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Tuesday 7 March 2023

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 7 March 2023

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Mollie Hughes, who is a mountaineer, adventurer and motivational speaker.

Mollie Hughes: Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

Over the past 15 years, I have been lucky enough to experience some of the world's most incredible natural environments, from standing on the summit of Mount Everest at sunrise and looking down at the immensity of the Himalayan mountain range to skiing alone through Antarctica for 58 days and, on one windless day, experiencing the utter silence of that vast frozen continent.

The wild spaces of our world are humbling, fascinating and truly inspiring. Since I returned from Antarctica, in January 2020, my need for wild spaces has turned to home—to Scotland—and I have spent the past few years researching and writing a guidebook on Scotland's wild blue spaces, which include our countless lochs, extensive coastline, riverways and canal systems. On that journey, I have travelled to every corner of Scotland, from the River Clyde as it flows through Glasgow to high mountain lochs that are tucked away in the Cairngorms national park and out west—as far west as I could go—to the mesmerizing archipelago of St Kilda.

Scotland is famed globally for our wild spaces, rugged coastlines, towering mountains and wildlife. It is easy to see why. This country has so much to offer. However, it is all at risk. The effect of the climate emergency on biodiversity in Scotland is already devastating—11 per cent of our species are facing extinction and 25 per cent of our wildlife has already been lost. That is not the legacy that I want my generation to leave.

The people of Scotland are doing something about it. What inspired me most on my journey around Scotland was the sheer number of small-scale, unassuming, community-led projects that are dotted across the country, all focused on protecting the natural environment. Those projects include the installation of toilet facilities in beauty spots, funded and maintained solely by the efforts

of locals; the presence of information boards to educate travellers on local wildlife; the installation of waste disposal units to avoid littering; and community initiatives to protect damaged sand dunes and machair out on the islands. Those humbling projects left me with a profound feeling of hope that we are moving in a positive direction and that our generation's enduring impact on Scotland can be ensuring the preservation of our wild spaces long after we are gone.

Topical Question Time

14:02

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many questions as possible, short and succinct questions and responses would be appreciated.

Loganair (Flight Suspensions)

1. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Loganair and Highlands and Islands Airports regarding the suspension of many island flights from 17 March. (S6T-01244)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): It is disappointing that Loganair has suspended those routes, although I am hopeful for a resolution before 17 March. I met the chair and managing director of Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd on Saturday morning to stress the need for a timely resolution to the pay dispute, and I asked for a new business case to be presented urgently to ministers. Following further discussions with unions yesterday morning, HIAL has developed further proposals that, subject to HIAL's board's agreement, will be considered shortly by ministers. Transport Scotland officials have discussed the situation with Loganair, which operates the routes on a commercial basis.

Neil Bibby: The inescapable and scandalous fact is that the Scottish Government would still be sitting on its hands, ignoring the damage to the islands, if it had not been for the dramatic escalation that was threatened by Loganair. That is not how things should work. Cancer patients should not have to be subjected to fear in order to get a response from the Government, and the islands should not be out of sight and out of mind until there is the risk of political embarrassment.

Why has the transport minister suddenly discovered a role in this matter when she repeatedly refused to become involved over the past five months, while HIAL said that its hands were tied by the Scottish Government's pay policy?

Jenny Gilruth: Neil Bibby has somewhat mischaracterised the situation. I regularly meet unions from across the transport sector. Most recently, I met our airline unions at the end of January to discuss this very matter. It is therefore not true to say that I have not been engaged throughout the process.

I share Mr Bibby's concerns, which is exactly why, when the decision was communicated to me—on Friday—I sought the first available

opportunity to speak directly to HIAL, which was on Saturday morning.

Clearly, there is an urgent need for a resolution to the dispute. I am particularly concerned, for example, about any implications in relation to medical appointments such as the member alluded to. I have asked Transport Scotland to raise that matter directly with Loganair.

It is important for members to recall that the decision was made by Loganair, whose view is that actions short of a strike, in the form of working to rule, lead to short-notice cancellations—for example, when staff absences cannot be covered due to an overtime ban. Loganair has therefore taken a commercial decision in that respect, because of the costs that are incurred by cancellations. However, it is not a matter in which Government ministers can become involved, because the Scottish Government has no direct role in that provision.

Neil Bibby: Many people in the Highlands and Islands believe that, without Loganair's escalation, the minister would still be missing, there would be no extra money on the table and the indefinite prospect of cancellations and disruption would still hang over the islands, with no end in sight. The minister cannot be unaware of the damage to fragile island economies by the ferries debacle. Why has she failed, for the past five months, to prevent that damage from being compounded by the on-going disruption to island air services? If extra money can be found now, why could it not have been found last week, or last month, to avoid the massive disruption that has taken place and the cancellation already of hundreds of hospital appointments?

Jenny Gilruth: Again, I refute Mr Bibby's characterisation of the situation. I meet our trade union partners regularly. I last met our airline partners on 31 January in relation to this very matter, and I recognise that that dialogue is on-going.

I reiterate that the decision on the cancellation of flights has not been taken by Government ministers; nor have I, as a Government minister, had any input into it. However, I met HIAL on Saturday morning, at the earliest opportunity, to explain the urgency to it directly. HIAL met the unions yesterday to discuss the new draft proposal. That proposal is being put to the HIAL board and I expect an urgent update on the new proposal later today. The focus for Government ministers is absolutely on addressing the underlying issue: settling the HIAL pay dispute.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It would be fair to say that my island constituents are horrified at Loganair's recent action. The impact on patients alone, including cancer patients, is

almost unthinkable. Seriously ill people rely on the service to access treatment on the mainland, and it is unclear how operations, appointments and scans will be carried out otherwise.

Directly and indirectly, Loganair has received substantial funding through the public purse, and it has now placed NHS Western Isles in an atrocious position. Did Loganair give the Government or island health boards any indication that such a disproportionate and draconian move was even being considered?

Jenny Gilruth: The answer is probably no. As I outlined in my response to Neil Bibby, Loganair informed me on Friday morning of its decision to suspend routes, including the two routes that we are discussing. However, as I explained to Mr Bibby, those services operate on a commercial basis, so Government ministers cannot become involved.

I very much understand that the performance on the Stornoway to Inverness route has declined in recent times. In part, apparently, that is because of a reduction in travel by Western Isles Council staff. According to Loganair, that has been a major contributory factor. However, there has also been a reduction when it comes to national health service staff using ferries for patient travel. I very much recognise the importance of those routes, particularly in relation to the critical transfers that Alasdair Allan has alluded to, and I have asked my officials to speak directly to Loganair on that point.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We now have a six-week suspension of Loganair flights; we have had a number of recent ferry failures; and we have had a betrayal of the Scottish National Party's promise to dual the A9. Travel to and from the Highlands and Islands is in crisis due to the Government's failure to deliver adequate lifeline transport links. When will the SNP-Green Government get its act together and make island transport a top priority?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not accept the characterisation that Donald Cameron has outlined in relation to transport to our Highlands and Islands communities. The vast majority of my time as transport minister is spent in dealing with those matters directly. I recognise the disruption on the network in recent times—I am about to answer a topical question further to that. However, it is important to reiterate that the way to resolve the situation with HIAL is to get a resolution between the unions and HIAL.

That is why I spent my morning on Saturday discussing with HIAL how it is urgently going to put forward a new proposal for ministers to approve. I await that proposal. Once I have it, we will be able to move forward and, we hope, unlock this dispute

and provide greater reassurance to Mr Cameron's constituents.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I was contacted earlier today by the family of a constituent to say that their mother is booked to fly to Shetland for a mastectomy operation later this month. Due to the suspension of air services between Orkney and Shetland, she now faces an eight-hour ferry journey either the day after her operation or after almost a week away from home.

Does the minister accept that these are lifeline air services? Can she explain why HIAL bosses were required to stick to a 5 per cent pay offer after counterparts at CalMac were freed up to offer staff more? Will she now ensure that everything possible is done to bring this long-running and damaging dispute to an end?

Jenny Gilruth: I understand the sentiment behind the member's question, of course. The scenario in relation to CalMac is slightly different from that for other private sector bodies. However, I recognise the concern that he has raised today.

In relation to the experience of the constituent that he outlined, I would be more than happy to look at the specifics of that in detail.

Clearly, these flights operate on a commercial basis and it is therefore very challenging for ministers to intervene in relation to their provision. Indeed, I raised that matter directly with Transport Scotland over the weekend and again today. Although I am not able to do that directly with Loganair, I will make representations to the company on behalf of Mr McArthur's and other members' constituents, because I recognise their concerns.

Ferry Services (Reliability)

2. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recent comments by the chief executive of CalMac, what action it is taking to prevent island residents being impacted by any reliability issues affecting their ferry services over the next two years. (S6T-01236)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I have been clear to Parliament, including to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee only last week, that investment in new ferries to replace the existing fleet has been one of my key priorities as Minister for Transport. We are delivering six new major vessels in the life of this session of Parliament, as well as the purchase of the MV Loch Frisa, which has been in service on the Oban to Craignure route since last summer.

We are investing almost £700 million to support the improvement in the fleet, which will also allow investment in the small vessel replacement

programme. Although I recognise that those vessels will take time to deliver, we are also investing resilience funding of at least £4 million per year to maintain the existing fleet and we continue the search for additional tonnage that can be chartered in the short term.

Edward Mountain: I thank the minister for that answer. I am flabbergasted by that. I asked about the next two years. There is obviously a timescale problem—the same timescale problem that results from the 10-year ferries plan being left on the shelf and ignored.

As far as resilience and the plans for the £4 million are concerned, the last time I am aware of that being spent, it was on improving fire extinguishers in a ferry, which should have been a normal contract thing.

Where are we at the moment? We have three candidates to be First Minister—one who oversaw the ferries, one who signed off the payments to a turnaround director who failed to deliver, and one who appears to be content to build a doomsday thermometer for independence. Will the Minister for Transport give me an assurance that, if she is still in position after the leadership battle, a spare ferry will be either rented or purchased to cover the next two years?

Jenny Gilruth: I am more than happy to give Mr Mountain a confirmation in relation to that request. It is important to reiterate that, when I appeared in front of Mr Mountain's committee only last week, I gave a very clear guarantee in relation to the search for on-going additional capacity on the network. I put on the record again that Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd made offers to purchase two second-hand major vessels—the MV Arrow and the MV Straitsman—but they have unfortunately been unsuccessful.

We will absolutely continue to look for the spare vessel that Mr Mountain alluded to. I recognise that there is a challenge in relation to the current fleet and the availability of services at the current time.

Mr Mountain will recognise that, if there are on-going conversations in relation to securing an additional vessel, some of them will be commercially sensitive and I will not be able, as minister, to share some of that detail in the chamber. However, he has an assurance from me that we are absolutely seeking the additional tonnage that we need in relation to the CalMac fleet.

Edward Mountain: The Government has been looking for a ferry to rent for the past 16 years and it has not come across one. That might give it an indication that there are no ferries out there and that it should have been building them—and

building them in a much quicker process than we have had.

We have the MV Pentalina, which we hope will come on to station and operate, but that is just one extra ferry. My question is very pointed. Will hull 802 be on station and operational by early 2024, as the Government has announced?

Jenny Gilruth: In responding to Mr Mountain in relation to the hiring or renting of vessels, it is important to say that we have chartered the MV Arrow, which is currently covering the Uig outage, so is not true to say that the Government has not considered such opportunities.

Since May 2021, the Government has bought an additional vessel, the MV Loch Frisa, which is operating on the Oban to Craginure route. We have chartered the MV Arrow, as I mentioned, and we have made significant progress on the construction of vessels 801 and 802. We have commissioned two new vessels for Islay and confirmed the award of contracts for two new vessels for the Western Isles and Little Minch routes, supported by an additional £115 million of investment. We have progressed investment in key ports and harbours, including the completion of major works at Tarbert and Harris.

Ministerial responsibility for Ferguson Marine sits within a separate portfolio, but we remain absolutely committed to the completion of those vessels and to supporting our island communities that rely on that type of vessel.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the minister knows, every cancelled sailing impacts our island communities. As the minister said, second-hand tonnage has a key role to play here. CMAL recently told the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee that it had looked at a substantial number of vessels. Can the minister therefore set out some of the particular challenges of specification and suitability when it comes to trying to acquire additional tonnage for our ferry routes?

Jenny Gilruth: As the member knows, CMAL has undertaken extensive searches and continues to engage with ship brokers to look at vessels available worldwide that would be potential additions to the CalMac fleet. CMAL needs to consider a wide range of factors when it is looking at vessels, including the fit for the specific characteristics of our harbours, the condition of the vessel and, importantly, whether the vessel will be compatible with the requirements of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

As I mentioned, we were able to secure the MV Loch Frisa. As I confirmed to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee last week and mentioned in my response to Mr Mountain, CMAL also made bids to purchase the MV Arrow and the

MV Straitsman. Regrettably, we were unable to secure those vessels, but that demonstrates our willingness to secure suitable new tonnage when it becomes available.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Does the minister accept that the scale of the disruption that is being faced by islanders is a direct result of the Scottish Government's failure to adequately invest in new ferries since taking office? Bar the overdue ferries that are being built at Ferguson Marine, there still does not seem to be a strategy. In total, CMAL has examined 650 second-hand ships, most of which were found to be unsuitable. Will the Scottish Government commit to developing a long-term strategy to build capacity so that we can build and commission vessels here in Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: There is a strategy. The first part of the draft islands connectivity plan, which was published in December last year, sets out quite clearly the future investment trajectory for this Government. If Ms Clark wants to look at that plan, I would commend it to her.

Secondly, if we look at overall investment by the Government from 2013-14 to 2022-23, we see that there has been a steady increase in our ferry fleet, so it is simply not true to characterise this as a lack of investment on the part of the Scottish Government. I would refute that point from Ms Clark. The most important thing now for our island communities is that we deliver the ferries that are on order and improve the services that they are receiving. That is what I am absolutely focused on as transport minister.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Ferguson Marine faced being struck off because it had not filed its accounts on time. Is there, as has been reported, an £11 million shortfall between what the firm has been asking for and what the Government has agreed to give it? Will that impact on the building of ferries?

Jenny Gilruth: As notified to the Public Audit Committee in December last year, the chief executive of Ferguson Marine expects the costs to complete both vessels to be £277 million. Scottish Government officials are working closely with Ferguson's to review assumptions behind any revised costs and a schedule on how spend aligns to the vessels' delivery.

Deposit Return Scheme (Payments)

3. **Fergus Ewing:** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports that small shops in Scotland fear they cannot survive because of the costs and impacts of the deposit return scheme, what its position is on Circularity Scotland's confirmation on 1 March that retailers who use reverse vending machines would have to wait one

month for payment for returned bottles, rather than the previously expected seven days. (S6T-01225)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): The handling fee given to retailers to cover the costs of providing a return point for Scotland's deposit return scheme is the highest such fee in the world.

The payment term for all manual return point operators and hospitality venues will be seven days; the payment term for larger locations that install automatic return points will be longer. Circularity Scotland has a wide membership of producers, trade associations and retailers. Any business with concerns should contact Circularity Scotland for advice and support.

Fergus Ewing: For the past 18 months, in all its documents, on its website and in its presentations, Circularity Scotland has confirmed that payments to retailers who provide reverse vending machines would be made within seven days. Tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of pounds have been invested on the basis of those commercial terms. Now, that seven-day period has been extended to one month. That decision was taken by Circularity Scotland after no consultation of convenience stores and there has been no explanation or press release. It is hidden away on page 23 of the document that I am holding.

I have three questions. First, does the minister agree that that decision by Circularity Scotland was taken in an underhand and sleekit fashion? Secondly, was she consulted on that decision? Thirdly, will she now order Circularity Scotland Limited to rescind that decision?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I remind members of the requirement that supplementary questions should be brief.

Lorna Slater: I can make the member aware of the context. Businesses offering return points in Scotland for Scotland's deposit return scheme have three options. If they do not wish to apply to be a return point, and if they have reasonable grounds for exemption, they have the option to apply for an exemption and not to act as a return point. Exemption may be offered on health and safety grounds, including a lack of storage space, or on geographical grounds if a business is close to existing return points. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Lorna Slater: The second option for businesses is to behave as a manual return point, which may be particularly suitable for small businesses of exactly the type that the member is concerned about. Convenience stores operating a manual return point, and with a small volume of returns, would probably find that option most convenient.

Those small businesses, which are exactly the businesses that the member is concerned about, will receive payments after seven days.

For larger locations, such as large supermarkets, that need to have automated vending machines to provide larger capacity return points, the payment terms will be longer. That is unlikely to affect the small businesses that the member is so concerned about.

I remind the member that the scheme is industry-led, as was agreed by members from across the chamber, and that the fees relating to the scheme are therefore a matter for industry to decide.

Fergus Ewing: There is irrefutable proof that businesses have been misled, duped and deceived by Circularity Scotland. For the second week running, the minister has completely failed to answer relevant, pertinent and vital questions. I ask her again: was she consulted by CSL on the unwarranted, unheralded and non-consultative change from seven-day to one-month payment—if even that can ever be achieved under this scheme? Was she consulted: yes, or no?

Lorna Slater: Circularity Scotland is a private, non-profit company and is responsible for operating the scheme, which includes setting handling fees for retailers. As is set out in the DRS regulations, the Scottish Government is not involved in setting handling fees. The fee was agreed after an extensive knowledge gathering exercise, which included analysis and modelling by PricewaterhouseCoopers, the company appointed by the scheme members.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): There are reports that Circularity Scotland dismissed the contributions of small producers as just “dust in the wind”. That serves to make small producers feel that the Scottish Government sees them as worthless. Many are already worried sick about the pigheaded planning of the scheme. Was the minister consulted on changes to retail handling fees: yes, or no?

Lorna Slater: I will give the member the same answer that I gave the previous member. As set out in DSR regulations—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Minister, please give me a moment. Members, I am sure that we would all wish to be heard with respect—please afford the minister that courtesy.

Lorna Slater: As set out in the DRS regulations, the Scottish Government is not involved in setting retailer handling fees.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): For clarification, can the minister say whether she was consulted on the changes in those handling fees? Yes or no?

Last week, we heard producers give a resounding vote of no confidence in the scheme, with less than 16 per cent registering. This week, it is retailers who are expressing concern. Pete Cheema of the Scottish Grocers Federation said that the scheme was not fit for purpose and that there is a real risk of thousands of stores closing due to cash flow issues or significant loss of footfall. Is it not a damning indictment of the minister’s handling of the scheme that just five months before she says that it will be introduced, businesses have not been given a clear blueprint for what should happen? The minister will still not answer the straightforward questions that members are asking.

Lorna Slater: Businesses have been given an operational blueprint, which was shared by Circularity Scotland last week.

Schemes of this type are in successful operation all over the world. I repeat what I said earlier: the return handling fees in Scotland are the highest when compared to other schemes around the world. Our businesses will do better than other businesses around the world in comparable schemes—*[Interruption.]*

I repeat: Circularity Scotland is a private non-profit company. It is responsible for operating the scheme, including setting retailer handling fees. The Scottish Government is not involved in setting retailer handling fees.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It is crucial that we continue to support small retailers to participate in the DRS. Not only will they be paid through the handling fee but there will be an opportunity for local shops to increase footfall. That is why the Federation of Independent Retailers is calling for there to be no delay to the scheme.

Can the minister outline what is being done to ensure that retailers are aware both of their obligations and of the opportunity that the scheme presents?

Lorna Slater: I appreciate the member’s question and his highlighting of the fact that those businesses that have invested in the scheme need the scheme to go live on 16 August, which is what the Scottish Government has committed to. Circularity Scotland has already contacted all retailers that have signed up for updates with information on the return point registration and exemption process. Retailers that have not signed up for those updates are encouraged to do so via the Circularity Scotland website.

Circularity Scotland will also be sending a direct mail to approximately 10,000 retailers across Scotland with information about retailer registration and the exemption process. Circularity Scotland has been in dialogue with more than

1,000 individuals at physical and online roadshows across Scotland. It is also conducting regular meetings with trade associations representing retailers, wholesalers, drinks producers and hospitality.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The minister says that the scheme is industry led, but I have a letter that was published on 6 March, signed by among others, the director of the Confederation of British Industry Scotland, the policy chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, the chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the chief executive of the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, alongside hundreds of individuals who describe DRS in its current form as “reckless”. Will the minister, at very least, instruct Circularity Scotland to remove glass from the current recycling scheme?

Lorna Slater: Scotland's deposit return scheme, which will go live in August 2023, will collect glass. Glass is one of the main three materials that is used to make single-use containers and accounts for more than a quarter of all the containers due to be included in our deposit return scheme.

Of the 44 territories operating deposit return schemes in the world, only four do not include glass. Glass is one of the most common items to pollute our beaches and broken glass poses a hazard to the public and to wildlife. It also poses a threat to local authority, private sector and voluntary clean-up crews. Including glass in the DRS will help to reduce the amount of littered glass.

The Scottish DRS business case suggested that including glass will save 1.2 megatonnes of CO₂ equivalent over 25 years, and will significantly increase the quantity and quality of glass recycle.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In the interests of those who just watched topical questions, in particular the last topical question, and listened to the so-called answers that the minister offered, can you clarify for the viewing audience and for members whether a minister who is asked questions in the Parliament has an obligation in any sense to address the question that they are being asked? There were at least four occasions this afternoon when the minister was asked a very direct question and refused to give a clear answer. Surely that is unacceptable; surely that is disrespectful to the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. Although standing orders are silent on that particular issue, it is a matter of courtesy and respect to all members that responses address the

questions that were put. There is also a requirement under the ministerial code on the issue.

Women's and Girls' Safety (Public Transport)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item is a debate on motion S6M-08122, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on women's and girls' safety on public transport. I would be grateful if members who wished to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:31

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth):

Tomorrow marks international women's day. It is a globally recognised date, which this year focuses on the theme of embracing equity. This week, parliamentary business from justice to transport embraces that theme. It is a welcome development from the Parliamentary Bureau, and one that I hope continues, because understanding the gendered inequalities that women continue to face in 2023 is not something that we should debate only on 8 March every year.

I was really pleased, Presiding Officer, to welcome your leadership on the matter last week through the publication of your report, "A Parliament for All: Report of the Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit". Having provided evidence to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, which is the only male-only committee in our Parliament, I know why representation matters. When women's voices are not at the table, policy is framed without us. That should not be the case in a Parliament where 45 per cent of members are women.

As the first female Minister for Transport in Scotland in two decades, I care deeply about the experience of women and girls on our transport system. Transport remains a male-dominated industry in 2023. From ferries to buses and from road to rail, women's voices are few and far between. That perhaps accounts for why, historically, the data on women's safety on public transport in Scotland has been so lacking.

As observed in Caroline Criado Perez's excellent book, "Invisible Women", the gender imbalance across the transport sector fuels a bias in transport planning, which largely adheres to male patterns of travel. Criado Perez gives the example of a local council planning a gender-equal snow-clearing schedule and its implications for transport. She notes:

"The men (and it would be men) who originally devised the schedule knew how they travelled and they designed around their needs. They didn't deliberately set out to exclude women. They just didn't think about them".

Scotland, much like the world over, has a transport system that is largely designed by men for use by men. What is the impact of that

approach? Fear of crime forces women to change their travel behaviour. Criado Perez notes studies from Finland, Sweden, the United States, Canada, Taiwan and the United Kingdom that show that women adapt their behaviour to feel safer.

Women should not have to adapt their behaviour. Our transport networks need to change to better accommodate and reflect women's lived experience, particularly, and importantly, given that women are far more likely to depend on public transport than men.

In February last year, I announced my intention to consult on women's safety across our public transport networks. The first phase of that work was incorporated in Transport Scotland's public attitudes survey, which was extended to include questions on the experience of men and women on Scotland's public transport systems.

The initial findings told us that a third of women who took part said that they were concerned about their personal safety when using public transport compared with only a quarter of men, and a higher proportion of women said that that influenced their travel choices. More women than men also said they had been the victim of harassment when using public transport, most commonly in the evening.

Although that data helped to provide some quantitative input, today's debate is largely informed by an in-depth report that focused on women's experience of Scotland's transport system. The second phase of the research looked to gather views from regional transport partnerships, transport operators, Victim Support Scotland, Engender and the British Transport Police.

We also heard directly from women and girls aged 14 to 86. I want to thank all the contributors who took part in that vital report by contributing their time and experiences. The analysis of that engagement work was published in the report today, and I hope that colleagues will review not just the recommendations but the powerful personal testimonies of the women and girls who contributed.

It is clear that feeling less safe when using public transport impacts on women's and girls' mobility. The majority of contributors felt the need to maintain a constant state of vigilance when using public transport—or, as one female transport worker put it, the need to

"always be looking over your shoulder".

Women and girls recounted experiences of being the target of inappropriate comments that were sexual in nature and unwanted attention from male passengers. The majority of contributors seemed to accept that such behaviour is typical or

not unexpected when travelling by public transport, especially late at night.

It is deeply concerning that that behaviour has become normalised to the extent that it is accepted and tolerated. To tolerate is to allow the existence of something that one dislikes or fundamentally disagrees with. Women should not have to tolerate. They should not have to thole it. Women should be able to travel on our public transport networks in safety, and men should learn how to behave themselves.

In some cases, women from ethnic minorities face particular difficulties. Some have spoken of having been subjected to racist verbal abuse and comments from other passengers. I think that everyone in the chamber would agree that that is not acceptable in a modern Scotland.

The research highlights the daily strategies that women in Scotland use as an accepted part of their everyday routines to keep themselves safe. The list is quite long, but I feel that it highlights the issues. It includes women always keeping their keys in their hands as they approach home, especially at night, so that they can open the door quickly or use the keys as a weapon if needed; never cutting across parks or walking through wooded areas away from streets or roads late at night so that they are always visible to others; not using headphones or using only one earphone when walking home alone in order to be able to hear people approaching and to be more aware of their surroundings; sitting downstairs on the bus, at the front of the bus or near the driver; sitting close to other women on board public transport, or sitting next to families who might be considered safer; choosing to sit in busier train carriages rather than quiet or empty ones; completely avoiding public transport at night and opting for a taxi instead; avoiding getting off at unlit or poorly lit bus stops and diverting accordingly; making telephone calls to friends or family while making journeys so that someone can independently track their journey's progress; asking male relatives or friends to meet them at bus stops or stations to accompany them on the last part of the journey home; wearing flat shoes or trainers to be able to run away or escape if necessary; using tracking apps, such as those that are available for Uber, and sharing them with friends and family to track journeys; and travelling in twos when using taxis or staying with friends overnight in order never to leave a female alone in a taxi as the last one to be dropped off.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The minister has outlined fully the problems. In 2000, Sarah Boyack MSP, who was then the Minister for Transport and the Environment, undertook a similar survey on personal safety for women on transport, and research and guidance were

agreed. Was that guidance used when the ScotRail tender was prepared, for example?

Jenny Gilruth: Katy Clark will appreciate that the data that she has cited is rather historical. I think that I was still at school when Sarah Boyack was the transport minister. However, I can certainly raise that matter with Transport Scotland to get an answer to her question.

The point that I was trying to address is how exhausting it is to be a woman in Scotland in 2023 when we simply want to travel home safely. It is extraordinary that such behaviours have become the norm for women and girls when they use public transport. Scotland is not unique in that respect, of course. All over the world, fear of crime is among the most important reasons why women choose not to use public transport.

I draw members' attention to one of the findings from the research, which shows that women and girls have concerns about reporting incidents for fear that they will not be taken seriously. Contributors expressed concerns that, even if an incident is reported, nothing will change. Some simply did not know where to report or whom to speak to, and they expressed cynicism about there being any consequences for the perpetrator. That suggests that issues surrounding women's safety on public transport are more prevalent than the statistics highlight, due to underreporting.

It is clear from the research that much needs to be done to improve the experience of personal safety for women and girls when using public transport in Scotland. Currently, women and girls bear the brunt of responsibility for dealing with the issue and adapt their behaviours to try to be and to feel safe when travelling on public transport. However, the burden should not rest with them; rather, wider systemic change is needed, supported by more practical interventions to enhance safety further, give women and girls a greater sense of freedom and maximise the opportunities that are afforded by public transport.

Last week, I met members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who are keen to support this work as we move forward with the summit that is proposed in the motion. We discussed the importance of challenging behaviours and that that could be adopted as a response to the report.

One of the most powerful ways in which that could be done is through the bystander approach. I discussed that in November with the British Transport Police, which is keen to support our work in this area. There is some really good learning that could be adopted from Police Scotland's excellent "Don't be that guy" campaign, which looks to tackle sexual violence.

The research highlights 10 recommendations. I will not go into detail on all of them, but I draw

members' attention to three. First, for women and girls working unsociable hours, there needs to be a better range of safe travel home options for transport workers. That is also particularly relevant to those working in the retail, leisure and hospitality industries, who are often faced with the extra expense of a taxi home if they are concerned about using public transport. I commend the work done in that area over a number of years by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—USDAW. That work is highlighted in its “Safe journey” campaign, which acknowledges that women are twice as likely to feel unsafe on their way to work as men are. I am keen to work with all trade unions and partners through the planned summit, building on their campaign work.

Secondly, the report recommends that consideration should be given to ensuring more visibility of staff and having more staff presence at times when women and girls feel particularly vulnerable. The research highlights that that could offer more reassurance for those using public transport. To that end, I note the Labour amendment, which is focused on ticket office proposals from ScotRail. Although there are currently no plans to close any ticket offices in Scotland, unlike in other parts of the United Kingdom, I must take cognisance of the outcomes from the report. I have therefore instructed my officials in Transport Scotland to include the proposals as part of the national conversation, which will launch in a matter of weeks. It is important to remember that visibility of staff could also include staff on trains.

Thirdly, the report recommends that a better system be put in place that enables women and girls to report incidents and for those incidents to be adequately acted on.

Of course women's safety on public transport is not a matter that transport policy alone can address. It is societal and it is cultural. Wider work is being done across the Scottish Government in that respect, which we will require to draw on. From Police Scotland's “Don't be that guy” campaign to making misogyny a hate crime, all of Government will require to play a role.

We can and must do better on this issue. The full recommendations from the research are clear: the aim is that the Scottish Government, transport operators, police authorities and other stakeholders take action. A collective effort and on-going collaboration and commitment will be required to take the work forward. The motion commits to a wider stakeholder summit to engage stakeholders in the Scottish transport sector in order to progress the report's recommendations.

I hope that today's debate enables us to start that process by considering the issues and recommendations from the research in order to

identify practical actions. I look forward to hearing members' contributions.

I move,

That Parliament notes the publication of new Scottish Government research on Women and Girls' Safety on Public Transport; encourages operators, police authorities and other stakeholders to adopt the recommendations put forward by the report; regrets that women and girls are adapting their behaviour to try to feel safe when travelling or working on public transport; notes that wider systemic changes, supported by more practical interventions, are required, and supports a commitment to engage stakeholders in the Scottish transport sector in a summit, which will progress the recommendations from this report, to ensure that Scotland's public transport is made safer for women and girls.

14:42

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I start by apologising for the length of this speech, which will probably be my longest speech ever, but it was out of my hands, and I will, of course, take interventions.

There are two things in the background to the debate. First, there is the research that was commissioned by the minister, which is very good, although it would have been helpful to have seen it a little bit earlier. Secondly, tomorrow is international women's day. In general, I am not a fan of naming days. In my view, every day should be women's day—it certainly is in my house.

I will come on to the minister's research later, but I say at the outset that everyone has the right to feel safe on public transport, be they female or male, whatever their background or race, or be they able bodied or disabled. I was chatting to representatives of the British Transport Police last week, and they certainly share the view that everyone in Scotland has the right to feel safe when travelling by rail. The BTP takes a zero-tolerance approach to violence, antisocial behaviour and sexual harassment. Working in close partnership with Network Rail and rail industry colleagues, BTP officers are out across Scotland's rail network, day and night, to keep the travelling public and railway staff safe. As part of the BTP's mission to keep everyone safe, it asks the travelling public to report crime through its text 61016 service and the Railway Guardian app.

Yesterday marked the 10th anniversary of the text service. It offers the travelling public and rail staff a means of contacting the British Transport Police directly and discreetly in order to report non-emergency crime. In that time, the BTP has had half a million reports using the service.

The free Railway Guardian app helps the travelling public and rail staff to report crime to the British Transport Police and offers information on what to do if anyone sees sexual harassment on

trains or at stations. Users now have the option of uploading media evidence directly to the app, which is great. By using those vital tools, the travelling public's small actions can make an enormous difference for the police.

I mention the work of the British Transport Police in my amendment. I have not had a great deal of hassle on public transport in my life. My most uncomfortable journey was probably when I sat next to a fellow journalist who got increasingly drunk on a rather long flight, when we had work to do at the other end.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Graham Simpson: I will just finish my point first.

Drunken behaviour is, of course, something that people must deal with on buses and trains. I am not out late too often, but I would try to avoid the last train home, especially if I am out with my wife.

Fiona Hyslop: I detect that the member might be struggling with the issue somewhat. Could he give some indication that he genuinely understands what women face? Their experience is personal, and they can feel very isolated and really defensive. Does he agree with me that it is very important that the Parliament debates the issue, because it affects so many women, not just somebody who goes home with him on the last train home at night?

Graham Simpson: I had hoped that this would be a consensual debate. I completely reject that, because I fully accept that women face particular issues on public transport. Everyone faces issues, but that applies to women in particular.

The coping strategy that I have just described is something that women must always think of. For them, drunken and boorish behaviour can be especially stressful. I note the report's recommendation on that, but it is a tricky issue and I do not think that we can have a one-size-fits-all approach.

Work that was carried out before the pandemic showed that more than half of women in London had been victims of unwanted sexual behaviour while travelling on public transport. The most common type of incident, which was experienced by more than a third of women and 12 per cent of men, was a stranger deliberately pressing themselves up against a person. I noted in the minister's report a section on invasion of space and a description of men sitting next to women when other seats were available. I am not sure that any of us likes that, but that would be particularly uncomfortable for a woman.

Transport Focus published its "Experiences of women and girls on transport" report in March

2022. It collected the views of 1,200 females across Great Britain. Most said that they felt "very safe" or "reasonably safe" across different modes of transport. The number of respondents who felt "very safe" ranged from 15 to 30 per cent. That is in comparison with the 59 per cent of respondents who said that they felt "very safe" using a car.

When planning or making a journey, 85 per cent of respondents thought about their safety. The types of mitigations that were taken included travelling at particular times of day, using specific routes, avoiding certain types of transport and travelling with others. I suspect that we will hear that throughout the debate.

The incidents that were described by respondents included sexual assaults, intimidating or predatory encounters, being physically assaulted or threatened and feeling unsafe due to antisocial behaviour. Around half the respondents said that they had felt threatened when making a journey on public transport. More than two in five had been subjected to verbal aggression and 14 per cent said that they had been physically threatened or assaulted when making a journey on public transport.

Transport Scotland produced a very useful report in June last year. The section on personal safety issues said that data from the Scottish household survey shows that twice as many women as men disagree that they feel safe and secure on the bus and train in the evening. In addition, twice as many women as men cite concerns for personal safety on dark or lonely roads as a barrier to cycling to work. We have not mentioned cycling yet.

United Kingdom data from the UK Government Equalities Office shows that, in 2020, of those who had experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12 months, 28 per cent had experienced it on public transport.

There are similar issues in relation to rail travel. Statistics from the British Transport Police show that there were 63 reports of sexual assault on ScotRail trains between 2017 and 2021.

Katy Clark: Campaigners have suggested that the British Transport Police presence should be increased at stations. Would the member support that?

Graham Simpson: Yes, I would. That issue is mentioned in the report that the minister commissioned. Greater staff and police presence would be a great help.

Women-only train carriages have been suggested as a possible solution to safety concerns, but I agree with my good friend Mick Hogg, from the National Union of Rail, Maritime

and Transport Workers, that that would be a logistical nightmare. I hope that he is watching.

The minister has told of her own experiences, and I think that she was quite right to commission the research that she did. The report is very fair and shows that there are no easy answers. It also shows that women's experiences differ, not just from those of men but from those of other women. Some of the strategies that are used in order to keep safe are also used by men.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):

The member is talking about the strategies that people use in such circumstances. It is really important for us, as men, to recognise that there is a huge responsibility on us to adjust our behaviour and to try to put ourselves in the mind of a woman who feels threatened in a particular situation. We should think about the actions that we could take that might alleviate such a feeling. One of the challenges is that, sometimes, things that we, as men, find comforting might be threatening to a woman. We should recognise that men, as well as being the bulk of the problem, must be part of the solution.

Graham Simpson: I thank Joe FitzPatrick for his speech. I agree with the points that he has made. Men have to reflect on their own behaviour, because we—men—are the problem. It is men, not women, who are causing the issues for women.

The report shows that women's experiences differ. Some of the strategies that are used are also used by men. Women should not have to sit close to other women or next to families on board public transport because that might be considered safer; they should not have to make telephone calls to friends or family while making journeys so that somebody can track their journey's progress; they should not have to ask male relatives or friends to meet them at bus stops or stations in order to accompany them on the final part of the journey home; and they should not have to wear flat shoes or trainers in order to be able to run away or escape if necessary.

People spoke of the need for a more visible police presence—that point was raised earlier—and that is the case in general, not just on public transport.

I was pleased to see that staff were also spoken to. I have been working very closely with Women in Rail. We will have an event in the Parliament later this year, and I note that Natalie Don will host an event for Women in Transport next week. We will not get women to work in the industry if it does not feel safe.

The recommendations in the report are sensible but not surprising. They include using technology; sharing best practice; providing better information

for women; dealing with drunks; improving lighting; doing more research and training with drivers of public transport and reviewing the training that is already offered; and having more staff at boarding points. That final point is key, and it should make ministers here and elsewhere think before cutting back.

I am sure that we are in for a good and consensual debate today. I commend the minister for commissioning the research, as well as those who carried it out and took part in it.

I move amendment S6M-08122.2, to insert at end:

“; notes the 10th anniversary of British Transport Police's (BTP) Text 61016 service in March 2023, and encourages people to use BTP's free Railway Guardian app, which helps the travelling public and rail staff to report crime to BTP and offers information on what to do if people see sexual harassment on trains or at stations.”

14:54

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On behalf of Scottish Labour, I welcome this important debate on the safety of women and girls on public transport. My Labour colleague Katy Clark called for the Government to hold such a debate last year, so I am pleased that we are holding one today.

Violence and harassment toward women and girls is, sadly, an issue across our society. It affects women and girls everywhere: in the home, on the street and on public transport, too.

A survey by the Office for National Statistics suggested that nearly half of women across the United Kingdom felt unsafe using public transport alone after dark, compared with only one in five men. In a survey this month, Transport Focus found that only 15 to 30 per cent of women feel very safe on public transport, compared with 59 per cent who said that they feel very safe in a car.

This is not a new problem, but sadly it appears to be a growing one. It has been reported that the British Transport Police has stated that reports of sexual harassment and sexual offences have increased by 175 per cent since before the pandemic.

I want to recognise at the outset that it is almost entirely the behaviour of aggressive and abusive men and boys that causes women and girls to feel unsafe on public transport. I have said before, and I will say again, that there is a duty on all of us—including men—to do whatever it takes to help to tackle this issue, including challenging the behaviour of other men, whether strangers or friends. It is a cultural problem. I do not think that it is possible for me to fully appreciate the experiences and feelings of women and girls when using our public transport, but there is a duty on all

men to try to fully understand them and to do something about it.

Women are more likely than men to be reliant on public transport, and their views must be listened to. It is vital that there is full engagement with women passengers, women's organisations and trade unions on the issue.

The one thing that I hear loud and clear when listening to women is that while they use public transport, their fears regarding safety exist from leaving their door to arriving at their destination—particularly at night. That involves walking to, waiting for and travelling on public transport.

I was recently contacted by a constituent who was followed by a man after getting off of her train in Renfrewshire. I would be happy to share details on that with the minister privately, but it is crucial that the voices of women passengers are heard.

I join the minister in thanking the authors of the research that we received yesterday, and we will consider and review it carefully. I very much agree with the recommendation about improving lighting at stations and bus stops, and on ensuring that real-time information on services is available and accurate. There is also clearly an issue about inadequate lighting in our communities for walks to and from stations and stops. That requires investment, and the reality is that we need to give councils the budgets to make it happen.

The safety of women is another reason why we need to improve the reliability of services, which has been raised already. On that issue, I am receiving more and more complaints about bus service cancellations and withdrawals from constituents, including many women. A bus service being withdrawn means women having to walk further to get a bus, and a bus service being cancelled without notice leaves passengers stranded at bus stops. At night, in particular, that can leave women and girls trapped in potentially unsafe and vulnerable situations.

Despite several requests, the minister has been unable to compile how many bus services are being cancelled across Scotland daily. I do not think that it is acceptable that the Government does not know how many buses are being cancelled daily, and I urge the minister to compile that information. Bus cancellations need to be monitored and tackled, and ensuring the safety of women travellers makes doing so even more vital.

The report also highlighted the use of apps and technology that can potentially help to provide reassurance, advice and assistance. There is the Railway Guardian app, run by the British Transport Police, which the Conservatives highlighted in their motion, and I understand that three bus companies in Scotland—including McGill's—are using the myTrip app. The feedback that I have

had on those from women I have spoken with is that they are positive and good, so we should make sure that they are publicised. However, in order for the apps to properly carry out their functions, there needs to be someone at the other end of them to answer and respond to calls for help. Failing that, there must be clarity on during which hours women can expect a response.

I have heard reports of British Transport Police texts going unanswered. I know that the police are being asked to do more and more with less resource. However, the key is that, if we are rolling out such technology, it cannot just be a gimmick or an app that does not do anything—there need to be people to support its implementation and to support women passengers who need assistance. Clearly, if there is a growing problem, the British Transport Police will need greater resources. That needs to be considered fully as we go forward.

That brings me to the issue of staffing more generally. As the minister said, the report recommends that we should

“explore the feasibility of increasing staff presence at both points of boarding, alighting and interchange, as well as the possibility of increasing on board staff presence at the times that women and girls feel most vulnerable (including evenings and weekends, in particular).”

That reinforces what Scottish Labour said in our debate on ScotRail last year about the need to fully staff our transport network. Unsurprisingly, Transport Focus has also found that a lack of staff presence can heighten feelings of vulnerability. Our amendment today makes clear that the minister and the Government should reject proposals to cut ScotRail ticket desk opening hours.

Staff who work in booking offices do much more than sell tickets. They give advice to passengers, assist disabled passengers and make our railway more accessible. Importantly, they also deter antisocial behaviour and are a presence that makes the railway safe, which is a concern for many women who travel alone.

We talk about the importance of listening to users and to women's voices, so we should do that. Last year, ScotRail consulted on cutting opening hours at 117 ticket offices, and just 1 per cent of people were in favour of the proposed cuts, with the remaining 99 per cent citing concerns around ticket sales, accessibility, antisocial behaviour and safety for women and vulnerable groups. Given that, why are the cuts still on the table? Why should the issue even be on the agenda for the national conversation on rail? We need to fully staff our stations and trains.

The issue of alcohol is discussed in the report. People who are intoxicated with alcohol on public transport can fuel aggressive, abusive and

intimidating behaviour towards other passengers. Our rail union colleagues tell me that, largely, such people do not get drunk on a train; they are already drunk before they get on one. That matter deserves further discussion.

Jenny Gilruth: When I meet the railway unions, I am always struck by the fact that there are no women involved in the management of those unions. I would be interested to hear whether the member has spoken to any female members of railway unions about their views on alcohol consumption on trains. I was struck by some of the feedback in the report from those who work in our transport sector—some horrific experiences are recounted in a bit of detail. I just want to be sure that Mr Bibby has been in discussion with female railway trade union members. If not, I would be keen to hear more from them directly.

Neil Bibby: It is important that we listen to the trade unions and the voices of women, as I said. I said just before the minister's intervention that we require further discussion on that issue.

Although I understand the reasons for a ban after 9 o'clock in the evening, I have said publicly that, like many passengers—men and women—I am not convinced by the complete all-day and all-services ban on ScotRail trains. That was brought in because of Covid and not for any other reason. I am not sure that it is proportionate or the solution, given that cases of harassment have gone up since Covid.

Having said that, I note that passengers, including many women, have asked me what the point of the ban is if it is not enforced. The report mentions that. Surely it would make more sense to target resources on ensuring that there is no consumption in the evening, rather than have an all-day and all-service ban. Last year, I asked the minister a series of written questions on how many times the ban had been breached and what the consequences were for passengers for doing so. I was disappointed that the minister responded by simply directing me to the British Transport Police. Again, I would hope that the Scottish Government and the transport minister would want to know that information and would share it. That goes to the heart of the problem with the issues of alcohol on ScotRail trains.

That takes me on to the issue of antisocial behaviour more generally. Statistics show that incidents of antisocial behaviour on our trains are on the rise. Anecdotally, it is also happening more on our buses, although we do not know the full statistics on that. Although the vast majority of young people are good citizens, I am increasingly hearing reports of a small number of people committing antisocial behaviour on our buses. For example, Kilmarnock bus station was closed last year. I reiterate that we need to understand fully

the extent of the problem and ensure that our police have the resources to tackle it.

I thank the Government for bringing the debate to the chamber, and the authors of the report for their research, which we will consider carefully. Scottish Labour will work with the Government, and with all parties, on this matter so that we do all that we can to ensure that women and girls are safe, and feel safe, not only on public transport but from their door to their destination.

I move amendment S6M-08122.1, to insert at end:

“; believes that in order for women and girls to feel safe and be safe, the public transport network needs to be accessible and properly staffed; rejects proposals for any cuts to ScotRail ticket office opening hours, which would be a retrograde step in this regard, and calls for assurances that trade unions and women's organisations will be actively included in the work for safety on public transport.”

15:05

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Transport is key to life in Scotland, not least in my constituency of Shetland. From interisland ferries that link islands together to the bus network and air and ferry links to the Scottish mainland, transport is vital for commuting, business, healthcare, leisure and visiting family and friends.

Everyone in Scotland should have the ability to use all our public transport networks free from fear or harassment. However, for women and girls, the opposite is reported. Data from the UK Government Equalities Office “2020 Sexual Harassment Survey” showed that of those who had experienced sexual harassment in the 12 months prior to reporting, 28 per cent had experienced it on public transport.

Fear of sexual harassment on public transport was reported by 72 per cent of women. That fear leads to avoidance, with 62 per cent of women changing their behaviour in relation to public transport. All too often, women and girls are forced by fear of male violence to change their behaviours at work, at social events, in public spaces and at the gym. It is clear that they cannot even travel between those places without fear of harassment.

Research that Transport Scotland conducted prior to the introduction of the young persons bus travel scheme noted that women and trans and non-binary people are more likely than men to state that they never feel safe using the bus at night. Respondents reported feeling “vulnerable and uncomfortable” and said that they had experienced catcalling, inappropriate touching and leering from men. Public transport should offer a safe and stress-free environment where everyone can travel without fear. Public transport in

Scotland's rural communities offers a lifeline link to essential amenities, and we need to improve conditions on public transport so that women can travel without fear of being harassed.

As we encourage people to choose to cycle, walk or wheel as an alternative to public transport, we must ensure that people are empowered to do so safely. An Office for National Statistics survey found that one in two women feels unsafe walking alone after dark in a busy public place, and that disabled people feel less safe walking alone in all settings. Crime in public space impacts the decisions that individuals make daily on how they choose to travel and their route choices to reach the places that they need to get to. It can also create fear and emotional work every time that people simply want to leave the house.

I welcome the publication of the Scottish Government's new research on women's and girls' safety on public transport, and I thank the Government for advance sight of the report. The findings all too predictably echo previous data, some of which I have mentioned. Enactment of the report's recommendations is important in tackling women's safety on public transport, but more will be needed.

The British Transport Police has the well-known "See it. Say it. Sorted" campaign for reporting suspicious behaviour on public transport. Less well known, however, is its "Speak up, Interrupt" campaign to encourage and enable bystanders to intervene if they witness sexual harassment. The BTP has a Railway Guardian app, which Graham Simpson mentioned, and a text service to report crime or antisocial behaviour discreetly and directly from the train. All crimes of all types on public transport must be treated with the same seriousness.

Institutionalised gender bias and the lack of a diverse workforce in the policing and transport sectors must be addressed. Many women and girls do not feel comfortable reporting crimes to a male police officer. Having more visible female police personnel and women working in transport could help to change that, along with better training across the transport industry. Women and girls need to be confident that reported crimes will be taken seriously.

Education—through public awareness campaigns and school education programmes—is a key factor that could embolden women to seek help and encourage bystanders to intervene. Public transport spaces should be designed with input from women and other minority groups to ensure that the design of the spaces themselves is more inclusive and preventative of harm—for example, by ensuring that spaces are well lit. A full range of options for where to sit, or where to sleep on overnight transport, must be affordable and

available for all. Transport providers, the third sector and the public sector must work together to ensure that daily journeys for women are safe and that women can enjoy travelling and the outdoors as much as their male counterparts do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate. I advise members that we have some time in hand, should members wish to take or make interventions. Although members' speeches should be around six minutes long, some latitude may be afforded.

15:10

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate.

I agree with the Minister for Transport that every woman and girl has the right to feel safe wherever they go, which includes feeling safe when they travel. That right is fundamental to how women access education and jobs and socialise. It is time for all transport providers in Scotland to pause and reflect on the role that they can play in helping to protect women and girls as they travel.

We know that more women than men rely on Scotland's public transport network. However, our transport system in Scotland still does not seem able to listen to, and act on, women's views and lived experience. We must see an improvement in that.

Last year, the minister committed to undertake a consultation on women's safety on our public transport network. That will include working with national and local organisations that represent the interests of a cross-section of women in society, as well as with groups that represent female staff who work on the public transport network.

Options to take forward the work will be informed by discussions with women's groups and organisations, trade union partners and wider stakeholders, and I make a plea to the minister to ensure that the voices of Scottish Women's Aid are heard as part of that. That is important because the Scottish Government's public attitudes survey has been able to provide more Scotland-specific data on harassment or antisocial behaviour on public transport.

Interestingly, a third of women who took part in the survey told the Scottish Government that they were concerned about their personal safety in general when using public transport, compared to a quarter of men, and that that has influenced their travel choices. More women than men also said that they had been the victim of harassment when using public transport, most commonly in the evening or at night-time. It is not good enough to continue to expect women and girls to adapt their

behaviour on public transport—or, indeed, anywhere.

Women expressed much higher levels of fear for their personal security in public places, whether on or waiting for transport, or in the use of car parks—again, particularly at night. That fear can, in turn, place a constraint on women’s mobility and their participation in public life—and, indeed, in their private and social lives—as they factor personal safety into routine decisions and activities.

Addressing those issues will not eliminate violence on its own, but it will support broader prevention efforts. Men should step up and say that such behaviour—especially what might be termed as low-level misogyny, which can often lead to other things—is entirely wrong and must be called out each and every time.

Official statistics from the British Transport Police show that there were 63 reports of sexual assault on ScotRail trains between 2017 and 2021. Over the same period, 26 sexual assaults were recorded at Scottish train stations, and one was reported at a Glasgow subway stop.

The BTP figures show a huge rise in the number of sexual assaults reported in 2021. Reports more than doubled to 29, from 14 in 2019, before the Covid pandemic. Almost a third of all reports over the five years were recorded in 2021, with the number falling to nine in 2020 amid Covid travel restrictions and advice for people to stay at home.

Alys Mumford, from the feminist organisation Engender, said:

“Policy makers need to recognise the safety implications around, for example, removing guards from trains, and we need urgent action to change our culture which allows misogynistic harassment and abuse to continue unchallenged.”

I ask the minister to reflect on that point, especially with regard to evening services, and ensure the availability of train guards.

I highlight Police Scotland’s “Don’t be that guy” campaign, which aims to reduce the number of instances of rape, serious sexual assault and harassment by promoting frank conversations with men about male sexual entitlement. The campaign stimulated conversations and turned the narrative away from preventative advice for women and towards a focus on men’s behaviour.

Collectively, we are responsible for the society that we live in and the underlying prejudices, sexism and misogynistic attitudes that are still far too prevalent. It is only by prioritising prevention that there can be an end to violence against women and girls. Gender-based violence is a manifestation of toxic masculinity, porn culture and an immoral set of attitudes, including a sense of

sexual entitlement, that are still held by too many men in our society and around the world.

I encourage people, particularly men, to take a look at the “Don’t be that guy” campaign, and I ask the minister whether a refreshed campaign is being considered.

I welcome the debate and the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to protect women on public transport, and I repeat my asks.

15:16

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the debate and to join with colleagues from across the Scottish Parliament in sending the clear message that everybody should feel comfortable using public transport without fear for their safety.

Sadly, as my colleague Graham Simpson and other MSPs have said, the number of assaults at train stations has risen in recent years. Transport Scotland recently found that one in three women was concerned about their personal safety when using public transport and a slightly higher number said that personal safety influenced their travel choices. A UK-wide study found that more than four in 10 women had been verbally abused on public transport and 14 per cent had been physically threatened or assaulted. Those numbers are depressing and concerning in equal measure.

Looking beyond the statistics at individual cases is what should really concentrate minds on the issue. Last year, a criminal was convicted of attacking and robbing a 60-year-old woman at Paisley St James station. He repeatedly kicked her when she fell to the ground as he tried to steal her handbag. Sentencing him, the judge said:

“This was a nasty attack on a random individual and you could tell she was vulnerable and that’s why you attacked her.”

Another offender, who was convicted this month, sexually assaulted a 15-year-old girl by putting his hand up her skirt. On the train from Ardrossan to Glasgow Central, his horrific attack made the victim physically sick. She said:

“As soon as I got off the train I just broke down as soon as there was room for me to do so. I was crying, I was in complete hysteria.”

Those appalling examples reveal just some of the threats to women’s safety that occur each day.

As Kelly Given from the Young Women’s Movement Scotland said last year:

“I know all too well the feeling of going home on a train at night, clenching your jaw and sitting tense and dreading getting on the train in the first place—it absolutely needs to be addressed.”

She is right: it must be addressed. I hope to hear the minister outline some of the specific actions that the Government will take in the near future to address the issue and give people greater protection when they are going about their lives.

The document that was published today by Transport Scotland is just a starting point, but it is a good starting point. There are many points to raise from it, but I was most struck by this simple point: women are scared. Women are scared of abuse, physical assault, strangers following them, antisocial behaviour and harassment. Women in Scotland are scared every single day. They describe the feeling of terror and the problems that they encounter each day as “the norm”. That is depressing, but it is true and it is wrong.

There are many possible solutions, but it comes down to this: men need to stop hurting and harming women. Not all men, but the men who inflict violence on women need to stop. They need to be called out and they need to change their behaviour. We can bring in all sorts of measures, we can ask more of the Government and we can do more to act. However, ultimately, men need to change. Until they do, this will continue to be the norm.

Although the onus must be on men not to inflict violence on women, the Transport Scotland report suggests some actions that the Government and ScotRail can take to improve the public transport experience for women.

First, I was shocked that the report says:

“Across the board, female transport workers described little to no formal training either in relation to their own personal safety or that of others.”

I hope that the minister and the Government will agree to change that immediately.

Secondly, there is clearly a need to reach more effectively those who attend football matches and concerts. I hope that the Government will look at the most appropriate way to do that, whether through a messaging campaign or targeted action from the authorities.

Thirdly, women feel more at threat at night in areas of poor lighting, so I hope that the Government will launch a review of all public transport locations, to check whether the lighting could be improved.

Fourthly and finally, improving the reliability of ScotRail would go a long way. That is certainly a major concern in my area. In the report, women raised concerns that they feel less safe if they have to wait for a long time. That fear was heightened by not knowing whether a service would be delayed or cancelled. Those problems are not specific to women, but the report makes it clear that a better ScotRail—not the sub-par

service that Scots get now—would be a big boost to women’s safety.

I urge everyone to do what they can to protect women’s safety and prevent violence on public transport by working with the police to report crimes and provide front-line officers with the information that they need to catch offenders. British Transport Police urge people to report concerns directly to officers; to flag incidents using its Railway Guardian app, to which people can upload media evidence; or to discreetly and directly report any non-emergency crimes by texting 61016.

15:22

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I open with a quote:

“So often, when I am being harassed by a man on public transport, no one intervenes. Then, when I am off the train, returning from work or a night out, there is no one to help. I have lost count of the number of times I’ve been followed home, terrified of being raped or murdered.”

Those are the words of one woman—Sally—who spoke to my office as I prepared for the debate. They are sobering to hear, and the experience is, sadly, one that most women in the chamber and watching at home will recognise in one way or another.

Many women and girls will be familiar with sending a friend our live location when we transit to or from home. Some of us change how we dress, in order to avoid attracting unwanted attention from would-be harassers. Alternatively, we take a different longer or more convoluted route to our destination, to ensure that it is well lit or busier. Some of us do not take the risk at all, and spend a fortune on taxis. Those are just a handful of the actions that women are taking, day in and day out, to avoid harassment in public. Sadly, that extends to our transport system.

Another woman told my office:

“Every time I get on public transport, I have a flashback to a time that I was harassed. I thought I was going to die. One of the reasons I bought my car and learned to drive was to avoid encountering creeps on public transport. If I couldn’t drive and needed to take public transport to get somewhere at night, I would choose not to go.”

No one should live in such a state of constant fear, excluding themselves from public life for fear of their safety. I thank the women who shared their testimonies with me and my office. Their courage and honesty have left me dwelling on a number of questions in the lead-up to international women’s day tomorrow.

How can women thrive at work, for example, when, too often, their commutes are spent in a state of hypervigilance? How can we tackle the climate crisis through encouraging the increased

uptake of public transport when so many of us fear for our welfare, and even our lives, on our buses and our trains? How can we tackle the scourge of harassment when, for too many women, there are still too many barriers to understanding and reporting harassment on our public transport? Women's safety and wellbeing should underpin all that we do in this area, but it is important, too, to recognise that these matters have an impact on our economy, our climate and our justice system.

It is also important to reiterate that the voices and perspectives of women must be front and centre in any effort to resolve this on-going problem. It is vital that we have women representatives who are proportional to the population to ensure that there is parity of attention to women's issues in the Scottish Parliament. Women make up 46 per cent of the Scottish Parliament, so there is a wee way to go yet, but we are closer than we have ever been to equal representation.

I had the privilege of being the SNP representative on the Scottish Parliament's gender-sensitive audit board and playing my part in the large body of work that has been undertaken to recommend action both in parties and in the Parliament. I hope that that will make a significant difference to women's participation in politics and elected office, because it is essential to have women's voices and perspectives at the heart of Government.

We are fortunate to have had our first female First Minister, who has ensured that, under her leadership, our Scottish Cabinet has been gender balanced for seven years. Our Minister for Transport—a woman—has talked about her lived experience of harassment on public transport.

We know from Transport Scotland's social and equality impact assessment that women are more likely to be a victim of sexual assault, and we are also more likely to have concerns about safety and security issues on public transport at night and a fear of being harassed or sexually assaulted.

The report that has been published today makes a number of recommendations to tackle those issues, and I want to highlight and endorse one in particular. I welcome the fact that the report specifically recommends that awareness be raised of the immediate and intermediate support that is available to those who feel vulnerable at any point before, during or after public transport journeys.

Many of the women who I have spoken to about harassment on public transport have said that any effort to tackle harassment must be door to door; it must not stop at the boundary of the train station or bus stop. I commend the work of organisations such as Strut Safe—a free, non-judgmental service that is dedicated to making women,

LGBT+ people, people of colour and others feel safe walking home.

We know that misogyny and the violence against women and girls that it perpetuates are not confined to public transport. Sadly, we see them throughout our society. Eradicating the pervasive and deeply ingrained inequalities in our society will require radical and holistic efforts, but with a gender-sensitive Parliament and a gender-balanced Cabinet, I know that we can prevail.

I vow to do all that I can to ensure that the voices of women from a wide variety of backgrounds are heard in this place, hopefully working alongside colleagues in a cross-party and cross-gender way. It is only by calling out misogyny and creating a culture where the perpetrators of it are like social pariahs that we will be able to radically change the culture in our society.

15:28

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): MSPs have stood up and stated on many occasions the absolute importance of keeping guards on trains, maintaining safe and regular buses and ensuring that transport hubs are sufficiently staffed for the benefit of all. Whether it is to ensure that the public are protected, to ensure that people with disabilities can get on and off safely or to warn of developing hazards, those calls all have a logical and necessary reason.

A key reason why those calls have been made so consistently is that we need to ensure that those who use trains, buses and boats feel safe and unthreatened while travelling. Of course, more often than not, when we speak of that we are, sadly, focusing on women. We still live in a world where women do not always feel safe when using public transport. As we have already heard, a survey by the Office for National Statistics suggests that nearly half of women in Britain feel unsafe using public transport alone after dark.

Whether cases involve catcalling or women being pestered or whether they go as far as all-out sexual assault, the number of cases where women have been made to feel isolated and exposed by the behaviour of men on public transport is concerningly high. We have all heard horror stories, today and at other times, or have experienced them ourselves. It is worryingly common that women's complaints are not taken as seriously as they should be. It may no longer be socially acceptable to insinuate that a woman was at fault—as was regularly claimed when I was young—but there are still plenty of ways in which women's concerns are diminished, while emphasis is put on women changing their behaviour instead of the men who carry out the harassment.

All women have been told at one time or another that they should not get on board this or that bus, or that, if they are travelling on a train at night, they should bring someone else with them. Although people who say that mean well, it belies the fact that, in 2023, we still accept that there are no-go areas for more than half of the population of the country. The implication is that men are born with an entitlement to roam and travel that women can enjoy only in the company of men they know. Some may scoff at the way in which I have characterised that, but it is absolutely true, and it is reinforced by the fact that men who harass women on public transport often simply get away with it. They get on with their day, oblivious to the damage that they have caused, and yet, for the woman, her right to feel free in public has been severely damaged. In some cases, women will never get on a particular bus or train again. Their life has been limited by the selfishness of others. We must not put up with that. We must all agree that the actions suggested in the report and in previous debates in the chamber require to be addressed urgently.

Like others, I was shocked to learn that, in a survey of its ScotRail-employed members last year, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers found that more than 80 per cent of ScotRail women workers had been subjected to violent or antisocial behaviour at work in the past year. Of those who had been subjected to those behaviours, 80 per cent were lone working at the time. That is absolutely shocking. Those workers should not have to put up with that sort of treatment. As a democracy and a functioning society, we simply cannot let that behaviour go on without treating it with the seriousness that it deserves. Further, and perhaps just as important, we should not be making decisions that only worsen the problem. It appears, at times, that we do so without thinking.

What can be done or, better put, what cuts should the Government not implement if it is to take the issue seriously? I was glad to hear the minister's remarks about considering the points in the report, and I would like more information on that. Making cuts to ScotRail's ticket office opening hours exacerbates the problem. Elderly passengers, in particular, still prefer to speak directly to someone when buying their tickets, and they often rely on the ticket office's knowledge to plan their journey. Planning a journey is an important part of feeling safe, so that support is absolutely necessary. The ratio of people in our country who are past retirement age and who use public transport skews significantly towards women. Like so many other cuts that are made without thinking, the proposal to cut ticket office opening hours will disproportionately harm women.

As we have heard, cutting bus routes and leaving isolated stations and trains without sufficient supervision inevitably leaves many women in a vulnerable position. As my colleague Neil Bibby mentioned, the number of late night bus routes that are disappearing is very concerning, not only because those bus routes have gone but because of the number of women disproportionately affected because they often work in roles that finish after dark and have no other means to get home. We know that employers are often not sympathetic to those concerns.

Finally, we must keep guards on trains and adopt a zero tolerance approach to those who are caught harassing women—or indeed anyone—on public transport. If someone cannot use railways and roads with respect and decency, some limits should be put on their freedom and not on the freedom of the women who are being harassed.

15:34

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): As we approach international women's day, tomorrow, this is the first of several debates this week regarding women's experiences in Scotland today. The Scottish Government supports the notion that those who live in Scotland should live lives of freedom and equal opportunity and that a safe, efficient public transport system is one means of realising that concept.

The groundbreaking decision to extend free bus travel to those under the age of 22 has been a great success. I place on record my praise for Scottish Citylink and its new 902 service, which runs through my constituency and once again connects Coatbridge to Glasgow after a number of years with no direct bus service. It was great to meet Citylink's operations director, Simone Smith, yesterday. It was clear from my chat with her that safety on those buses is a primary consideration, which was heartening to hear.

The decision to scrap the peak-time pricing of train fares is another way in which the Scottish Government has encouraged people to utilise our transport systems. However, our investment in Scotland's public transport will be successful only if those who use it feel safe in doing so.

Research undertaken by Transport Scotland found that roughly 33 per cent of women were concerned about their personal safety when using public transport, compared to just 25 per cent of men. A higher proportion of women than men said that personal safety concerns influenced their travel choices. In addition, and as we have heard already, more women than men said that they had been victims of harassment when using public transport, and 15 per cent of those who had

suffered harassment said that they no longer use any form of public transport after the incident. Those are startling figures for anyone, especially a man, to read.

One of the more distressing statistics to come from research by the British Transport Police was that reported sexual harassment and sexual offences on the railway have increased by 63 per cent in comparison with pre-pandemic levels—a point that was made by Neil Bibby when he spoke about the alcohol ban. That is simply not good enough. We must do more to challenge unacceptable male behaviour and to better protect women from that. We all have a role to play in ensuring that women and girls feel safer and more supported on Scotland's public transport system. I say, as other men have said today, that men's behaviour is the problem here. We must recognise that and do something about it.

It is also incumbent on ScotRail and the British Transport Police to keep passengers safe. An extensive closed-circuit television network and 24-hour customer information and advice hotlines should give some peace of mind to those who have concerns. As others have done, I also highlight the 61016 number, which is a text service that offers the travelling public and rail staff a means to discreetly contact the BTP in order to report non-emergency crime.

Graham Simpson: Given the picture that Fulton MacGregor so eloquently describes, I assume that he would agree with me that station staff are of enormous value. Does he agree that we should not be cutting back the number of staff at stations or reducing ticket office hours?

Fulton MacGregor: I wonder whether Mr Simpson has had a wee look at my speech, because I am coming to exactly that point. As he may well know, a couple of stations in my constituency might be impacted.

Before I talk about that, and to follow on from my previous point, I point out that anyone who witnesses a crime or who feels threatened or is in danger should always dial 999.

CCTV and customer service hotlines are invaluable, and the presence of staff at stations is equally indispensable. As the minister and others in the chamber know, I raised objections when plans were released that showed an intention to reduce staff hours at Blairhill and Coatbridge Sunnyside stations, which are both in my constituency. I went out and spoke to workers, who agreed with me.

One key takeaway from our discussions was that station staff do much more than sell tickets. That phrase might have been used already, but it is well worth repeating. Their presence deters antisocial behaviour, and station staff can act as

an important point of contact for travellers who encounter any issues while travelling. To emphasise that point, one staff member told me that she had saved three lives during her time working at the station and had acted as a first responder. She also spoke about having been a help to many women and girls who felt scared or worried and had left the train at that station because there were staff there.

ScotRail and other transport operators must take those factors into account when making decisions. Something might seem to be just a cost-saving or resourcing issue, but, in an area such as Coatbridge—and, I am sure, in many others, although I can speak only for my own constituency—those decisions send a much bigger message to women and girls. I welcome the minister's response to Katy Clark on that point.

Some people might suggest that women and girls should avoid travelling at certain times, should avoid travelling alone and should not draw attention to themselves. Why should women be forced to change their behaviour so that they can travel safely? They should not have to.

This week, we will observe international women's day and, although we can celebrate the slow progress in women's rights over the past century, we must acknowledge that huge inequalities continue to exist. It is a sad reality that we have a culture in which prejudice, sexism and misogyny thrive.

Men are now recognising that they have a role in standing against violence against women and girls by changing the way that they behave and calling out the behaviour of other men. Men must take the lead in that challenge. We hold a unique place in being able to challenge our peers. It is vital that men speak out. We need men to lead by example to their friends, family and children. That is the only way in which real change can be realised.

As well as the more obvious challenges, we—including me and other men in the Parliament—need to consider the smaller things. I have said to women friends and colleagues, "Why are you not getting the train?" Maybe I need to think about that. I am sure that other men in the Parliament have said similar things. We all need to think about it. It starts small, at grass-roots level. We need to think about it as a whole.

Presiding Officer, I see that I am running over my time, so I will conclude.

The Scottish Government has done excellent work in promoting the use of public transport. Feeling safe is fundamental for individuals and communities to thrive. A strong and flourishing Scotland is one where all individuals are equally safe and respected and where women and girls

live free from all forms of violence and abuse, as well as those attitudes that perpetuate them.

15:42

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Presiding Officer,

"I got on the train. A group of men were sitting next to the only free seats. One calls out "Give us a smile hen, or better still, come sit on my knee."

"He was the only one at the bus stop. We both got on the same bus. The bus is empty, but he comes and sits next to me. I am wearing shorts. He touches my thigh. He says, 'you're cold, let me warm you up'. I had nowhere to go."

Those are just two comments from women relaying their experiences using public transport. They will not be unfamiliar to any of the women in this chamber. That is why I welcome the report, its recommendations and our opportunity to discuss such an important issue.

If women and girls cannot travel safely, with confidence and assurance, their participation in so many aspects of life will inevitably be limited: in work and study; social, cultural, political and sporting activities; and as volunteers, activists and environmental protectors. We cannot afford to lose their contribution to all those things.

The report's recommendations are wise and well thought out, and some of them are long overdue, but they are not enough on their own. We need to address the cause of women's and girls' experiences of danger and hostility, rather than just mitigate the effects.

Let us be frank, the cause is misogyny. It is a misogyny that often intersects, brutally, with other forms of bigotry and bullying, including racism, homophobia and transphobia. It is important that we begin the parliamentary week with this specific issue, but it is at least equally important that we will be talking, later this same week, about the cause itself: misogyny.

Technical responses, monitoring and infrastructure, are welcome, but they cannot be the whole answer because, fundamentally, it is an issue not of technology but of people. On public transport, we need what we saw on Kenmure Street and what we see in neighbourhood food larders and climate camps: a sense of shared responsibility for one another, of solidarity, and the creation and nurturing of a culture of care.

That is why I am particularly pleased to see the recommendation about transport workers' safe return home at night. That reflects my proposed member's bill for hospitality workers. I hope that the recommendation will be followed wholeheartedly, not only collating and reviewing best and current practice but ensuring that real change happens—and soon. Everybody—transport

workers and passengers alike—should be able to finish work with peace of mind and the knowledge that they can get home safely.

We know that public transport is safer than private cars in so many ways, but we need to make it safer in every way and make it perceived and experienced as such. In Britain in 2021, 340 women and girls were killed in motor vehicle accidents, with 137 car occupants killed for every one in a bus or coach, and 241 child pedestrian casualties were recorded in Scotland in 2021. It would be a tragedy if that number increased because women and girls were discouraged from using public transport.

We need to be and feel safe, not only while travelling on a bus or train but for our whole journey from its beginning until its end. That means having stations that are staffed and have safe places to wait, and it means having joined-up systems, making sure that intercity services are met by reliable local buses or trains, and having well-lit, well-maintained and well-signposted paths at each end. It means taking bus travel and bus passengers seriously. It is a source of shame that we talk so often about trains and so little about buses. That sneer of Margaret Thatcher's really echoes down the decades.

There have been wonderful innovations in bus travel such as the Ember electric buses between Dundee and Edinburgh and Glasgow; they are reliable, reasonably priced, comfortable and low carbon. Experiences of local buses, especially in rural parts of Angus, Aberdeenshire, Fife and elsewhere, and their connections to town and city centres, are far too often experiences of serious delay and cancellation without notice or information, which leaves vulnerable would-be passengers waiting at dark and isolated bus stops. We know that there are major challenges in recruiting and retaining bus drivers—another of those Brexit benefits—but more can and must be done to give passengers the service, information and security that they need.

Finally, local authorities have a vital role to play, too: taking up and using the powers that they hold to support and promote local public transport. However, many are moving in the opposite direction by ending subsidies for vital bus services, which are used largely by women.

Why are streets close to bus stations not only some of the most polluted in Scotland but some of the least cared for and last to be regenerated or have green spaces or welcoming facilities? Why do so many bus stations charge, in cash, for use of their toilets? We know the answer: it is because they can get away with it.

This is, at its root, an issue of justice. There are choices to be made at every level of government

and within the public and the private sectors. There are also choices to be made about whether, by taking some of the simplest decisions, we are to embed privilege or dislodge precarity. We must make the right choice and ensure that others can do so, too.

15:47

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Of course every girl and woman has the right to travel on public transport without fear of harassment or worse, and of course it is not acceptable that they have to adapt and accommodate such possible events. The reality is that there are measures that will help, such as better lighting at bus stops and train stations and a role for CCTV, although I note that we do not always feel secure that those function, and they are of limited use in prevention.

It goes without saying that having personnel at bus stations and transport hubs, especially at weekends and late at night, makes everyone feel more secure. I would go so far as to suggest that, especially at weekends and at night, a police presence would not go amiss.

However, I believe that there is not a woman in the Parliament who has not experienced some form of harassment, quite often of a sexual nature, during the course of their adult life. It certainly happened to me in my younger days. I will describe two occasions—there were others, none of which I officially reported. Travelling one winter's evening in my late teens, I felt my hair being tugged—it was long in those days. I could see in the reflection of the bus window the man who was sitting behind me stroking my hair. I called over the bus conductor—we had them in those days—but he did not believe me. "Are ye sure, hen?" he said. Frightened, as the bus turned into the dark street where I was alighting, I stood up at the last minute. The man stood up, too, and followed me. I rushed off the bus and crossed the road to the stop opposite, where a man was standing. I told him what was happening. He seemed to disbelieve me but noticed that I was being followed, so, on my request, accompanied me to my road end.

The man who was following me simply stood at the bus stop. It was not my imagination. I dread to think what would have happened had that man at the other stop not been there or had not believed me. The minister said that it is important to be believed. So it is.

The second occasion was years later. On the last bus on a summer evening, I was aware that a young man was immediately behind me standing too close for comfort as I rose to leave at the terminus. I got off the bus and walked along the

main road, which was unexpectedly quiet. He kept apace too close by. Concerned, to put it mildly, I suddenly crossed the wide road to put distance between us. He, too, crossed the road. I crossed again to put the width of the road between us, and I made up my mind to run to the first door and bang it, ring the bell and shout if he followed. He stayed where he was and entered a driveway. However, when I checked, he had come back on to the pavement and turned to go back.

I have other personal examples. I have told members that for two reasons. First, nothing has changed. I cannot say whether things are worse because of underreporting, and I encourage the reporting of every instance. Secondly, women are still taking evasive, preventative protection measures for their safety, and they have to. I wish it were otherwise, but it is not.

In my constituency, I have been advised by Borders Buses that, although it is satisfied with CCTV on the buses, it has concerns about its female drivers when the shift is over and they have to disembark in quiet places. That is especially an issue in rural constituencies such as mine.

As an aside, it is also the case that female taxi drivers have to take special care. Taxis are sometimes the better choice, and some taxi drivers will wait to see that the person has opened the front door of the property before they leave.

I am afraid that vigilance, and people having strategies if they find themselves in a concerning situation, are still necessary. We all have that sense when something is not quite right. Trust that sense.

It is also important that girls in schools are made well aware of situations that put them at risk. I am afraid that that is unfortunate but necessary. The use of a mobile phone so that family can track them is awful, but not a bad idea. Situations that might—just might—put them at risk should be avoided. Taking a late-night taxi, for example, might well be the better choice.

Finally, although this is not exactly about public transport, when I park my car to take the train to my local office—not just at night-time—I do so where people will be about. Without naming the station, there is one at which I would not wait for the train. The station is in the middle of fields, few take the train there, and a person can return to find that their car is the only one parked there. I learned that when I returned one late afternoon, and I vowed that it would not happen again. Experience has shown me that that could be risky. There is CCTV there, but it has its limitations, and it will be of use only after the event. It certainly did not give me comfort. It is, of course, not practical to have personnel at those rural train stations.

In conclusion, even at my stage in life, I have to think ahead about what is safe and what is not safe. Although, in my experience, the vast majority of men are decent folk and some might be unaware that their behaviour might make a woman feel ill at ease, there are, sadly, those few who are predatory and will always be with us. Identification through reporting is therefore key, followed by prosecution if appropriate. We know that what may appear to be “low-level” sexual intimidation can progress—the Sarah Everard case has taught us that. Yes, we can push transport providers and local authorities to improve safety but, in my view, vigilance from women will still be required.

15:54

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I applaud Christine Grahame for her bravery in sharing those stories.

I welcome the publication of the research that was commissioned by the Minister for Transport. It is not only welcome; it is, in my opinion, imperative to moving forward and addressing the concerns that women and girls have while using public transport.

I recognise those issues from my own experience. When I first started at Holyrood, I took the train every day. The morning commute was fine, and it passed without incident. However, there were late sittings in the run-up to the Christmas break, and trains were often cancelled or significantly delayed by the time that I got to the station. That meant that the next scheduled departure would be about an hour later.

On a couple of occasions, I was travelling on the last train, getting home well after midnight. Every time, I found myself sharing the carriage with a group of alcohol-fuelled men, who always caused a disturbance.

The reaction among the handful of other travellers sitting in the carriage was the same: heads went down, headphones went in and eyes quickly diverted to anywhere but where the group was sitting. The atmosphere in the carriage changed, and there was a collective shallow breath. As a woman on my own, anxiety, discomfort and tension all flowed through me until the group disembarked the train—and I silently prayed that they would leave without incident.

I mention my personal experience not because it is in any way unique—as we have just heard—but because it illustrates that the problem runs deep in our society and in our collective experience as female travellers. I now drive. It is not because I want to do that; it is because I need to get home in a timely manner and, in all honesty, I feel safer. I recognise that that is not an option

for all, however. It is therefore not surprising to me that the first main finding in the report states:

“The risk of delays and cancellations, specifically to buses and trains, explicitly put some women off using public transport at night as the risk of waiting alone in the dark was considered too great.”

What message are we, as a society, sending women and girls who want to travel to and from work or school on public transport? Public transport is an essential and affordable way for many to achieve independent social mobility.

As an MSP for the Mid Scotland and Fife region, I must also mention the appalling incidents of youth violence that we have seen on buses in Fife. Like others from across the chamber, I was shocked by what I saw in a video, and the fact that it took place on a bus in broad daylight should concern us all. Public transport should be safe for everyone. There is a collective responsibility for everyone to show respect for one other, but that is not always happening. It is a few small incidents—but sometimes incredibly violent or uncomfortable ones—that can lead to lasting uneasiness with using public transport.

We must all use public transport if we are going to lower our carbon footprint. We have a duty to increase the usage of public transport and make it safe, reliable and convenient for everyone to use. If we put up barriers to its use, no one will use it.

Now we know the depth of the problem. If we want to ensure a proper transport system that is fit for everyone, especially women and girls, we must take on board the recommendations. A couple of them stand out to me; other members have already mentioned some in the debate. One is:

“To raise awareness of the technology that is currently available to assist women and girls and explore means of making this more accessible to all, including raising awareness of the immediate and intermediate support that is available to those who feel vulnerable at any point before, during or after public transport journeys.”

The second recommendation is:

“For stakeholders to implement more robust procedures and standard practice for following-up with transport staff and public transport users who do report negative incidents to the authorities. Women and girls need to know that their complaints are taken seriously, and that they are being heard, to give them, and others, the confidence to share their experiences in the future.”

When my daughters were coming home from a night out in town, they were always comforted by the taxi’s detailed description in comparison to the nameless, distant, almost cold disinterest from the bus service. The person, the car type, the colour and the number plate were all given up front by taxi companies, using technology to create a degree of ease. Surely we could utilise something similar and create that sense of ease in other forms of public transport, with a scannable code,

for instance, which could let people know their driver's name and the estimated journey time when they get on the bus or train. There could be an instant link to text numbers such as 61016 and to telephone and online support. Proper use could be made of CCTV. All the information regarding the route, time, place, carriage number and so on would be there on people's phones, just in case. If an incident is reported, let us treat it with urgency. That information regarding the route, time, place and so on is now on the phone, so it is easier to document and track the incident. We should also improve waiting times for victims, so they should not be left hanging.

There should be more confidence in the system so that, if something does go wrong, it will be swiftly and properly dealt with. If incidents are quickly acted upon and antisocial behaviour is treated the way it should be, there is a very real opportunity to turn around the fear experienced by women and girls.

The research that was commissioned by the Scottish Government shows that much more needs to be done to improve the experience of women's and girls' personal safety when using public transport.

Women and girls, as has been explained, are already taking responsibility for adapting their behaviours so that they can feel and be safe when travelling, but it should not be up to the victim to adapt to allow the behaviour of the abuser.

The specific recommendations in the report cannot be treated in isolation, and I wholeheartedly agree with the minister's points around broader partnerships. Police Scotland, the British Transport Police, educators and those working in equalities need to work together to challenge wider stereotypes and the systemic issues that lie at the heart of the experiences of women and girls in Scotland.

16:00

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Text 61016. The fact that we are talking about and lauding a safe number for female passengers is absolutely appalling. As Roz McCall just asked, what does that tell us about the society in which we live today?

I am very proud of my wife and daughters, their independence, their strength of character and their determination to live their lives to the full. However, no matter how strong they are, they must endure certain toxic and potentially dangerous societal norms that are almost always perpetrated by men. Why are those societal norms? Why do we allow that? Other countries do not.

Lorraine Kelly talked about the issue on her television programme. Lorraine's daughter had been living in Singapore and she admitted to having a very difficult conversation with her when she came back. She told her that she could not walk home on her own anymore because it is not safe and that this society is different from that in Singapore. That struck me greatly. That is an infringement on freedoms that we should all expect to have. As a man, it sickens me that that is our culture.

I dropped off my daughter at the train station last night. I waited to see her on the train; I looked to see how many folk—men and women—were on it; I told her to text me when she got to the final train station; and I told her to text me when she got home. I would not think to do anything else, because that is our society. It is disgusting.

Whether it is travelling on trains, buses or taxis, we have all become used to the idea that women need to protect themselves from predatory males. How can that be okay? How can we as males be comfortable with the certain knowledge that, by doing nothing, we give tacit approval to behaviour that is completely and utterly unacceptable?

There are numerous examples of males using the situation in which people are captive while on a train or a bus as an opportunity to get too close, and to sit in the seat beside a woman when there are more than enough seats elsewhere. They should give them the space that they need so that they do not feel intimidated or harassed. We need to call that out. Whether that is a sexual or a power thing is, to me, utterly irrelevant; it is simply completely and utterly wrong.

I listened to the same debate on the radio this morning. A lady was talking about how women must constantly adapt their behaviour to accommodate and mitigate the behaviour of men. That is unacceptable; we must change that.

The only way to do that is by men changing their attitude and behaviour. That is not about men becoming saviours or protectors of women. Women do not need white knights. Women and girls need to be given respect for their privacy, dignity and personal space, as well as their right to live their lives as they choose without fear of intimidation, harassment or even worse. When we as males see men acting in that way, we must call it out.

My message today is not to the women of this country—there are plenty of people doing that—and it is not about the provision of a hotline emergency service. My message today is to the men of this country, particularly those men who engage in such behaviour, which creates fear.

A man's behaviour is the main thing that gives women and girls security and rids them of the fear

of being unable to travel safely at night or at any other time on public transport. Inappropriate behaviour is not acceptable or tolerable. It is not just a laugh; it is not just a bit of banter. There is no need for a man to sit right beside a woman or girl on public transport when other seats are available. That is not them being friendly; that is them being intimidating. A man would not accept that happening to their mother, sister, girlfriend or wife, so they need to ask themselves why it makes them feel like a big man to intimidate a girl who is sitting alone on a train.

I am told that the gen Z generation has a far better attitude in relation to not accepting that kind of unacceptable behaviour, although I have no idea what “gen Z” actually means—this was from a conversation with my daughter. I hope that that is the case and that that means that we are getting through to people the cultural message that men and women—boys and girls—need to live together in equilibrium and that a better future is to come.

We must accept that, today, safety measures are needed to protect women and girls—I accept that we must have them—but we, as men, have to change the culture, change attitudes and change the lives of women and girls in this country, so that we are far more like Singapore.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Thank you, Mr Fairlie. I am sure that Fergus Ewing can give you an update on gen Z if you need one.

I call Siobhian Brown, who joins us remotely.

16:05

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I welcome this important debate on the importance of the safety of women and girls on public transport. I commend the minister for her commitment to undertake a consultation on women’s safety across our public transport network.

It is so disheartening that, in 2023, we are still trying to tackle issues such as sexism and misogyny. I want to highlight the continuing challenges that women face daily.

Just over two years ago, Sarah Everard was murdered in the most horrific way possible while she was walking home at night. She was only walking home from a friend’s house, but she never made it back. She never made it because the unfortunate truth is that the safety of women and girls is still not guaranteed across society in the 21st century. Many of my colleagues in the Parliament and I attended a very moving vigil outside Holyrood last year, on the anniversary of the sad death of Sarah Everard. Many of the moving tributes made me reflect on how many

times I have, when walking home, changed my route or behaviour if I felt at risk.

A recent incident was when, on my way home, I was walking down a dark close, as I have done hundreds of times before. A man was walking towards me with his hood up and a face mask on, and he did one thing that automatically put me on edge: when he saw me, he looked behind him. It could have been totally innocent, but that slight movement made me question why, as we were approaching each other, he was looking to see who was around.

I automatically assessed the situation. I saw a hotel about 20 yards away, so I started to walk quickly towards it and went into the lobby. The man walked on and I left the reception and continued my journey home. I could have been completely safe—I might have misread the situation—but whatever made me feel ill at ease made me walk into that local hotel without giving it a second thought. Normally, I would just continue on my journey and never think about the incident again. The sad thing is that I have probably done that hundreds of times in my life but never really thought too much about it. Now, it is just a habit for me, as I walk home, to ring my husband until I get through the door.

Today’s debate is specifically about the safety of women and girls on public transport. Every woman and girl has the right to feel safe wherever they go, including when travelling, however they choose to do so. I am sure that we are all familiar with constituents getting in touch about their experience and concerns regarding intimidating behaviour on public transport.

Public transport needs to better serve the needs of women as unpaid carers, workers, volunteers and survivors of gender-based violence. It needs to serve young women, older women, LGBT women, disabled women and ethnic minority women. As Graham Simpson said, it needs to serve everyone, because every person in Scotland should be able to jump on a train or a bus without fear that they will face violence.

Last week, I met in the Parliament representatives from the British Transport Police to hear more about their work in keeping law and order on Scotland’s railways. The British Transport Police has responsibility for safety on Scotland’s trains, and it launched a campaign earlier this year that focuses on women’s safety. As well as the Railway Guardian app, the campaign focuses on the use of the 61016 number and the role of the public in reporting incidents on public transport. I take this opportunity to ask anyone who is listening to save that number—61016—on their phone, just in case they ever need to report an incident, and to download the Railway Guardian app today.

People should, please, ensure that they report incidents. Historically, there has been a data gap in relation to such incidents, because women are far more likely not to report sexual harassment when it happens and, if they do, it is likely to be after the event.

I welcome that the transport minister has instructed her officials to take forward a programme of analysis that will allow for better data collection in Scotland.

I also welcome the findings from Transport Scotland's report, "Women's and girls' views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport". The authors found:

"Unanimously, women felt safer travelling in the day rather than at night or in the dark. Travel during the week was also seen as being less hazardous than travel at the weekend, largely due to perceptions that public transport attracted large crowds of often intoxicated passengers at weekends."

They went on to say:

"The risk of delays and cancellations, specifically to buses and trains, explicitly put some women off using public transport at night as the risk of waiting alone in the dark was considered too great",

and they highlighted concerns about poor lighting and lack of staff.

I welcome the recommendation in the report that we

"raise awareness of the technology that is currently available to assist women and girls and explore means of making this more accessible to all, including raising awareness of the immediate and intermediate support that is available to those who feel vulnerable at any point before, during or after public transport journeys."

I also welcome the recommendation to

"strengthen existing rules around non-consumption of alcohol on public transport and at points of interchange",

with

"Increased penalties for non-compliance and better enforcement of legislation".

I note the recommendation to

"explore the feasibility of increasing staff presence at both points of boarding, alighting and interchange, as well as the possibility of increasing on board staff presence at the times that women and girls feel most vulnerable (including evenings and weekends, in particular)."

That would reassure women and girls about their safety on journeys.

Any form of violence against women and girls is abhorrent and, in 2023, has no place in our vision for a safe, strong, successful Scotland. As we approach international women's day, I welcome the valuable work that has been carried out during the consultation and through the report, as well as the recommendations and commitment to on-going work, which is vital to ensure that everyone

has the right to feel safe and supported on Scotland's public transport system.

16:11

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the launch of the Scottish Government's research on women's safety on public transport, especially as Scottish Labour called for a debate on the subject last year.

This is a much-needed step towards improving the safety of women and girls. As the minister highlighted, women consider our safety from the moment that we leave our front door to the moment that we reach our destination. We change our behaviour and routes to protect ourselves from potential danger, we send friends our location, we take longer routes to avoid certain areas and we pay for taxis instead of walking alone at night. It is no wonder that we do that, given that a staggering 55 per cent of women have experienced harassment or assault on public transport. That, and the threat of it, stops women from accessing opportunities.

Fearing for our safety not only has a significant impact on our wellbeing but has a wider impact on the economy and contributes to women's poverty overall. Women's fear of travelling is so great that around 4 per cent of the UK's gross domestic product is lost because of it. For moral, legal and economic reasons, we must ensure that public transport is safe, affordable and reliable, so that women can travel freely without fear and participate fully in the economy and society.

Sadly, in the Glasgow region that I represent and across Scotland, we are not there yet. During the past five years, bus fares in the Glasgow region have gone up twice as fast as the average across the UK, while bus usage has plummeted. That has a disproportionate impact on women, including on when they access support services that are designed to address violence against women. Organisations such as Rape Crisis Scotland are clear that cost is a barrier to women accessing their services. We need to take serious action to make bus travel affordable; that is why Scottish Labour has called for fares to be capped. People in Glasgow are paying among the highest fares in Scotland. A 2-mile journey with First Glasgow costs £2.60, whereas it costs only £1.80 to travel across Edinburgh, where buses are council owned. In Manchester and Liverpool, Labour mayors are capping fees at £2. I want to see the same thing happen in Glasgow.

It is not only cost that matters; inaccessible public transport also puts women at risk. As a wheelchair user, I know that only too well. I am unable to travel on the same bus as my partner, because we both use wheelchairs. Three months

ago, late at night, when we were returning home after a light lemonade in town, we had to split up and get on separate buses. As we travelled home separately, I was followed off the bus by a man, who proceeded to ask me detailed questions about my impairment and where I lived. I had to wait 20 minutes, on my own, with a strange man, until the next bus came with my partner on it.

I was frightened and, instead of going home happy after a night out, I went home scared and angry. Other countries do not have that rule of one wheelchair user in each bus, so we must urgently address the issue in Scotland.

I also know how important it is for people to have someone they can trust around when they need help. One simple and effective way of helping women to feel safer while using public transport is to have members of staff available at bus and train stations. As we have heard, closing ticket desks and booking offices seriously undermines station safety and women's safety. I hope that the minister will take action to protect those roles now and not necessarily after a national conversation.

Christine Grahame: Your contribution is extremely interesting and valuable, particularly when you speak from your own experience, but do you agree that it is practically impossible to have personnel at very rural bus stations such as the one that I described earlier, which is in the middle of fields in the middle of nowhere? That is just not practical, so we must have something else in rural stations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please, Ms Grahame.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The member highlights the incredibly important point that transport in rural areas, including for women and disabled people, needs particular attention. Given that we are asking women to use public transport in such areas, we need to address the issue that has been highlighted, although we also need to look at the specificity of what we do in very remote areas.

The issue is particularly worrying for disabled women who require assistance at train stations and platforms, including in some remote areas. If staff are not available, we either have to go without essential help or rely on a stranger. CCTV is helpful, but there really is no substitute for a human being when it comes to making women feel safe. Closing the offices makes no sense in relation to safety, service or jobs. It is simply a result of cuts and could leave women having to spend money on taxis instead.

Taxis, particularly black cabs, provide a safe travel option for women, especially at night. They will be key to Glasgow City Council delivering on its unanimous support for Unite's "Get me home

safely" campaign. In the absence of accessible subways, trains or buses, black cabs are often the only truly accessible form of transport for wheelchair users. However, those cabs are under threat, too. We are set to see hundreds of black cabs leave our streets in Glasgow if drivers do not receive support from the city council or the Government to meet the requirements of the low-emission zone. The grants that are offered are insufficient. There is a significant back order for new taxis and there are supply-chain issues when it comes to second-hand cabs so, even if taxi drivers could find the money, they cannot meet the deadline.

Cab drivers are asking for more time to meet low-emission zone demands. Other authorities across Scotland, such as in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, have extended deadlines to 2024. In fact, Glasgow is the only council in Scotland that is still pushing ahead with the June 2023 deadline. That is, not least, a matter of jobs, but it is also a matter of equality and women's safety. I therefore once again call on the Government to do everything in its power to encourage Glasgow City Council to extend the deadline to protect Glasgow's black-cab trade and, in turn, women and disabled people. A failure to do so will leave women and disabled people, including those working in hospitality, without a vital form of safe and accessible public transport.

Finally, we must also ensure that our streets are safe. In November 2021, Radio Clyde launched its light the way campaign, calling for safety lighting to be installed in Glasgow's parks. I was pleased when, late last year, Glasgow City Council confirmed that at least three of the city parks will have safety lighting installed. However, the council still needs to allocate cash for that, and it could be at least another year, or two years, before the work starts. Given the drastic cuts to transport in Glasgow and the anticipated loss of at least 100 black cabs from the city, more women than ever before might be left to walk home late at night. Glasgow City Council and the Government must prioritise installing safety lights in parks urgently. Women cannot afford to wait until 2025 for that.

The launch of research on women's safety on public transport is welcome, but there is action that the Government can and must take right now, as I and others have outlined today. Of course, taking those actions in transport alone will not and must not be the end of the matter when it comes to women's equality, but ensuring that women can enjoy public transport without fear is key to unlocking so much potential. We in this Parliament all agree that that potential must not be lost to inequality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Joe FitzPatrick, who is the final speaker in the open

debate. After that, we will move to closing speeches, and everybody who has participated in the debate should be in the chamber for those closing speeches.

16:19

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): I thank colleagues from across the chamber for their important contributions in what has been a constructive debate from start to finish. On the eve of international women's day, it is crucial that Parliament debates the deeply concerning findings of the research.

The steps that the Scottish Government has taken to expand free bus travel to those under 22, and to nationalise ScotRail and, later this year, the Caledonian Sleeper service, should rightly be celebrated. However, it is essential that access to public transport is safe for everyone in Scotland.

Transport Scotland's public attitudes survey showed that one third of women who took part

"were concerned about their personal safety"

on public transport, in comparison with one quarter of men, as we heard earlier from Jackie Dunbar. The survey showed that more women than men reported being "victims of harassment", most commonly in the evening. That shows that the issue is about not just a feeling of being unsafe but actually being unsafe. We, as men, need to understand how that has an impact on how women feel in such circumstances. The survey showed that more women altered their travel choices as a result, which links in with some of the points that Pam Duncan-Glancy made just now.

One shocking statistic from the British Transport Police is that reports of sexual harassment and sexual offences on railways have increased by a staggering 63 per cent in comparison with pre-pandemic levels. In its response to the Scottish Government's consultation on Scotland's national transport strategy, Engender highlighted that

"BME women and women of certain faiths face both racialised and sexualised abuse, which can affect decisions around travel."

That is simply not acceptable.

It is not acceptable that women and girls need to adapt or change their plans out of fear of harassment, and it is incumbent on everyone in the Parliament and the Government, and across public transport authorities, the police and other stakeholders, to better protect women and girls.

As we all know, most violence against women is committed by men. Although not all men are responsible for that behaviour, all men in society—as I said earlier—have a massive part to play in achieving our collective goal of advancing gender

parity. Gender-based violence is a manifestation of toxic masculinity, the commodification of women, porn culture and an immoral set of attitudes, including a sense of sexual entitlement, that are still held by too many men in our society and around the world.

Other members, including Jackie Dunbar, mentioned Police Scotland's "Don't be that guy" campaign, which highlights the need for all men to talk openly to our male friends and relatives about behaviour that is damaging to women and puts men at risk of offending. We need to challenge unacceptable behaviours, language and attitudes in our workplace, at home, in the pub and—as we have heard—in our public transport system. I am glad that we are challenging that here today in Parliament. I repeat the call from Police Scotland: please don't be that guy.

Siobhian Brown clearly highlighted why we, as men, need to go further and consider how our behaviour, even if it is innocent, might be perceived. She told us about a time when she, like many women, had to change her behaviour. As men, we need to take a little bit of time to try to put ourselves in the shoes of women like Siobhian in those circumstances, and think about how we, as men, could change our behaviour to remove the fear and make someone like her feel that little bit safer.

We need to understand that something that we, as men, might see as a signal that someone is not a threat might appear to a woman in such circumstances as a threat. A smile between two guys might seem to signal, "It's fine—I'm okay," but it might feel threatening to a woman in the same circumstances.

We need to think more carefully. For example, rather than expecting a woman to cross the road and get out of our way so that we can go on our way, maybe we need to cross the road so that we are not positioning ourselves as a threat. We, as guys, need to start having those conversations so that we can change our behaviour; even if we are not "that guy", we can ask how we can do our bit to help make women feel safer.

I welcome the Scottish Government's continued support for the third sector organisations that work to prevent and eradicate domestic abuse. The Scottish Government's equally safe strategies were prioritised and produced in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Police Scotland, NHS Health Scotland and specialist violence against women support groups such as Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland.

The delivering equally safe fund is providing £19 million per year to support 121 projects from 112 organisations that focus on early intervention,

prevention and support services. Many of the organisations run training and outreach programmes aiming to prevent violence against women and girls. They also offer one-to-one emotional and practical support, as well as refuge, legal or financial advice and other services.

As we look forward to international women's day—a global celebration of women's achievements—tomorrow, we must remember why it is still needed. It is needed to raise awareness of discrimination, to drive forward action on gender parity and to remember the daily struggles of women and girls.

I welcome the commitment in the motion

“to engage stakeholders in the Scottish transport sector in a summit, which will progress the recommendations from this report, to ensure that Scotland's public transport is made safer for women and girls.”

I call on public transport operators, police authorities and other stakeholders to adopt the recommendations that are put forward in the report.

Everyone has the right to feel safe in Scotland's transport system—everyone. It is time that we made that a reality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. I call Katy Clark. You have a generous seven minutes, Ms Clark.

16:25

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am pleased to close the debate for Scottish Labour and to get the opportunity to thank the minister for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

The commitment to carry out research was made last year in a Labour Opposition debate on booking-office closures, so we are disappointed that the trade unions were not approached to take part in the consultation. I very much hope that they will be directly involved in such initiatives in the future.

There is no doubt that this is an important issue and that there is an urgent need to ensure that women and girls feel safer on public transport and at stops and stations.

Graham Simpson: I am not here to defend the minister, but it is clear from the report that staff were spoken to. That perhaps addresses Katy Clark's point about unions.

Katy Clark: I might expand on the point later in my contribution. As I said when I intervened on the minister, there have been previous consultations. As I said, the most recent work was agreed to as a result of the debate on booking office closures,

and the railway unions were campaigning against those closures. The voices of trade unions and—as I am sure that the minister will agree—of women trade union members, in particular, need to be heard on these matters.

Jenny Gilruth: I will address the member's point more substantively in my summing-up speech, but I want to say that the research will form part of a summit to which the trade unions will be invited. The point that I was making to Mr Bibby is that every single railway trade union is led by a man. I asked Mr Bibby whether the Labour Party had asked any female trade union members for their views—I am more than happy to hear them today. I just wanted to reflect on the fact that there is a gender imbalance in relation to the leadership of our railway unions.

Katy Clark: I fully accept what the minister is saying. Indeed, women have been elected to positions in some of the major trade unions recently, such as Sharon Graham, who is general secretary of Unite, which is one of the leading unions that I am sure the minister meets. I have met many women activists in railway unions in Scotland, and I hope that the minister has met them, too.

As I said, it is important to lay down that marker. Tinkering around at the edges will not address the scale of the issue. A number of members referred to the work that was carried out by the women's charity Engender. Its research has found that bus services are currently seen as being incompatible with women's working patterns and that women are particularly concerned about safety on train travel, as we heard from a number of members. We have also heard—from Pam Duncan-Glancy, in particular—that disabled women lack assistance and feel insecure when travelling and when at stations and on platforms.

I was pleased that Pam Duncan-Glancy and Maggie Chapman spoke about Unite's “Get me home safely” campaign, which asks employers to provide workers with safe and free transport home after 11 pm and when there is no public transport available.

Women's sense of insecurity and fear is a persistent theme. A number of members have referred to the survey by the Office for National Statistics, which suggests that nearly half of women in Britain feel unsafe using public transport alone after dark, compared with around one in five men. That is not surprising. A number of members, including Jackie Dunbar and Graham Simpson, spoke of statistics from the British Transport Police that show that there were 63 reports of sexual assault on ScotRail trains between 2017 and 2021. Those are appalling figures.

The minister spoke about female public transport staff, who deal with unacceptable levels of abuse and antisocial behaviour. As Carol Mochan has said, in a survey that it carried out last year, the RMT trade union found that more than 80 per cent of ScotRail women workers had been subjected to violent or antisocial behaviour at work in the past year. Given that the problem seems to be increasing, and given that it is already an aggravated offence to assault or abuse emergency services workers, will the minister confirm whether the Scottish Government will extend that legislation to cover public transport workers?

As has been said in powerful testimony by a number of members, these issues require a change in attitude and culture. However, that will not be enough to address the challenge immediately. There is a need for significant investment in staffing and infrastructure.

The Scottish Government's report lacks concrete recommendations on how to combat attitudes among men that lead to gender-based antisocial behaviour and violence, and we must think about whether we should put so much focus on the responsibility of women. I do not disagree with any of the report's recommendations or conclusions, but although raising awareness of the technologies—such as tracking apps—that are available to assist women and girls would be a welcome step, it would not address the problem. In addition, developing “credible” guidance for women and girls on what to do if they feel unsafe is not an unhelpful measure, but it will take us only so far.

The reason that I made an intervention on the minister about the survey that was undertaken in 2000 was to highlight the fact that these are not new issues and that we must not reinvent the wheel. That survey, which was carried out between July 1999 and May 2000, resulted in the development of guidance and a checklist to assist central and local government transport policy makers to ensure that a number of basic requirements would be built into the formulation and development of policy, including that issues affecting women should form part of mainstream consideration.

Jenny Gilruth: I accept, of course, that when Ms Boyack was transport minister, a body of work was undertaken on the issue of women's safety on public transport. However, will Katy Clark accept that 23 years have passed in the interim, technology has moved on and behaviours that we see today either did not exist more than 20 years ago or manifested themselves in different ways? There was therefore a requirement for the Government to update our consultation to get a

better understanding of the current landscape in Scotland. Does Katy Clark accept that point?

Katy Clark: I accept that point, but what I have been trying to get a better understanding of is whether the recommendations and guidance that were made back then have been implemented over the past two decades. We know, for example, that that work said clearly that surveillance and technology must be supported by “appropriate staffing” and that technology was “not a solution in itself”. Now, in this century, more than 200 rail stations—around 60 per cent of the total in Scotland—are unstaffed and, in the West Scotland region, which I represent, just a third of all rail stations are deemed to be fully accessible, based on Transport Scotland's methodology.

The Scottish Government's transport policy identifies that

“Many women and disabled people feel vulnerable when using public transport”.

We have had numerous contributions on how that has an impact. Despite that, the reality is that the Scottish Government's proposals have been to cut back on services and staffing levels across the railways, and we know from our constituency experience about the cancellation of bus services. Today, the Scottish Government still refuses to rule out cuts to existing ticket office hours. I ask the minister to rule out staffing cuts before the national conversation starts. We need to invest in and expand our public transport systems.

Jenny Gilruth: Will the member give way?

Katy Clark: I would be happy to do so, but I am probably running out of time.

Jenny Gilruth: It is to put on the record—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a bit of time in hand, but you must be brief, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: We have no plans to cut any staff numbers. I ask Labour Party members, including Ms Clark, not to mischaracterise any of the proposals as they are currently drafted.

Katy Clark: I am very grateful to the minister if she is ruling that out today.

As the minister has said, the harassment of women is a systemic problem and one that is particularly prevalent on public transport. We agree with that assessment. We think that that has been made clear across the chamber today; by women and girls in surveys; by women's groups; and by workers and trade unions. However, we also think that the problem cannot be addressed without significant investment in staffing and infrastructure.

I commend the minister for raising the issue. I am pleased by the commitments that she has

made today on staffing levels, on which there will undoubtedly be further discussion, and I commend her for commissioning the report.

I encourage all parties to agree to Scottish Labour's amendment. By ensuring that our stations, carriages and platforms are accessible and well staffed, we will ensure that women and girls feel safe and comfortable in using public transport in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Russell Findlay. You have a similarly generous eight minutes, Mr Findlay.

16:37

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you. I am pleased to contribute to the debate as my party's closing speaker, ahead of international women's day, tomorrow. Be assured that my speech will not be as long as Graham Simpson's blockbuster 11-minute opener.

Presiding Officer, last week I saw a new TV advert for ScotRail. I do not know whether you have seen it. It was all smiling passengers, cheery staff, beautiful scenery and blue skies. At one point, a departure board flashed on the screen, showing that every single train was on time. The advert was created by a trendy design studio. It looked like Scotland—but perhaps not the Scotland that I live in. It also looked like ScotRail—but perhaps not the ScotRail that I use. I am afraid that that wholesome TV advert bears little resemblance to what is experienced by women passengers every day.

Three months ago, I lodged a motion stating that

"all people should be able to travel on public transport without fear of harassment or violence".

I am grateful to the members who supported it. It included the revelation that

"an estimated 75% of sex crimes on the railways go unreported".

My motion also supported the British Transport Police's

"Speak Up, Interrupt campaign, which aims to empower bystanders and witnesses to report incidents or safely intervene where they can."

Some of today's speakers, including Jackie Dunbar and Sharon Dowe, have rightly been critical of the fact that responsibility is too often put on women's shoulders. Why should women alter their behaviour? Why should women be expected to police the inappropriate or criminal behaviour of men? The answer to both of those questions is, of course, that they should not. Men need to learn how to behave themselves. That point was made

very well by both Jim Fairlie and Fulton MacGregor.

However, when men do not behave themselves, the criminal justice system needs to act quickly and decisively. In my view, robust policing and, as Carol Mochan put it, a zero tolerance approach should be paramount. That should apply on our streets and on public transport.

Last year, the minister appeared to be receptive to the idea of women-only train carriages. For practical reasons, I do not think that that is the answer. Practicalities aside, what signal would it send out—that we should all just accept that some men will target women on trains? I recently met the chief constable of the British Transport Police, Lucy D'Orsi, and I have absolutely no doubt that she fully understands that it is her officers who bear the responsibility for policing and that it is not the job of female passengers.

Although it is a fine line to tread, I think that encouraging public awareness, reporting and safe interventions has its place.

The minister's motion mentions the new report that has been published by the Scottish Government agency Transport Scotland, and she also mentioned it in her speech. It is a weighty document that runs to 79 pages, and it echoes the sentiment about women and girls

"shouldering significant responsibility for adapting their behaviours to try to 'be' and to 'feel' safe when travelling on public transport".

I agree with the minister about the report's value and I thank all the contributors to it. However, I am left questioning some of what is not in it. The following four words do not feature once: arrest, prosecution, conviction, sentence. The report does not tell us how many crimes have been recorded on Scotland's public transport network in recent years or the nature of those crimes. Of particular interest would be how many of them were sex offences, the majority of whose victims are women.

Crucially, the report also does not tell us how many crimes were prosecuted in court, how many cases resulted in a conviction or what sentences were imposed. There is nothing about non-court disposals such as formal warnings and fixed penalties. I believe that that data is crucial, as it could provide a meaningful picture to the public and MSPs.

Jenny Gilruth: The data that the member has requested is gathered by the British Transport Police; it is not gathered by the Scottish Government or Police Scotland. However, I have provided that data to the member's colleague Tess White, and I would be more than happy to make it available to him.

Russell Findlay: It was not a criticism of the minister or, indeed, of the report. I was just pointing out the key importance of knowledge. I think that some of the data relating to prosecutions and outcomes is not British Transport Police data but Crown Office data.

As a member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I am familiar with hearing crime victims' troubling accounts of the system. I am familiar with hearing about the disrespect, the delays and the lack of transparency. I am also weary—as are the other members of the committee, sometimes—of the battles that we have in trying to access some basic data. It is often difficult to establish a full and true picture, and the demise of news journalism in Scotland is not helping. Increasingly, what happens in our courts—good and bad—goes unreported and is therefore unseen by the public.

Occasionally, however, we still come across reports that invoke disbelief. Around 18 months ago, I read a deeply concerning report about a middle-aged man who committed a sex act on himself in front of a female train passenger. To my astonishment, a sheriff decided to remove this depraved sex criminal from the sex offenders register because the victim was aged over 18. I could not understand the thinking behind that.

Sharon Dowey spoke about some truly horrific cases that expose the personal toll on victims in a way that statistics never do. Such cases are shocking and harmful and we need to be told about them. They often expose the gulf between the justice system's talk and its reality.

That Roz McCall no longer uses public transport partly because of her ordeals is a damning indictment.

I agree with Neil Bibby that, as men, we cannot really know how female passengers feel. He also raised an important gap in the data when he talked about our knowledge of the number of bus cancellations. I hope that the minister will heed his call on that.

Beatrice Wishart pointed out that, welcome as the new report is, there is not really much in the recommendations that is new.

Christine Grahame's personal accounts were deeply troubling, and they confirm that little or nothing has changed over the years. Perhaps things have even got worse.

Pam Duncan-Glancy's experience also illustrates the unpleasant reality of what is still occurring out there.

Preventative measures, stakeholder communication, big Government reports and public awareness campaigns all have their place. First and foremost, however, men need to behave and there must be confidence in justice. As

Graham Simpson said, my party is pleased to support Jenny Gilruth's motion and the Labour amendment. I hope that there is also consensus on his amendment.

16:44

Jenny Gilruth: I thank members for their valuable contributions to the debate. I thought that Labour and the Conservatives might have allowed a woman to open on behalf of their parties. That is not to suggest in any way that I am tiring of the dulcet tones of Graham Simpson and Neil Bibby, but I was pleased to hear Ms Clark closing for Labour, because it was Ms Clark who requested the debate many months ago. I thank her for that.

To make a serious point to male members today, every single female MSP in this chamber will either have personal experience of or have witnessed inappropriate behaviour by men on public transport. I was thinking during the debate about the first time that that happened to me, which was when I was 15. I cannot begin to explain how exhausting it is for women to have to continue to adapt our behaviour throughout our lives to accommodate men's behaviour on public transport.

As I outlined in the report that was published today, there is a wealth of evidence internationally on women's safety and public transport. Scotland is not unique in that respect, but what is rather unique is the historical data gap on the issue. I am pleased that we have been able to rectify that to some extent.

This debate lays the groundwork that is required for the systemic change that is needed. The research that has been carried out by the Scottish Government contributes to that. It also underlines that the issue of safety on public transport prevents women and girls in Scotland from realising their full potential. It is therefore really important that Parliament recognises that, particularly given that tomorrow is international women's day.

I will move on to respond to some of the points that were raised in the debate. There were notable contributions from lots of members. First, I touch on the contribution from Mr Simpson, who highlighted his engagement with the British Transport Police. I know that colleagues across the chamber have been engaging with the BTP in recent weeks, which is welcome. The Conservative amendment highlights the Railway Guardian app, which I support, and the BTP text number, but I hope that members will acknowledge that the onus should not just be on women to report when behaviour such as we have discussed today occurs. As we heard from Joe

FitzPatrick, the emphasis really needs to be on men changing their behaviour.

The report highlights that women do not always know how to report and, when they do, they do not have faith that doing so necessarily makes a difference. That needs to change, and I look forward to working with the British Transport Police and others to develop a campaign across our transport network that allows women a better opportunity to report inappropriate behaviour when it happens.

Graham Simpson: Member after member has raised the issue of a lack of data. We should not just be getting data from the police; we should be getting it from railway staff, too. What the minister has just said will be extremely useful if we are going to have an on-going campaign, because an on-going campaign is what we need. A debate such as this is fine, but it will probably get very little attention. We just need to keep it going to raise awareness.

Jenny Gilruth: I would not assume that a debate in our country's national Parliament will not get attention, but it is important that we use this opportunity to give impetus to the work that has been carried out by Transport Scotland. The next step is the summit, and Mr Simpson's point about data sharing is well made. We need data from all our transport providers to inform policy and make sure that it works better for women, because we know that it is not working at the moment.

Neil Bibby touched on the impact of men's behaviour on women on public transport, and I agree with him that it is an issue of culture. He also gave examples from his constituent in relation to public transport. If he is able to share some details with me in confidence, I would be more than happy to look at that and see how it might inform our work going forward.

A few members touched on the alcohol ban. When we are discussing women's safety on public transport, we need to be cognisant of the role that alcohol often plays in making women feel unsafe. I accept the point about enforcement, but that is addressed by the third recommendation, which talks about increased penalties. Fundamentally, the issue will be addressed through the national conversation. However, I point members to some of the experiences of the women who contributed to the report. One said:

“If you know someone's drunk ... it kind of throws in a wild card cos you don't know what they're going to do. And if they're drunk and they attack you...how are you going to manage the situation ... the option there is just to get as far away from them as possible.”

That is why alcohol on public transport impacts on women's safety. We all need to be cognisant of that.

Beatrice Wishart said that institutionalised gender imbalance must be addressed, which I very much agree with. She talked about having more women working in our transport sector, and I whole-heartedly agree. I cannot tell members how many meetings I attend as transport minister where I find that I am the only woman in the room. That is important because it affects policy and how organisations engage with more than half the population.

Beatrice Wishart also spoke about the importance of education, and again I fundamentally agree. As I said in my opening speech, I also support the bystander approach.

Jackie Dunbar spoke about the importance of transport providers, and I agree with that. Lothian Buses, Stagecoach and ScotRail engaged in our stakeholder workshop. For Ms Clark's information, the Scottish Trades Union Congress also engaged in our scoping work on the consultation, which was published today. Jackie Dunbar also asked for Scottish Women's Aid to be included in the planned summit and I am more than happy to ensure that that happens because it is a reasonable and important request.

Sharon Dowe raised some appalling examples of women's experiences when things are not safe. As she noted, the overarching theme of the report is that women are scared. She is right. She is also right that men must change. I was struck that she also mentioned the importance of training. There is a need for a more collegiate approach across the transport sector to ensure that the necessary skills and experience are in place to tackle such behaviour when it occurs on our public transport networks.

Karen Adam talked about the experiences of someone called Sally who travelled on public transport in Scotland. No woman should feel that way simply because they are using the train or bus. It is really important that we learn from women's experiences.

Similarly, Carol Mochan said that “men are born with an entitlement to roam”, which I found compelling. She also pointed out that women's concerns about their safety are often diminished and that the focus is instead put on women's behaviour. That critique was also levelled by Ms Clark in her closing speech, which I agreed with to some extent. Men are able to go on with their day-to-day activities and women have to deal with the consequences of men's actions. We must urgently look at that, and I am committed to making that part of the work of the summit so that we can take it forward.

Maggie Chapman talked about how public transport is safer in many ways than travelling privately by car and rightly pointed out that it would

be a tragedy if more women felt compelled to avoid public transport simply because they are scared to take the train or bus.

Christine Grahame shared powerful personal testimony about that feeling of not being believed or taken seriously, which permeated the results of the research. Depressingly, what she outlined is absolutely reflected in the research: it is true to say that women feel that they cannot report and that they do not believe that anything will happen if they do report. That must fundamentally change. It is linked to the need for better reporting systems, which was a key finding from the research.

Roz McCall spoke about her experience of travelling by train and about how behaviour during her commute has forced her back into her car. That is unwelcome news. We must encourage more women to regularly use public transport. She spoke about her girls travelling home in a taxi after a night out and seeing the information displayed on the sign that all drivers have in their cars. I am happy to take that idea forward when we meet transport providers at the summit and to see whether we can give the public some greater transparency when they are travelling.

Jim Fairlie spoke about his daughter and adapting his behaviour, such as texting to check in with her as she boarded a train and at the other end of her journey. It strikes me that, throughout the debate, we have heard powerful personal testimony about the extent of the problem. We all know where it exists in our public transport system. Mr Fairlie is right: men are central to changing and improving women's safety.

Siobhian Brown touched on the importance of the gap in the existing data, which Mr Simpson also spoke about a moment ago. There is underreporting of criminal and inappropriate behaviour. I hope that the research will start to plug that gap, but that will not be the end of the journey.

Neil Bibby: I have spoken to the minister before about the lack of data on bus service cancellations, which leave passengers, many of whom are women, stranded when buses do not turn up on time or do not turn up at all. We need to fully understand the extent of bus cancellations across Scotland. Will the minister commit to working with bus companies to find and publish that data?

Jenny Gilruth: I listened to Mr Bibby and I wrote to him in February on that very point. The traffic commissioner records all details of cancellations. I am not sure whether Mr Bibby is looking for something in addition to the information that is already published by the traffic commissioner. If he believes that there is something more that the Government can add—

Neil Bibby: The traffic commissioner talks about bus withdrawals—that is, withdrawals of whole services. The issue here is when buses are cancelled at short notice, leaving passengers stranded at bus stops. We need to understand how often that is happening daily.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members at the back of the chamber to desist from quiet chit chat.

Jenny Gilruth: Broadly, the member makes a fair point. I will certainly take it away as an action for the summit. I take the point about women's safety potentially being impacted by short-notice cancellations. It is something that we need to guard against.

Pam Duncan-Glancy highlighted the way in which women adapt their behaviour to feel safe. That impacts on how and when we engage with public transport, but—crucially—it can also put women off travelling on public transport at all. She also shared more powerful testimony of her experiences of being followed home by a man, while travelling home on her own from a night in town. I found that really compelling. I also found the number of colleagues sharing such experiences of travelling on public transport and the impact that it has had on their behaviour deeply depressing.

The research published today highlights the lived experience of women and girls using and working on public transport in Scotland. The division between women who use public transport and women who work in public transport was well made in the report.

This is the first time that the Scottish Government has undertaken specific research on the issue. I thank everyone for the contributions that we received. The report will serve as a key document now and in the future. It is also important that we now move forward with the planned summit.

More needs to be done to challenge the accepted position that coping strategies and mitigating behaviour are just a part of life for women and girls when doing something as simple as catching a bus or a train. The collective voice on that has to be louder. I am pleased that the debate has largely been consensual on that point.

I welcome the recommendations set out in the report. They range from practical actions that we can take to improve the passenger experience for women and girls on the transport network to shifting attitudes and behaviours to foster a more fundamental change in what is considered acceptable behaviour towards women and girls. We have heard that in the reflections of members in relation to the bystander approach. As we heard from Joe FitzPatrick, the Police Scotland "Don't be

that guy” campaign has been an exemplar and I would be keen to take it forward at the summit in relation to tackling male behaviour on public transport and improving women’s experiences more generally.

Broader issues include the consideration of alcohol consumption on public transport and greater visibility of staff on board and at stations. Calling out inappropriate male behaviour is more challenging, but it is not something that we should shy away from.

The motion asks that operators, police authorities and other stakeholders adopt the recommendations made in the report and commits the Scottish Government to working with stakeholders to make Scotland’s public transport safer for women and girls.

Although the publication of the report signifies the conclusion of the research that we have undertaken, it is not the end of the road. As I mentioned in my opening speech, last Friday, I met members of the Scottish Youth Parliament to discuss what role they can play in taking the work forward. The SYP carried out its own research with young people across Scotland back in 2018, the findings of which echo our own research findings that safety on public transport is a greater concern for women and girls in comparison with men.

More of those conversations are needed. I have already tasked officials with developing plans for a summit on the issue. The summit will bring together stakeholders, members of the Scottish Parliament and, most importantly, women and girls whose experiences we are going to improve, to discuss how, collectively, we put into practice the recommendations from the research.

As noted, only through collective action and a co-ordinated approach can we tackle the problems and concerns that we have discussed today. It is not an issue for just the Scottish Government to resolve, but we can and will work towards creating the conditions for a vastly improved experience for women and girls on our transport network.

I close the debate by stating my commitment as transport minister to tackling the issue. I hope that I can count on support from members and garner cross-party consensus to develop actions in response to the recommendations in the report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on women and girls’ safety on public transport.

Motion without Notice

16:59

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): It is time to move on to the next item of business. I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, to bring forward decision time.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders, Decision Time on Tuesday 7 March be taken at 4.59 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:59

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-08122.2, in the name of Graham Simpson, which seeks to amend S6M-08122, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on women's and girls' safety on public transport, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S6M-08122.1, in the name of Neil Bibby, which seeks to amend S6M-08122, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on women's and girls' safety on public transport, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:00

Meeting suspended.

17:03

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-08122.1, in the name of Neil Bibby, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Douglas Ross, who is online, has a point of order.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ross. I will make sure that that is recorded.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)

Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 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)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 51, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08122, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on women's and girls' safety on public transport, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That Parliament notes the publication of new Scottish Government research on Women and Girls' Safety on Public Transport; encourages operators, police authorities and other stakeholders to adopt the recommendations put forward by the report; regrets that women and girls are adapting their behaviour to try to feel safe when travelling or working on public transport; notes that wider systemic changes, supported by more practical interventions, are required; supports a commitment to engage stakeholders in the Scottish transport sector in a summit, which will progress the recommendations from this report, to ensure that Scotland's public transport is made safer for women and girls; notes the 10th anniversary of British Transport Police's (BTP) Text 61016 service in March 2023, and encourages people to use BTP's free Railway Guardian app, which helps the travelling public and rail staff to report crime to BTP and offers information on what to do if people see sexual harassment on trains or at stations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Imprisonment and Release (Effect on Families)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07522, in the name of Rona Mackay, on the cost to families of imprisonment and release. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges what it sees as the deepening financial and emotional hardship of families with a loved one in prison after a decade of austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic and the present cost of living crisis; notes the impact of what it considers this harsh reality in a new report by Families Outside, the only national charity that works solely on behalf of families in Scotland, including in the Strathkelvin and Bearsden constituency, who are affected by imprisonment; understands that one in three children in disadvantaged areas of the country are now living in poverty; believes that the cost of imprisonment is overwhelmingly borne by single women on low incomes, with single parents hit especially hard financially, along with the added adverse impact on mental health as a consequence of supporting someone in prison; notes the view that more support is needed for people on release from prison, which it considers would in turn help their families; highlights what it considers the role of prison in creating, sustaining and deepening poverty among children and families, and notes the view that more must be done to relieve what it sees as the financial and mental burden carried silently by families for too long, and to ensure that their voices are heard.

17:07

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The cost of living crisis is affecting everyone in some way or another, but for those with a loved one in prison, the crisis is disproportionately damaging. We know that when someone is sentenced to a prison term, the adverse ripple effect on families is immense. A cost of living crisis, coming on the back of a decade of austerity and the Covid pandemic, is really taking its toll.

The impact of that harsh reality is highlighted in a new report from Families Outside, an excellent third sector organisation that has been supporting families of prisoners in Scotland for many years. The report, "Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release", sets out starkly the situation in which families find themselves.

The consultant on the report, Dr Brieger Nugent, and the superb team at Families Outside, led by Professor Nancy Loucks, highlighted that one in six United Kingdom households—approximately 4.4 million—is in serious financial difficulties. I am convener of the cross-party group on women, families and justice and I take this opportunity to thank all the stakeholders who attend the group

regularly. We are fortunate in Scotland to have such a stellar third sector network of organisations and professionals who are concerned with the welfare of families and children affected by imprisonment.

The report reveals that 27 per cent of children are living in poverty. In areas such as Glasgow, the proportion rises to one in three. Single parents, predominantly women on low incomes, have been especially affected and the worries that parents face about putting food on the table and paying bills are described in the report as a “toxic brew” that has an adverse impact on mental health.

For the report, which was funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, Families Outside was able to hear directly from families affected by imprisonment, to understand the impact that that is having.

Currently, approximately 7,400 people are in prison, 96 per cent of whom are male. Of the 280 who are women, 102 are on remand and most have children. Remand is an especially uncertain, stressful and costly time for families—we should remember that people on remand have not been convicted of any crime.

Scotland has one of the highest remand populations in Europe: nearly 30 per cent of all people in prison are being held on remand. I hope that the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill, which is currently proceeding through Parliament, will alleviate the problem. There is no doubt that remand is an especially costly and stressful time for families, who spend, on average, £300 per month providing support. For some, the monthly cost rises to £1,000.

For families of people who have been sentenced, the costs are also stark. For families of people who served six years in prison, the median monthly spend on calls, travelling and visiting was £180—or £2,160 a year to support the person in prison.

Alison, a kinship carer in her 60s, is supporting her daughter, who is in prison on a short sentence. She said:

“I can’t keep doing this. All the stress around us all the time. I have all the responsibility. It is wearing me down ... It has affected my mental and physical health.”

The first two months after a person gets out of prison are the most stressful and costly, as the person is often without any money until their benefit claims are set up and housing arrangements are made. Post prison, they do not have the money that they need simply to exist. As is almost always the case, women are left to cope when a family member is in prison or has been released, and they do that by careful management of their already pressured budgets—skipping meals and not buying clothes, and visiting food

banks. They stop socialising or engaging in activities that cost money, which leads to a diminished lifestyle that, in turn, affects their mental health.

Of course, rising energy costs are of particular concern and add to the stress of eking out the family budget. Children miss out on activities. Many of the people who were interviewed for the report said that the concept of family time no longer existed as it had done before.

There is no doubt that the Scottish Government’s child payment of £25 per child, which is not available anywhere else in the UK, will be a lifeline to many families at such times. Many prisons have introduced excellent family units and early learning practitioners to help with family contact.

What more can be done? Families Outside, which offers amazing practical and emotional support to families, has made many commonsense recommendations. I have time to mention only a few of its asks: removal of charges for electronic payments into prison accounts; permission for families to hand in items rather than post them; free access to video calls; free allocation of minutes for phone calls; free basic hygiene products and packs in prison; and a reduction in the cost of the food that is available in visitor centres, which is often way too expensive.

Access to funds must be improved and financial support for families, such as benefit schemes and travel passes, should be available immediately on release from prison, to help the ex-prisoner back into society. People should always be placed in prisons close to their homes and an assessment of the potential impact on family contact should be required before a person is transferred to another prison.

Finally, we must reduce the societal stigma that is faced by families who are affected by imprisonment. There are a number of ways of doing that, including removal of the “HM Prison” stamp from post from prison establishments and implementation of measures to promote education and equalities through training on the impact of imprisonment, including as part of personal and social education classes in school.

We must provide alternatives to prison, particularly for women. Many women who are incarcerated are victims of domestic abuse and have addiction and mental health issues. We have the evidence: prison wrecks families. It creates, sustains and deepens poverty among children and families. Those children and families are guilty of no crime and we must do everything that we can to support them.

17:14

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am grateful to Rona Mackay for securing the debate and I welcome the findings of Families Outside's report on the cost to families of imprisonment and release. The cost can be devastating for families. We need to acknowledge concerns that prison has a role in creating, sustaining and deepening poverty for children and families, as well as the emotional impacts. It is a shocking statistic: around 27,000 children in Scotland are affected by a parent's imprisonment, which is more than those affected by divorce.

We must acknowledge the issue of remand. Scotland has a large remand population and in the majority of cases people are later released. We need to consider reforming the system while protecting public safety to ensure that families are not affected by that shock of someone ending up in prison temporarily before being acquitted. That is one reason why the Scottish Government's Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill is much needed and I look forward to seeing it progressed.

The report from Families Outside states that the families of people held in prison overwhelmingly live on very low incomes, often below the minimum income standard. At the same time as bearing the loss of an average household monthly income of £890, some families find themselves spending a considerable proportion of their disposable income on supporting loved ones in prison. That is being made worse for families by a decade of Tory austerity, which has now been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis.

The cost of support does not fall after release: the Families Outside report highlights that families face average costs of £300 a month in the first months after release. Rona Mackay's motion calls for more support for people leaving prison, which, in turn, would help their families. Research indicates that better mainstream opportunities for employment after release reduces the likelihood of reoffending, and some good work is being carried out in that regard.

I recently visited a Timpson store in East Kilbride and was pleased to learn about the Timpson Foundation charity. We all know Timpson as the business that fixes our shoes and cuts our keys, but the foundation's work could offer a blueprint for industry to offer opportunities to people. The Timpson Foundation specialises in recruiting from marginalised groups within society, including those who have been in prison. Approximately 10 per cent of Timpson's 6,500 employees are people who have criminal convictions, and the staff retention rate is around 75 per cent. By choosing not to judge people by their past, treating its recruits and employees with respect, and offering them autonomy through

training and employment, Timpson is actively addressing the stigma faced by people who have spent time in prison.

The Timpson Foundation goes further than simply employing people who have been in prison: it has invested in training academies that are situated in prisons across the UK. It also trains prisoners who are on release on temporary licence, helping people to enter employment after leaving prison.

I would be interested to know whether the Scottish Government can support businesses and the public sector to follow the Timpson Foundation's lead. I thank Families Outside for the work that it does to support families affected by imprisonment as well as for carrying out important research such as the report that we are talking about today.

17:18

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I am grateful to Rona Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber.

Scotland has a prison population of around 7,500, with around 25 per cent of prisoners being on remand. Many prisoners have families in our communities: partners, children and elderly relatives. In committing their crimes, they have knowingly put their loved ones at risk. There is financial hardship, stigma and mental burden, and those pressures are happening at a time of continent-wide economic downturn, a global energy crisis and a war that threatens to overspill raging in central Europe.

In recent years, our courts have seen marked increases in common assault, rape and attempted rape, as well as threatening or abusive behaviour. Scottish Government statistics show that the number of people who are in prison for sexual offences has doubled over the past decade, and the proportion of the prison population who are being held on remand has also increased substantially.

Our criminal justice system incarcerates people in order to protect the public at large, sometimes by breaking up crime syndicates. Removing perpetrators from society is a punishment for them, but prisons also provide support for rehabilitation, which is important in reducing reoffending.

Rehabilitation stands a much better chance of success if we are strict about eradicating drugs from the prison estate and we strengthen mental health support. It is estimated that 15 per cent of Scotland's prison population have a long-term mental health condition, with 17 per cent having a history of self-harm. The Scottish prisoner survey

found that 39 per cent of those convicted had used illegal drugs at some point while in prison.

We cannot let up on mental health support, which should also be provided to our huge remand prisoner population, who are not entitled to quite the same meaningful activity as convicted prisoners are. My colleague Jamie Greene has been very vocal on that problem and on the issue of self-harm and suicide among prisoners on remand. The mental health of partners and particularly of children who have been separated from offending family members is often stretched to the limit. That issue cannot be swept under the carpet.

However, the Scottish Government has failed to tackle countrywide backlogs in mental health support, just as it has failed to tackle our country's mounting number of drug and alcohol deaths. Teenagers in Scotland who are referred to child and adolescent mental health services with eating disorders, suspected attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism are being told to expect a two-year wait for CAMHS appointments. Parents with savings are being asked to go private at a cost of about £1,500 for an assessment, but that is simply not an option for many families, especially the families of prisoners.

As for prisoners and their family members who suffer with addictions, our proposed right to recovery bill should be at the heart of a health-led approach to combating addiction, which is often the source of offending. In the Scottish prisoner survey, 45 per cent of prisoners reported being under the influence of drugs at the time of their offence, while 40 per cent said that they were drunk. Everybody who seeks treatment for addiction should be able to access their preferred treatment option unless it is deemed to be harmful by a medical professional.

The focus of the motion for today's members' business debate is prisoners and their families, but there is one glaring omission: the victims of crime and their families. Victims also suffer financial stress as a result of theft, higher insurance premiums or the loss of paid work, and they experience anxiety and a loss of confidence. Many are victims of sexual or physical violence. Some victims feel forced to move away or change their job, but others simply do not have that option. Families who are affected by the imprisonment of criminals should be treated with fairness so that they can be supported to live healthy lives, free from stigma. That should apply to the families of prisoners as well as to the families of victims.

Over the coming three weeks, I am looking forward to hearing from the Scottish National Party leadership candidates on how they intend to reverse the alarming increase in sexual assaults and violent crime. Will they, for once, start to

emphasise the rights of victims? What are their plans to support all families who are impacted by offenders?

17:22

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The report from Families Outside rightly highlights the extraordinary strain that the imprisonment of a family member places on some of our poorest families in Scotland. As previous speakers have pointed out, all those strains have been greatly amplified by the current cost of living crisis, which has led to any flexibility in income being greatly reduced. It is right that the Parliament considers those impacts, so I thank Rona Mackay for securing the debate.

The report highlights the importance of the immediate post-release period. Families Outside found that, all too often, the burden of providing support falls solely on families, who have already endured so much during the period of imprisonment. The report highlights that families spend a huge part of their income on supporting prisoners while they are inside.

There is an urgent need for quality throughcare support for people leaving prison and their wider families to ensure as best we can that people do not return to prison and that the cycle of poverty is not further entrenched. Quality throughcare support is especially needed for those who are struggling with substance misuse, and my remarks will focus on that pressing issue.

In 2019, the Dundee drugs commission report raised the challenges that exist in accessing good-quality treatment both before and after release. In July 2022, the national Drug Deaths Taskforce report recommended nine actions relating to prisons. One of those calls on the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service to establish an integrated case management approach so that individuals receive support from before sentencing right through to after they are released from prison. That work is directly complementary to the conclusions of the report that we are discussing. I would appreciate it if the minister, in summing up, would give an update on that vital work.

Whenever we allow a newly released prisoner to emerge to chaos, poverty and hunger, we greatly increase the chances that they will soon be back in prison or that—this happens in far too many cases—their life will be lost within mere days of parole. We can then ask what the purpose of all of that was.

The report is clear that the first two months after someone leaves prison are especially challenging, particularly with regard to finances. I find the report particularly insightful and illuminating about the

fact that our devolved system of welfare was meant to allow for payments to be scheduled for release but that, in practice, that almost never happens. The door opens to poverty, and the path leads back to crime.

More must be done to allow those who have been released from prison to reintegrate into society and find work, and to prevent the cycle of poverty and the feelings of despair that can lead to further substance misuse. The cost of Government inaction in all of that is counted out in lives lost and weighed out in the pain of loved ones who are left behind.

According to the national drug-related deaths database report, in 2017, 10 per cent of all drug-related deaths in Scotland were those of people who had been released from prison in the previous six months. In 2018, the figure was 9.7 per cent. Data for the subsequent years has not yet been published. I find that entirely unacceptable. I continue to struggle to see how any policy approach can be properly assessed when we wait five years for data on who lives or dies. We can only speculate on the impact that the pandemic and the cost of living crisis may have had.

Scottish Labour welcomes “Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release”, and we look forward to hearing what action the Government will take to address the problems that it has correctly diagnosed.

17:26

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Rona Mackay on bringing the debate to the chamber and on her continued work to promote a fair and progressive approach to prison policy and to Scotland’s justice system, and I thank the Families Outside charity for all the work that it does to support families who are impacted by imprisonment.

I will touch on the Families Outside report and the work of Prisoners Abroad, which is a charity that supports the families of people from the UK who are serving sentences in other countries.

The evidence is clear that the cost to families of imprisonment is stark. I will give a few key statistics relating to families in Scotland. For prisoners who are held on remand, the average distance travelled per visit by families was 74 miles and the cost was £70 a month. Some £60 per month was spent on food snacks on visits, £100 was put into the personal account, and £55 was spent on other costs.

Rona Mackay mentioned the food costs on visits. It costs £1 to purchase a Galaxy chocolate bar from the vending machine in the Parliament, for example, but it costs £2.50 for the same

chocolate bar in Polmont, and the profits go directly to the private vending machine company. Why are the prices in the Parliament and prisons so different? I was interested to find out that fact. Are the prices so different simply because there is a captive audience in prison? Is that simply for pure profit?

If a person is sentenced, the costs increase significantly compared with the remand costs. Rona Mackay outlined some of those costs. If a person was serving six years in prison—that was the average that was looked at—the family travelled twice a month to visit and the average distance was 106 miles for a return journey. That cost £77 a month for travel, £36 for supplemental snacks, £88 into the personal account, and £75 for other costs. The costs are therefore pretty significant. The median total spent per month was £180, or around a third of the household income, and £2,160 a year was spent supporting the person in prison. I know that Rona Mackay has already mentioned that, but it is worth reiterating. The financial costs are significant. Of course, we also need to reflect on the emotional impacts of having a family member in prison.

There are clear ways to improve things. Families Outside reported that it would like toiletries, prison clothes and footwear to be free, telephone calls and canteen prices to be cheaper, and prisoner wages to be improved for the in-person work that is carried out. That would allow people in prison to be more self-sufficient and not totally reliant on their families, many of whom are already impacted by increased costs and, of course, the cost of living crisis. As the Scottish Government continues to make Scotland’s justice system a more progressive system that focuses on prevention, education and rehabilitation, I ask the minister to seriously consider those recommendations and to outline the Scottish Government’s position on them.

Finally, I turn to families who have family members in prison abroad. There are 750 people from the UK in prison abroad, 196 of whom are being held in the United States in federal or state prisons. The cost to families of visiting family members abroad—this applies to visits to family members in prison in the US, in particular—is in excess of £2,500 per visit. That includes air fare, insurance, car hire, accommodation and food, as well as the cost of paying for additional snacks, toiletries and use of the canteen. Therefore, the same issues of additional cost that we are seeing in Scotland are reflected in the USA.

Prisoners Abroad, the UK-wide charity that supports families of prisoners abroad, has called on the UK Foreign Office to consider the feasibility of creating a grant scheme that would allow family members to visit family in prisons abroad. I ask the

minister whether such a scheme could be considered or whether she could raise the issue with the UK Government, as we know how vital it is for the welfare of families and for people in prison to maintain family contact.

There are many complex issues associated with prisoners and families; I have highlighted only a few. I look forward to the minister's response.

17:31

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Rona Mackay for bringing this extremely important debate to Parliament and, if I may say so, for making one of the most thoughtful opening speeches in a members' business debate that I have heard for a very long time. It is right that we reflect on the human cost of imprisonment, the anguish and the hardship of families outside, and the impact not only on children but on parents, aunties, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters and the wider family network. Their voices must be listened to and heard—all those worlds turned upside down, the devastating toll that it can take.

I want to focus on the toll that one family has faced: the ultimate toll. I speak of the family of Allan Marshall. Anyone who has met Allan Marshall's loving family, as I have been privileged to do, or has witnessed from afar the denial of justice to them, will welcome the Lord Advocate's announcement just this morning that, on her instruction, his death in custody back in 2015 will at last be the subject of a police investigation. That investigation might lead to the prosecution of the Scottish Prison Service for corporate homicide.

Of course, we cannot prejudge the outcome—there is a live police inquiry—but what we do know is this: Allan Marshall was just 30 years old. He had two young children: a son and a daughter. He was in Saughton prison, not convicted but on remand—on remand for breach of the peace and for non-payment of fines. We know as well that 13 prison officers held him down or—to use the jargon—restrained and controlled him. They did it with such force that a fatal accident inquiry concluded that his death was “entirely preventable”.

That is why today's decision by the Lord Advocate is welcome. It is a completely unprecedented move that may end up with the Scottish Prison Service being held corporately responsible, but it begs the question whether it was right that prison officers who were described by the fatal accident inquiry sheriff as “mutually dishonest” should have been granted immunity in the first place.

There are other questions that arise from this case that have a wider resonance in tonight's debate, such as why the Scottish Prison Service

believed that it could just ignore three of the 13 recommendations of the fatal accident inquiry, including the recommendation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Leonard, I do not wish to be unduly restrictive, but you will realise that we have a motion in front of us, and I am sure that, as important as the issues that you have raised are, you would wish to get back to the details of the motion. Thank you.

Richard Leonard: Presiding Officer, Rona Mackay spoke about paying the price. This is one family's story of a prisoner held on remand.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Indeed, and I accept that, which is why I have given you latitude. However, I think that focusing on the family that you referred to would perhaps be of more relevance now. You are in your last minute.

Richard Leonard: Okay. Let me finish with two final points, if I may, Presiding Officer. One of the other questions that arise is: why was the then Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Humza Yousaf, prepared to sanction the Scottish Prison Service and take out an interdict to censor the free press and stop the *Sunday Mail* reaching the newsstands, because it is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Leonard, I have made it quite clear that members need to address the motion. If you wish to bring a different debate at a different time, that is absolutely up to you, but we are dealing with this debate. Please bring your speech back to the family of the individual that you are referring to. Thank you.

Richard Leonard: Tonight we consider the price paid by all families with loved ones in prison and tonight Allan Marshall's family believe that they are one step closer in their fight for justice. Our thoughts are with them all. Our fight for justice and for a better world than this carries on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Elena Whitham, to respond to the debate. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry, I do not call the minister. I am off my stride. I call Audrey Nicoll.

17:36

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. It has been a long day.

I am very grateful to Rona Mackay for bringing to the chamber this debate on an issue about which I know that she is passionate, as demonstrated by her convenership of the cross-party group on women, families and justice and of the cross-party group on men's violence against women and children.

As we have heard, Families Outside is for many a lifeline organisation that supports families to

navigate the challenges that arise when a loved one is serving a prison sentence. I commend the detailed research and analysis set out in its report “Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release”, which outlines the ripple effect of financial, emotional, mental and physical harm that is experienced by families and, in particular, single women on low incomes who are affected by imprisonment.

I would like to focus on release, which is an issue that Rona Mackay and Michael Marra referenced in their contributions and which has been considered recently by the Criminal Justice Committee in its work on the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill, which seeks to give greater focus to rehabilitation and the reintegration of individuals leaving custody.

In its report, Families Outside narrated the challenges of the financial costs of someone leaving prison, which can be anything from £30 to £1,000 a month. Women who were interviewed for the study felt very much left to get on with it. They described the first two months following release as the most stressful and costly, as money was often short due to benefits not yet being in place. Meeting someone and taking them home from prison can incur significant cost. One woman had to travel the day before and reside in a hotel overnight before travelling home, which cost around a quarter of her monthly budget. Women spoke of the costs of basic items, such as a kettle, a television and curtains, when a family member moves into new accommodation after having lost their previous home.

Two interviewees were unaware of the grants available within the Scottish welfare fund. One interviewee spoke of the cost of protecting a friend returning to the area where she was likely to resume drug use, and of covering the costs of clothing, food and keeping on the heating during the day until her benefits were set up. One mother spoke of the pressure of having to take time off work to settle her son in his flat. That is by no means an unusual scenario.

During its scrutiny of the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill, the Criminal Justice Committee heard from Professor Fergus McNeill, who referred to research that had been undertaken by the University of Glasgow on post-prison integration and the need to address key facets, including housing, employment, skills development, social integration and political participation. The conclusions that Families Outside set out in its report add to that analysis. They recognise the added impact of austerity, service cuts, the pandemic, and now the cost of living on families who are affected by prison.

The report sets out ideas for development around release, including reinstating throughcare,

facilitating the making of benefits claims, and engagement with support services well in advance of release. Indeed, on our recent visit to HMP Grampian, the governor, Mike Hebden, reflected that planning for release should begin on the day on which someone enters prison.

The ideas that Families Outside set out align with much of the evidence that the Criminal Justice Committee heard. I very much hope that those will inform a robust and meaningful response from the Scottish Government, and that they will lead to positive change in policy and practice, so that release from prison is no longer a burden, but is a starting point for all families in Scotland.

Once again, I extend my thanks to Rona Mackay for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now call the minister, Elena Whitham, to respond to the debate.

17:41

The Minister for Community Safety (Elena Whitham): I, too, thank Rona Mackay for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

The impact of imprisonment on families is, as Families Outside’s report makes clear, significant and often unseen. That makes it all the more essential that the issues are openly discussed and debated. This is not someone else’s problem; we all have a responsibility to listen to those families and to take action.

I take the opportunity to acknowledge, as others have done, the vital work that Families Outside does. I know that it is a lifeline for many families who are affected by imprisonment.

Twenty years ago, when I worked to support young people at risk of homelessness—many of whom faced addiction issues and had experience of care and childhood trauma—it often felt like I was on my own trying to hold everything together when one of my young folk was in prison. It is extremely exhausting for everyone, not least their families.

The report covers a number of extremely important issues. I cannot do all of them justice in the time that I have, so I will focus on some key points.

The report emphasises the negative impact of imprisonment and calls for the use of prison to be truly a last resort. This Government has been clear that, although prison will always be necessary for those who pose a risk of serious harm, we need to look again at how custody is used in a modern and progressive Scotland. There is no reason why we

should have the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe. We know that short periods of imprisonment, including on remand, do not address the underlying causes of offending or support rehabilitation.

It is important to take a second to understand that many people who are in prison are often victims of criminal acts so, although they may be offenders, they are indeed victims. We also know that many people who are in contact with the justice system have experienced multiple and severe disadvantage. We should not use imprisonment to address those wider societal harms.

As the report highlights, the impact on the children and families of people in custody can be devastating and wide ranging. That is why we are taking action to shift the balance towards greater use of community-based interventions, which we know are more effective than short-term imprisonment in reducing reoffending. That includes continued investment in community justice services.

In 2023-24, the Scottish Government will invest a total of £134 million in community justice services. That includes £123 million to local authorities to support the delivery of community-based sentences and interventions, such as alternatives to remand. That is not soft justice by any means. It can be transformative justice at the heart of our communities.

We have also introduced legislation. Members have referenced the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill, which will shortly be debated in the chamber at stage 1. That bill focuses on two of the key issues that are raised in the report: the impact of remand and improving support for people leaving prison.

Remand removes people from their families, homes, jobs and communities. We must remember that they are mostly people who have been accused of an offence and have not been convicted of any crime. The bill seeks to refocus how remand is used so that custody is reserved for those who pose a risk to public safety or to the delivery of justice.

The bill also seeks to improve the pre-release planning and support that is provided for people leaving prison to enable their successful reintegration. We know that holistic, well-planned support for people leaving prison can reduce their risk of reoffending and improve their outcomes. The bill's provisions are intended to support that.

That is alongside on-going investment in national third sector throughcare services. We know that throughcare is hugely important—that has been referred to. We need to provide one-to-one support for people who are leaving prison.

That investment currently totals £3.7 million a year. I know first hand, from my work in homelessness services, how crucial support is at the time when someone is liberated. Our third sector partners provide that critical lifeline, and we must strive to ensure that supports are in place in advance of people leaving prison. That is why it is important to embed the sustainable housing on release for everyone—SHORE—standards across all areas, via local authorities' rapid rehousing transition plans.

The report also highlights the importance of specific financial and emotional support for families of people in prison. That includes the critical role that prison visitor centres play. The Scottish Government has provided funding—which is currently up to £800,000 a year—since 2016-17 to support the development of PVCs across Scotland. I am delighted that there are now 12 of those centres. We remain committed to maintaining funding for prison visitor centres in 2023-24.

I take the opportunity to say a huge well done to Recovery Enterprises Scotland in East Ayrshire, which has provided the PVC service at HMP Kilmarnock since January. I know the team personally, and I know how committed it is to supporting folk and their families during difficult times.

As highlighted in the report, the Scottish welfare fund can be an essential source of support. The fund, which was established in 2013, is administered by local authorities. It provides two forms of discretionary awards: a crisis grant and a community care grant. The community care grants can be awarded to prisoners who are leaving prison, to help them to establish or maintain a settled home in the community. That is invaluable support, especially when someone's previous tenancy has been lost and their belongings have been cleared. The grants can also be provided to family members, to assist in the care of an individual who is on temporary release from prison.

We must also recognise the gendered nature of supporting a family member in prison, especially during a cost of living crisis. Women bear the cost, and income maximisation is vital. Therefore, we must support those families to ensure that they receive all the support that they can get.

I highlight the work of the Scottish Prison Service in supporting family contact and mitigating the impact of the cost of living crisis for prisoners and their families. That includes trying to keep prices in the prison canteens at a minimum and reviewing the application of the prisoner wage policy. Although the vending machines in prisons are a matter for the SPS, I hope that it heard Emma Harper's call to ensure that pricing is

reasonable. The example that she gave was quite stark.

The SPS is also committed to making visits as family friendly as possible. The approach might look different in each establishment, but that includes reviewing visiting timetables in light of family feedback, having family days, and supporting virtual visits where appropriate. The SPS is currently revising its family strategy, informed by active consultation with prisoners and their families. That strategy aims to support and encourage people in the SPS's care to play an active role in building strong and stable families.

I will take a second to talk about the stark statistic that Collette Stevenson told us about earlier. The number of children who are experiencing the trauma of having a family member in prison is actually higher than the number of children who are in families in which there is divorce. I reassure Collette Stevenson that the Scottish Government and the SPS are actively working with Timpson and other employers to figure out how we can best support them to give people the opportunity to thrive.

I assure Michael Marra that we have established a cross-portfolio ministerial working group to explore the urgent issues that he brought to the chamber. However, I would be really happy to meet him on a one-to-one basis to discuss those issues, because his points were really important.

In response to Richard Leonard, I take the opportunity to recognise Allan Marshall's family and their stoic and steadfast seeking of justice for him. However, as members will understand, I cannot comment any further at the moment, due to the on-going issues at hand.

I say to everybody out there who has a family member in prison that we have heard your voices loud and clear through the report.

Meeting closed at 17:48.

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