt and parts of it are extremely rural. My constituency also has a trunk road, the A92, that runs all the way through it and Mr Whittle might recall that, as a back bencher, I spent much of my time in engagements with Mr Yousaf, who was then the Minister for Transport and the Islands, to bring about the improvements that we now have on that road, which are welcome.

Clearly, the A75 plays a vital role in connecting the port at Cairnryan with the wider trunk road network. It is also crucial for connections not only to Northern Ireland but from Scotland to England and beyond.

When I was appointed to this role last January, one of my first engagements was to open the Maybole bypass, to which Colin Smyth referred. I fondly remember talking with members of the local action group there about the benefits of that new stretch of road, which brought home the clear impacts that the new bypass has already had and will have for local people. Like everything in the transport portfolio, roads are fundamentally about people. They are about connecting the people whom we represent.

I have noted the discussion about working with the UK Government and the use of UK Government funding to help to accelerate the design and development of projects on the A75. This is a members' business debate, and such debates are usually marked out by their consensual approach. That was not always the tone adopted today, but it is the tone that I will take as minister.

Finlay Carson: They have not been for the whole session. Perhaps you have missed lots of members' business debates.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We can resist making comments from a sedentary position. If you want to make an intervention, I am sure that the minister would be sympathetic.

Jenny Gilruth: I am very sympathetic to anything that Mr Carson would like to say.

I will set out the engagement that Mr Carson has alluded to between my officials and UK Government officials. However, the context of that engagement is important, noting the devolved competencies that are involved.

Back in March 2021, there was an announcement from the UK Department for Transport on the A75. Then we had the March 2021 UK Government announcement on a design for the union connectivity development fund. That was for an advanced design development on a select number of transport corridors, including the A75. It took a wee while—to the end of October last year—for the UK Government to provide clearer details on what information was needed to enable a bid to proceed. Mr Carson might want to reflect on why that might have been the case.

The reoffer of funding from the chancellor in his autumn statement is something of a moot point, given that officials have been in continuing dialogue for almost a year. It is worth pointing out that there have been no direct discussions with UK ministers on the A75. Mr Mundell asked for me to become personally involved, but I was surprised not to receive a letter from the responsible minister following the chancellor's autumn statement. I very much hope that, as Scotland's transport minister, I will receive that courtesy soon.

Finlay Carson: Putting aside the grievance, do you agree that constructive talks are going ahead between UK Government officials and Transport Scotland on building the business case that would enable significant levels of funding from the UK Government to address the issue? The people in the south-west of Scotland do not care where the money comes from. Are the officials negotiating in a positive atmosphere and do you have any idea of the timetables for the conclusion of those discussions?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Carson spoke about significant levels of funding. I have to be honest with him that I do not know how much funding we are talking about, because I have had no written correspondence from the UK Government on the matter. However, he is right that there is continuing dialogue between officials, which is to be welcomed. I spoke to my officials yesterday about the point that we are discussing and they will meet their UK counterparts tomorrow.

The Scottish Government—as Mr Carson outlined—is now required to submit a business case to the Secretary of State for Transport, which will then be presented to HM Treasury for approval. It is important to say, therefore, that funding from the UK Government is not guaranteed, because it has to go through the process that has been introduced. As Mr Carson knows, given that transport is devolved, Scottish ministers remain responsible for the whole of the motorway and the trunk road network in Scotland.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Jenny Gilruth: I will, in one second.

That is not a point of grievance; I simply think that it is important to reflect the constitutional reality in which we live.

I have a solution, if Mr Carson would like to hear it, but first I will take the intervention from Mr Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: While the minister is setting things out, could she explain to my constituents why, after 15 years of SNP Government, we do not have a business case or a detailed plan for any improvements on the route? We have a couple of vague promises in the case of Cuckoo Bridge, in Mr Carson's constituency, for what I understand to be relatively minor improvements.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: I have to say that the tone that Mr Mundell adopts is not particularly helpful. The Scottish Government has invested £133 million in the A75 since 2007; we are investing £6.8 million in road maintenance in this year alone; and there are recommendations in STPR2 for the route.

However, let us try to move forward in the spirit of collegiate working, because there are ways in which improvements could be made, working together, which would also respect the devolution settlement. That is important, given that we are all members of the Scottish Parliament.

For example, when I was Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development, we had an

agreed ministerial-level memorandum of understanding on the Unboxed festival that supported funding to cultural organisations across the UK. That meant that each devolved Government had control of funding allocated to each strategic delivery body, and we also had responsibility for commissioning through the funding that was allocated.

As we have shown in the past, therefore, there are ways in which the UK Government can work with Scottish ministers, but that does not need to come at the expense of the devolution settlement. That is my concern, and I hope that Conservative members understand that.

My officials will continue to work with the UK Government counterparts to better understand the requirements of the business case request. Again, those have not been made clear to my officials in Transport Scotland. I very much look forward to further feedback on that later in the week—tomorrow, in fact—when our officials are scheduled to meet. Both Governments agree that investment is needed in the A75; from what we have heard today, I do not think that that is in dispute.

Finlay Carson: We appreciate that transport is devolved, but in the south-west of Scotland we have had 15 years of waiting and promises, and the money that has been devolved has not been spent down there.

We are talking about a specific situation in which the UK Government, through the Peter Hendy report, has identified the importance of the A75 to the whole United Kingdom, not solely to Scotland. I believe, therefore, that it is quite right that the UK Government should step in. Why do you not welcome that investment with open arms, rather than going back and repeating over and over again that transport issues are devolved?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Carson, please make any comments through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Carson for his intervention, but I reiterate that I do not know how much money the UK Government is offering—it has not written to me, and I am Scotland's transport minister. That is, to say the least, discourteous.

On Mr Carson's point about the responsibilities in this case, I do not want to have a debate with him about additional funding that apparently exists; I would like to see the colour of the money, please—*[Interruption.]*

I would like to make some progress.

Recommendation 6 in the "Union Connectivity Review", to which Mr Carson alluded, which was published back in November 2021, states that the UK Government needs to

“make a commitment to support a significant upgrade”

of the A75, given

“that the majority of strategic benefits ... fall outside of Scotland”.

In our STPR2 document, to which other members have referred, which was published back in December, we recognise the strategic importance of the road. STPR2 recommendation 40, on access to Stranraer and Cairnryan, highlights the need for improvements to both the A75 and the A77.

The Scottish Government’s commitment is clear, but we need the UK Government to give us clarity and consider its approach to funding. I very much hope that we get that tomorrow afternoon.

Colin Smyth: I have a lot of sympathy with the argument about the need for clarity from the UK Government on what investment it proposes to make in improving these roads. However, my constituents would also like to know what investment the Scottish Government plans to make in the roads. We have waited for years for the strategic transport projects review to be published, and we still do not know what level of investment is planned by the Scottish Government to improve the A75 and the A77.

Jenny Gilruth: It is not fair to say, as Mr Smyth did, that there has not been investment. As I mentioned in response to Mr Mundell, we have invested £133 million since 2007. In addition, there are key recommendations in STPR2, and the delivery plan that will come forward in spring will set out some of the detail and provide greater clarity.

I move on to talk briefly about road safety, if I may. It is important that we touch on that as part of our commitment to casualty reduction, and Mr Carson touched on it in his speech. There has been significant investment in the A75 in recent years to manage traffic speeds and to look at reducing the risk of accidents. That is important, especially given that in the past year alone, there has been a worrying increase in accidents not just on the A75, but across the country.

A further route study will be carried out in 2023 to look at collision and risk reduction measures. For Crocketford specifically, which has been mentioned in the debate, a new signal-controlled pedestrian crossing was introduced in 2020 to help pedestrians crossing the trunk road. With regard to traffic speeds through Crocketford, the operating company, Amey, has been instructed by Transport Scotland officials to carry out a review of speeds through the village.

One of the key technologies that we have that help with road safety is the safety camera, which is an issue that Mr Carson raised with me recently

in a parliamentary question and again today. There is already a mobile safety camera site at Crocketford on the A75, and over the past 12-month period, additional camera resources have regularly been deployed by the west safety camera unit. [*Interruption.*]

I would like to make some progress.

A further safety camera site selection process is under way to look at all routes across Scotland, including the A75. Should the locations in question be identified as stretches of road that meet the minimum requirements, further camera deployment will be considered.

I note the time, so I will conclude. Both the Scottish Government and the UK Government agree that investment is needed on the A75 to improve road safety and ensure that the main route between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK is fit for purpose. I therefore urge the UK Government to make a firm commitment to funding further investment in the A75, while recognising that the responsibility for the road, and for all parts of the trunk road network, is that of Scottish ministers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:01.

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