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Thursday 27 April 2023

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 27 April 2023

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many questions as possible, we must have short and succinct questions and answers to match.

Unpaid Trial Shifts

1. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether businesses that make use of unpaid trial shifts should be disqualified from receiving public sector grants and procurement contracts. (S6O-02156)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation and Trade (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government opposes the use of unpaid work trials. If a trial period is offered, it should be paid, whether it leads to permanent employment or not.

Although employment law powers are reserved to Westminster, we are using all levers at our disposal to promote fair work and to tackle worker exploitation, including measures adopted through our public spend. Our fair work first approach asks employers who are in receipt of public sector grants, contracts or other funding to commit to adopting fair work criteria, including no inappropriate use of zero-hours contracts, and payment of the real living wage.

We are now strengthening our conditionality approach by requiring recipients of public sector grants awarded on or after 1 July 2023 to pay all employees at least the real living wage and to provide appropriate channels for hearing effective workers' voices.

Ross Greer: I welcome the minister's opposition to unpaid trial shifts. I am proud to have worked with the Scottish Government on the fair work section of the Bute house agreement, which delivered the real living wage conditionality.

Employment law powers might be reserved to Westminster for now, and our options here are limited, but the living wage conditionality for grants and contracts demonstrates that we can go a bit further. Given the Scottish Government's robust opposition to the injustice of unpaid trial shifts, will it consider adding a new fair work condition that would ban companies that engage in such

exploitation from accessing public sector grants and contracts in Scotland?

Richard Lochhead: Ross Greer highlights an important issue. We were very disappointed when the Conservatives in the House of Commons talked out attempts by Stuart McDonald MP to introduce a private member's bill to ban such practices.

In Scotland, we are determined to go as far as we can within our current powers to tackle the most significant issues in the labour market and to drive fair work practices by using the powers that we have, as set out in the Bute house agreement, which Ross Greer referred to. I say to him that we will continue to examine how we can strengthen our approach to conditionality. I will certainly ask my officials to consider the issues that he has raised today, including by highlighting our opposition to unpaid trial shifts as an example of good practice, in any future update of our fair work first guidance.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Payment of the real living wage is a key tool in tackling poverty. I am glad to recognise Highlands and Islands Enterprise as the first of our agencies to make all grant awards contingent on payment of the real living wage. That is also now a requirement for all businesses located in Scotland's green ports. When will the requirement be rolled out to other agencies, as is called for in our national strategy for economic transformation?

Richard Lochhead: I thank Ivan McKee for raising the importance of the real living wage in tackling poverty and low pay in Scotland. Some 91 per cent of Scots are now paid the real living wage, which is the highest rate across the United Kingdom. We are working alongside our enterprise and skills agencies to develop our stronger approach to conditionality. From 1 July this year, as will be the case with grants provided by the Scottish Government, public sector grants issued by such agencies will require payment of at least the real living wage and provision of appropriate channels for hearing effective workers' voices. I join Mr McKee in congratulating HIE for being ahead of the game and proactive on the issue.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The guidance on fair work first does not make trade union recognition a requirement for bidders; instead, it permits alternative arrangements. It also stipulates that there should be

"no inappropriate use of zero hours contracts"

instead of ruling them out completely. Will the Scottish Government commit to addressing those discrepancies?

Richard Lochhead: I assure the member that we are committed to addressing the discrepancies

by arguing for more powers for the Scottish Parliament over employment law in Scotland, which is the best way to strengthen the guidance and the law in this country. We do not have the powers to go much further than the position that we have outlined in our current guidance, according to which we have to demonstrate proportionality in our regulations.

Katy Clark: That is not very far.

Richard Lochhead: I think that we have gone very far in Scotland. Since 2019, more than £4 billion of public sector investment has been subject to fair work first criteria, which has made a real difference to tens of thousands of workers across this country.

Inequality (Fiscal Measures)

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what additional fiscal measures it will put in place to reduce inequality in Scotland. (S6O-02157)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Tackling poverty and protecting people from harm is one of the three critical and interdependent missions for the Scottish Government, and it is only with the full fiscal powers of a normal independent nation that ministers can use all the levers that other Governments have to tackle inequalities. However, our income tax policy decisions for 2023-24 are estimated to add £519 million to the budget, ensuring that we make the best use of our limited tax powers. We have allocated almost £3 billion this year to supporting policies that tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible during the on-going cost of living crisis.

Richard Leonard: On the morning that he was elected leader of the Scottish National Party, under a headline that said, "I'll hammer the rich", the First Minister declared himself to be a socialist. Can the cabinet secretary tell us whether the First Minister's new-found socialism will extend to a proposal for a wealth tax to be brought to Parliament before the end of the year—yes or no?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With the greatest respect, the issue is more complex than a yes or no answer, so I will set out the principled position of the Government.

We have always prioritised a fair and progressive approach to income tax policy. As I said in my original answer, that was demonstrated by the decisions that were taken in the past budget, which built on the progressivity that we have within the powers that we have. The recent work for the Institute for Fiscal Studies, for example, has shown that our progressive attitude has enabled more support to be delivered to less well-off households.

Of course, we will consider—and the First Minister has made clear that he will consider—further measures that we can introduce. I look forward to the constructive discussions that we can have with Scottish Labour on that, not just at the anti-poverty summit, but as we move forward with our deliberations on taxation policies ahead of the next budget.

Highly Protected Marine Areas (Engagement with Communities)

3. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken, in addition to its public consultation, to engage with the fishing industry and the coastal communities that could be affected by highly protected marine areas. (S6O-02158)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): It has always been our intention to develop these ambitious proposals hand in hand with those who are impacted by them. The member asked about action aside from the consultation. Prior to the consultation, we met with more than 20 stakeholder groups representing a wide range of marine industries and users. Those meetings included fisheries organisations such as the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation; aquaculture groups such as Salmon Scotland; environmental non-governmental organisations such as Scottish Environment LINK; community representatives such as Coastal Communities Network; and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Feedback from those meetings fed directly into our consultation. Since then, from February to April, we have run 10 online information sessions to help anyone wishing to provide a response to the consultation. We have also provided additional targeted events with regional fishing industry groups such as the Western Isles Fishermen's Association and the north east whitefish forum, and I will meet with coastal and island MSPs next week.

Karen Adam: I thank the cabinet secretary for that comprehensive answer. In recent weeks, I have spoken to a number of fishers across my constituency, who have expressed their concerns around highly protected marine areas. I welcome the First Minister's commitment last week not to impose on any community a policy to which it is vehemently opposed. Will the cabinet secretary reassure the fishers whom I spoke to and make the same commitment?

Màiri McAllan: I am happy to reiterate the First Minister's commitment. I firmly believe that you do not impose policies in communities—you work hand-in-hand with them to make those policies

work. I want our island and coastal communities to help to shape the creation of those areas, which is why we chose to consult so fully and so early in the process.

As I have committed to from the very beginning, site selection will be a participatory process, with meaningful community engagement at every stage.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The fishing industry and the communities built around it have been crystal clear in their opposition to this Government's HPMAs proposals, and we stand squarely behind them. However, their concerns have been cast aside by this Government time and time again. Is the dismissal of those concerns based on any sort of economic impact assessment that the Government has undertaken, or is the Government simply blind to the damage that the policy could do?

Màiri McAllan: It is astonishing that I can read out the level of consultation that has been undertaken so far and point to a full consultation right at the beginning of the process yet still be accused of what the member was narrating.

The truth of the matter is that, despite progress in improving the state of our marine environment, evidence tells us that we need to do more. The Scottish marine assessment of 2020 showed that a number of marine species were in decline, and the most recent United Kingdom marine assessment showed that, across the UK, good environmental status was not being achieved.

However, as I have said right from the beginning of this process, we recognise the strength of feeling on this and we are committed to working hand in hand with communities to make this policy work right around the country.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Does the Scottish Government recognise that the lack of detail for communities up and down Scotland's coastline whose livelihoods depend on the sea has caused distress and concern? When will the cabinet secretary visit Shetland to meet with the fishing and aquaculture sectors?

Màiri McAllan: I have narrated some of the interaction that we have already had with the fishing and aquaculture sectors. I have personally committed to spending some time in the summer meeting communities with particular views on the issue, and I would be happy to speak with Ms Wishart on that point. However, what I do not accept is the accusation that consulting early has been problematic. We could have cherry picked areas to pilot, as other Governments have done, but I did not think that that was right. I wanted meaningful engagement right from the beginning.

Sunday Train Services (West Central Scotland)

4. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with ScotRail regarding improving Sunday train services in west central Scotland. (S6O-02159)

The Minister for Transport (Kevin Stewart): Transport Scotland regularly engages with Scottish Rail Holdings on improving ScotRail timetables, including Sunday services in the west of Scotland and beyond. Delivering a Sunday timetable has traditionally relied on overtime working. However, as part of the recent ScotRail pay deal, there is an agreement to bring Sundays into the working week within the next five years. That should end the current reliance on overtime for Sundays and present an opportunity to enhance Sunday services, not only in the west of Scotland but across the ScotRail network. In the meantime, we continue to improve the timetable, where possible.

Pauline McNeill: I declare my interest as a member of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers.

Does the minister agree that it is critically important to improve Sunday services across Scotland in order to give people more choices in public transport? Even in central Scotland, services can be as infrequent as one every two hours. As the minister said, it is a six-day service that is run on the seventh day—Sunday—entirely by the workforce volunteers, who are paid overtime.

Will the minister commit to rebuilding trust with all four rail unions, which is necessary in order for them to enter into discussions about the other conditions that would be necessary? Further, does the minister accept that those other conditions include investment in the new staff who would be required to improve services on Sundays for the public?

Kevin Stewart: Obviously, I want to have a good relationship with all the trade unions that are involved in our rail network. I want to take a collaborative approach to all that we do, and, as I outlined in my initial answer, I think that we have already seen that change.

At the moment, ScotRail operates around about half the number of services on a Sunday that it does on a weekday. The Glasgow and west of Scotland area is comparatively well served, with all suburban and urban routes running a minimum of one train per hour. However, that is a reduction from the two trains per hour that operate on most services during the week.

We will move forward on this issue, and I assure Pauline McNeill and the chamber that I will do

everything possible to co-operate and be collaborative with trade union colleagues.

NHS Fife (Meetings)

5. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with NHS Fife and what was discussed. (S6O-02160)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet with representatives of all health boards, including NHS Fife, to discuss matters of importance to local people.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer and welcome him to his new post.

I have raised consistently the issue of a new medical centre for Lochgelly, and, indeed, I have written again to the cabinet secretary just this week to report that the current premises are dilapidated and unfit for purpose. Will the cabinet secretary therefore agree to visit the medical centre in Lochgelly with me to see for himself the awful conditions that staff and patients face? Further, will he agree to review the decision not to make that project the priority that it should be?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the local member's long-standing interest in the replacement of the Lochgelly medical centre, and I support the replacement of the centre. Annabelle Ewing will be aware that that is one of the areas of priority for health capital funding. However, as things stand, the capital budget is already fully committed. It has also been impacted by a reduction in our capital allocation by the United Kingdom Government and the significant level of construction inflation that projects face. That has all resulted in a lack of flexibility within our existing capital funding arrangements, which is having an impact on projects such as the replacement of the Lochgelly medical centre. However, I hear Annabelle Ewing's concerns about the particular issue and her invitation to visit the facility, and I would be more than happy to undertake that visit with her.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Vacancies)

6. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to tackle the vacancies in child and adolescent mental health services. (S6O-02161)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government remains committed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland's population and to ensuring that everyone receives the best possible care and support from our health and care services.

Delivering that can be achieved only with the right workforce capacity and capability. We have invested heavily in staffing in recent years, which is why the CAMHS workforce has more than doubled under the Government.

Responsibility for the recruitment of CAMHS staff lies with national health service boards. In "NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026", the Scottish Government committed to providing sufficient funding for around 320 additional staff in CAMHS over the next five years, with the potential to increase capacity for CAMHS cases by over 10,000.

Meghan Gallacher: Since December last year, 190 vacancies have been listed. Eighty-nine of those were left unfilled for three months or longer. Public Health Scotland figures that were published last month showed that 70.1 per cent of children were seen by CAMHS within 18 weeks of referral. That is almost 20 per cent below the Scottish Government's own target.

Those figures are unacceptable. When will the Scottish National Party Government make child and adolescent mental health services a priority? How will it attract people into a profession that is stretched to breaking point?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the concerns that Meghan Gallacher has raised and assure her that child mental health services are a priority. To underscore that fact, we have more than doubled the CAMHS workforce in the Government's time in office. I mentioned that we are in the process of recruiting around 320 additional staff in CAMHS over a five-year period, for example. We are already at some 67 per cent progress on that recruitment programme.

We want to continue to see that workforce increase, which is why we are putting in additional investment. Meghan Gallacher will be aware that we are now seeing more people through the CAMHS network than we have ever seen before. We want to ensure that children get the right services in their local communities in the way that best meets their mental health needs. That is why we are continuing to invest in CAMHS.

Neurology Physiotherapy (Waiting Times)

7. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the average waiting time is for neurology patients who are seeking an appointment with a physiotherapist. (S6O-02162)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Information on physiotherapy waits for people with neurology conditions is not held centrally by the Scottish Government. However, Paul Sweeney may be interested in some of the work that we are taking

forward to support those with neurology conditions.

In 2019, we published “Neurological Care and Support in Scotland: A Framework for Action 2020-2025”, which aims to ensure that everyone with a neurological condition can access the care and support that they need. The aims include improving the provision of co-ordinated health and social care, developing sustainable workforce models and ensuring high standards of person-centred care.

Since October 2020, we have also invested £2.1 million with national health service boards and partner organisations to fund innovative projects to achieve better outcomes for people living with neurological conditions.

Paul Sweeney: The minister will be aware that this week is multiple sclerosis awareness week. I commend the work of the MS specialist physio service that is based at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, which works hard to support neurology patients across NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. However, research by the MS Society has found that there is extreme pressure on physiotherapy services in Glasgow, with patients waiting for an average of 17 weeks for an appointment and 107 of 931 full-time-equivalent physio posts lying vacant. Will the minister please set out how she plans to fill those vacancies and cut the backlog of physiotherapy appointments for neurology patients so that they can access that vital support?

Jenni Minto: I thank Paul Sweeney for his question and join him in acknowledging the importance of this week being MS awareness week, with the hashtag #MSMakesMe. We want everyone who is waiting for physiotherapy, including those with a neurological condition, to be seen as soon as possible, and NHS boards are working extremely hard during challenging times to support that.

The most recent statistics show that the number of patients seen in the quarter to December 2022 was at the highest level since March 2020 and last year over 1.2 million out-patients were seen, an increase of 8 per cent since 2021, which demonstrates the progress that we are making. I recognise that it is extremely challenging and I am determined to work with health boards to ensure that we improve the current situation, as well as with third sector groups, which are also providing very worthwhile support to MS sufferers.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes general questions. Before we move on to First Minister’s question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery His Excellency José Alberto Briz Gutiérrez, Ambassador of Guatemala. [Applause.]

First Minister’s Question Time

12:01

Cost of Ferries

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This morning, Scotland’s Auditor General, Stephen Boyle, said this to the Parliament’s Public Audit Committee about the £300 million that the Scottish National Party estimates it will cost to build two ferries. The Auditor General said:

“it would be folly to suggest that that is a reliable”

figure for what

“will be spent to deliver the vessels at this stage”.

Will the First Minister continue to defend his Government’s estimate for those ferries, or does he agree with the Auditor General that that would be folly?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I was listening to the committee’s evidence this morning, and I will read the rest of the evidence later today. Douglas Ross will be aware that the figure that was provided to the Public Audit Committee on 22 December last year from the chief executive officer of Ferguson Marine was made up of a number of different factors. The Scottish Government is now reviewing those projections based on independent advice. That process of due diligence—which is important in any procurement programme of this size and scale but is even more important in the case of Ferguson Marine, given the cost overruns—will conclude within the next few weeks.

Regardless of that, I repeat what has been said before when this question has, rightly, been raised by members of the Opposition. It is unacceptable that we have had these cost overruns and delays to vessels 801 and 802. Once again, as First Minister—[*Interruption.*]—I apologise to island communities for those cost overruns and delays. However, we are focused on getting the vessels completed so that our island communities can see the benefit of them.

Douglas Ross: I think that even the microphone operator gave up on that answer and switched off the First Minister’s microphone because there was absolutely nothing in it.

Only a party that bought a camper van for £100,000 could think that paying hundreds of millions of pounds for two massively delayed ferries is a good deal. We all know, from the scandal engulfing the SNP, that it really struggles with finances, but this is getting ridiculous. Will the First Minister stop the secrecy and be honest for a change? How much higher is the real cost to taxpayers going to be to deliver the two ferries?

The First Minister: I am not sure that I will take too many lessons on financial literacy from the party of Kwasi Kwarteng and Liz Truss.

However, on the important issue that Douglas Ross is absolutely right to raise in the chamber, I have said that a process of due diligence is, rightly, under way. It will conclude in the next few weeks, and we will, of course, make known the result of that process. I will never shy away from saying that the cost overruns and delays in relation to the two vessels are, of course, unacceptable. To the island communities that are, frankly, frustrated and angry at the cost overruns and delays, I say that I completely accept their frustration and anger.

Therefore, we will continue to invest in Ferguson Marine and do what we can to get the vessels ready, in line with the updated timescales, but the process of due diligence is important and is due to be completed in the next few weeks.

Douglas Ross: The Auditor General knows that the £300 million figure is folly, but it seems that the First Minister does not. He does not have a clue what the actual cost will be for taxpayers in Scotland. So far, the bill for the vessels is already three times more than what was stated in the original contract—but it gets worse.

The First Minister said that he was listening to the evidence this morning, so he will have heard the Auditor General reveal that the bonus system for highly paid executives at Ferguson Marine is still in place. The two ferries are not fit to sail, costs keep spiralling out of control and islanders continue to be left without vital lifeline services. First Minister, what on earth could those bonuses possibly be for?

The First Minister: I will not disagree with Douglas Ross, nor with the Auditor General, who made it clear in the section 22 report that was published earlier this year that those bonuses should not have been paid. I agree.

Douglas Ross: So, do something about it!

The First Minister: If Douglas Ross will listen, I will genuinely give him an answer to the question that he is absolutely right to raise. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Members! We will hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The former Deputy First Minister made his anger clear. We—and I—share that anger at the fact that bonuses have been paid. Those bonuses relate to a decision that was made by Ferguson Marine's remuneration committee, without consultation with the Government, in November 2022. I asked for those bonuses not to be paid, but the advice that has come back is that they are a contractual obligation. With regard to any future discussion

about or consideration of bonuses, I have made it clear that bonuses should not be paid in relation to vessels 801 and 802. The chair of Ferguson Marine will take forward that work. It is my expectation and the Government's expectation—the chair of Ferguson Marine knows this very well—that there should not be bonuses in the current financial year, 2023-24, in relation to vessels 801 and 802.

Douglas Ross: On every front, the SNP is engulfed in scandal, secrecy and a shameful waste of money. *[Interruption.]* SNP members are groaning about what I have said about a waste of money when the First Minister has just accepted how much this will cost taxpayers.

This week, the SNP's ex-treasurer, Colin Beattie, said, "It wasn't me, guv," when he was asked about the notorious camper van, before abruptly changing his mind. Humza Yousaf has said that he is not sure whether Scottish Government ministers are using burner phones. That is what the First Minister said. This is all starting to look like an episode of "Line of Duty", but it is also a massive distraction that is preventing the SNP from getting on and delivering vital ferry services to island communities.

The problem for the First Minister is that he has been personally involved in the ferry scandal from the very beginning. He was at the SNP conference in 2015, beaming beside the disgraced Derek Mackay when the contract was announced. In 2016, he was behind Nicola Sturgeon, hoping that, one day, he would be the First Minister to launch a ship with painted-on windows. He was the transport minister who inspected the yard for years. We found this picture of the First Minister visiting one of the yards when he was transport minister. He was there that day to mark the halfway point in the building of the ferries. The only problem for Humza Yousaf is that this picture—taken, according to him, at the halfway point—was taken in December 2016. That was more than six years ago. First Minister, that was not the halfway point; it was not even the start of this sorry saga. How is the First Minister, who got us into this mess, going to fix it?

The Presiding Officer: Before the First Minister responds, I remind members that we do not use props in the chamber.

The First Minister: That is a sign of Douglas Ross's desperation, his pathetic schoolboy tactics, his inability to raise his game—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members!

The First Minister: —and his inability to address what is a really serious issue.

I agree with Opposition members when they talk, rightly, about the anger in island communities

over the fact that the ferries have not been completed, so I give those communities an absolute commitment and guarantee that we are focused on that and that Ferguson Marine will receive the resources that are required on the back of the due diligence that is being done on the cost.

There are things that we, as the Government, should and will apologise for, but we will not apologise for saving hundreds of jobs at Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow. I am not surprised that Douglas Ross shakes his head; he belongs to a party that has put—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, will you give me a moment? People are gathered here to hear the questions that are put to the First Minister and to hear his responses. Can we please ensure that that is possible?

The First Minister: When I mentioned that we have saved hundreds of jobs at Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow, Douglas Ross was shaking his head because he belongs to a party that decimated communities up and down Scotland and left workers on the scrapheap.

In his question, Douglas Ross decided to take a swipe at the SNP. I remind him that, this week, the SNP released its membership numbers, which I am pleased have increased in the past few weeks. The Tories demanded that we release our membership figures, which we have done, but Douglas Ross does not practise what he preaches—he has not released his party's membership figures. There is a word for people who do not practise what they preach—they are called hypocrites.

Prisons (Costs)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I know that the First Minister has spent the past few weeks thinking about financial mismanagement and the criminal justice system, so I will ask him about the overspend on the project to replace Barlinnie prison. Financial mismanagement is an issue not just about how the SNP is run but about how the SNP governs our country. The Government's failure to manage the public finances has cost the taxpayer more than £3.7 billion. That is the result of failed interventions, waste and incompetence.

Earlier this week, it was reported that the cost of building a new prison to replace Barlinnie has spiralled from £100 million to £400 million. Will the First Minister confirm that that project is running over budget? What does he expect the final cost to be? Will the new prison be operational in September 2026, as planned?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Anas Sarwar raises an important issue. We are looking at the cost overruns and what can be done to

mitigate their effect. I think that we all agree that Barlinnie is not in the condition that any of us would like it to be in. We are exploring what can be done.

Anas Sarwar does the debate a disservice when he talks about what he describes as more than £3 billion of waste. I have seen Labour's press release about that, which talks about decisions that are for the Crown, such as the Rangers prosecution. Such decisions are not for the SNP Government; they are independent decisions for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. Including such figures does the debate a disservice.

We are interrogating the figures in relation to Barlinnie. Construction costs have increased for a whole number of reasons, which are partly to do with the United Kingdom Government's complete mismanagement of the economy and are also to do with global factors, such as the war against Ukraine—Russia's illegal invasion has affected construction costs.

The direct answer to Anas Sarwar's question is that the cost overruns are being interrogated and we will do everything that we can to bring them down.

Anas Sarwar: It is interesting that the First Minister disputes £60 million out of £3.7 billion of waste under the SNP Government. I am sorry, but blaming Ukraine, the wider economic crisis or inflation will not work. Costs have increased by 300 per cent—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

Anas Sarwar: —at a time when inflation is running at 10 per cent. Even an SNP treasurer could tell people that those figures do not add up.

Scotland's prison estate is in dire condition. At Greenock prison, HM chief inspector of prisons is threatening to bring in the Health and Safety Executive because of the state of the building. HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland has said that Inverness prison is not fit for purpose. That prison was due to be replaced at an original cost of £52 million, but the cost has now risen to almost £140 million.

In fact, all five major capital programmes in the criminal justice system are running over budget. If the First Minister truly believes in transparency, will he commit to opening the books? Would he welcome an Audit Scotland review of those projects, so that we can understand why costs are running out of control?

The First Minister: Again, I am happy to take away and explore any sensible suggestions around the cost overruns, but it is astonishing that Anas Sarwar seems to suggest that those global factors, as well as domestic factors in relation to

inflation, do not have any bearing on construction costs. That is not the reality. Of course, what has not helped our economy at all is a hard Brexit, which is now, quite unbelievably, supported by the Scottish Labour Party.

Of course, Anas Sarwar is right to stand up and question the costs of HMP Barlinnie and other prisons and infrastructure projects. He is absolutely correct to do so, and he can bet his bottom dollar that those costs will be interrogated, because we are absolutely in challenging financial circumstances—again, that is no thanks to the UK Government. However, because of what happened when Anas Sarwar's party was in charge, we are still having to pay a quarter of a billion pounds in private finance initiative payments. That certainly does not help our budget in any way, shape or form.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister talked earlier about desperation. It is really desperate to say that a 300 per cent increase in the cost of Barlinnie prison is somehow due to global factors around Ukraine and perhaps even Vladimir Putin. Sixteen years into an SNP Government, it is also desperate to talk about decisions that were made by a Government when the First Minister was 12 years old. He needs to change the script, change the record and take responsibility for a change. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: When Mr Sarwar is putting his question, I would be grateful if we could hear it and members could resist the temptation to make comments at that point.

Anas Sarwar: I can understand why SNP members are frustrated, so I will give them a bit of slack this week and maybe in future weeks as well, because, across the public sector, project after project is running out of control. In health, the initial budget for the new Baird family hospital in Aberdeen was £163 million, but the budget is now £244 million; in education, the initial budget for a new college campus in Dunfermline was £86 million, but the new budget is £119 million; and, of course, in transport, the initial budget for replacement ferries for lifeline routes was £97 million but is now running close to £300 million. While families across Scotland are working out how to make ends meet, the incompetence of the SNP Government and the First Minister is allowing millions of pounds to disappear.

This Government has been in power for 16 years and has lost its grip on taxpayers' money and weakened every institution in our country. Scotland can no longer afford this chaotic, dysfunctional SNP Government.

The Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, Mr Sarwar?

Anas Sarwar: It is arrogant, incompetent and out of touch, so is it any wonder that people are concluding that it is time for a change?

The First Minister: Tackling the important issues of inequality and poverty continues to be a defining mission for this Government and that is why we invested in the game-changing Scottish child payment, which has lifted many hundreds of thousands out of poverty. The first announcement that I made as First Minister was that we would not just double but triple the fuel insecurity fund. Through Social Security Scotland, seven benefits are available only in Scotland, and our social security system is based on fairness, dignity and compassion. That is our focus when it comes to tackling inequality.

Anas Sarwar says that it is desperate for us to talk about decisions that were made by the most recent Labour Government. I agree with him, because that was many moons ago—and for good reason. Of course, Jackie Baillie was, very briefly, in Government at that point. However, it is important to say that the reason that we are still talking about that is that we are still paying for it. The Scottish Labour Party mortgaged not just our future, but our children's future. The fact that we are having to pay hundreds of millions in PFI payments 16 years on is, undoubtedly, the reason why Anas Sarwar does not want us talking about it.

This Government and I take seriously the important issues around the construction of prisons and our infrastructure projects, and I give Anas Sarwar an absolute promise that we are doing everything that we can to bring those costs down.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-02033)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am very grateful for that reply.

It is enough to fill 19,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools—that is how much sewage we know was dumped into our rivers last year by Scotland's Government-owned water company. I say "know" because only one in 20 discharge pipes is actually monitored. In addition, new Liberal Democrat research that we are publishing today reveals more than 400 sewage dumps in the vicinity of some of Scotland's best beaches last year. From Peterhead to St Andrews, those award-winning beaches should be protected and pristine. They draw tourists, families and wild swimmers, but, like so many other things on the

First Minister's desk right now, this absolutely stinks.

Will the First Minister now instruct the monitoring of all sewage discharges in Scotland, and what will he do to help Scottish Water to get a handle on the issue? Otherwise, how many swimming pools' worth of poo is he content to see put on our best-loved beaches?

The First Minister: It is a serious issue, and Alex Cole-Hamilton is right to raise it. Our beaches, of which he mentioned a number in his question, are world-class tourist destinations, so I absolutely do not want to see a single sewage dump where that is unnecessary. I will take up the issue personally with Scottish Water, and I know that my cabinet secretary is also doing so directly with Scottish Water.

Alex Cole-Hamilton is absolutely right to the issue, and I will raise it myself with Scottish Water and come back to him in due course.

Alcohol (Deaths and Harm)

4. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to Alcohol Focus Scotland's emergency call to urgently take action to prevent further deaths and reduce harm from alcohol. (S6F-02048)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First and foremost, my deepest sympathy, and, I suspect, the deepest sympathy of all members in the chamber, goes to those who have been affected by the loss of a loved one through alcohol.

We remain absolutely determined to reduce alcohol-related harm. That is why we have introduced initiatives such as our world-leading minimum unit pricing. Recent research estimates that it has saved hundreds of lives. As outlined last week, I am committed to reviewing the current level of minimum unit pricing alongside other ongoing work, such as the upcoming United Kingdom alcohol treatment guidelines, the development of alcohol treatment targets for April 2024 and the expansion of our residential rehabilitation capacity by 50 per cent by the end of this parliamentary session.

Last year, £106.8 million was made available to alcohol and drug partnerships to support local and national initiatives. We will carefully consider the points that have been raised by Alcohol Focus Scotland, and the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy is due to meet it and other stakeholders in the coming weeks to discuss our approach to tackling alcohol harm.

Stephanie Callaghan: I know that the First Minister will agree that the on-going alcohol emergency requires a public health-led policy

response to save even more lives and reduce health inequalities. With that in mind, I really appreciate the update on developing alcohol treatment targets. Is the First Minister able to say anything about alcohol brief interventions?

The First Minister: Stephanie Callaghan raises an important point in relation to alcohol brief interventions. We remain absolutely committed to our ABI delivery programme, which has been in place for 10 years. We have seen excellent progress and sustained delivery of the national ABI programme across Scotland today, and I congratulate local partners on that fantastic achievement.

The alcohol framework makes a commitment to review the evidence on current delivery of ABIs to ensure that they are being carried out in the most effective manner. We are working with Public Health Scotland to review the evidence on the current delivery of alcohol brief interventions to determine how the system could better meet the needs of individuals. I will update the member in due course, once that review has been completed.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): We know from National Records of Scotland and Alcohol Focus Scotland that alcohol-specific death rates in Scotland's most deprived areas are more than five times higher than they are in the least deprived areas. With hospital stays linked to alcohol, we see rates that are six times higher in our most deprived communities than in our most affluent. There is a clear need for improved access to alcohol-related support services in our most deprived areas, which are being badly let down by the Government.

The alcohol-related and wider health inequalities that exist in our country are both deep and divisive. The First Minister's predecessor did little to address them. How can the country have any confidence that he will do any better?

The First Minister: I do not agree with that final point, of course. It was my predecessor, when she was health secretary, who introduced minimum unit pricing for alcohol, and it was successive health secretaries who made sure that we pushed ahead, in the face of considerable opposition to minimum unit pricing for alcohol. My understanding is that there was considerable opposition from Scottish Labour to minimum unit pricing of alcohol.

As Carol Mochan talks about saving lives, it is worth saying that the research on unit pricing of alcohol has shown that more than 150 lives a year have been saved because of MUP. It has also resulted in 411 fewer hospital admissions. It is encouraging to see in that research—I am happy to share a copy of it with Carol Mochan, because it is directly related to her question—that the policy

is having an effect in Scotland's most deprived areas, which experience higher death rates and levels of harm from problem alcohol use.

I am happy to give Carol Mochan further details on what more can be done. I am confident in saying that this Government is taking action on alcohol-related harm, particularly in the areas of highest deprivation.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): A new study from the University of Glasgow found a correlation between the minimum unit pricing policy and the 13.4 per cent reduction in deaths. However, the 50p rate was set over a decade ago and inflation has been raging since, so we need a change to catch up. Will the First Minister bring forward the review of minimum unit pricing? Will he uprate it from 50p and bring forward legislation to tie the rate to inflation in order to save lives in the future?

The First Minister: I pay credit to Willie Rennie. He has raised this issue many times, including a few times when he raised it with me when I was the health secretary. He makes a really important point about the research.

Willie Rennie will know, because he was in Parliament at the time, that there was robust legal challenge to minimum unit pricing. We are ensuring that, when it comes to the review of minimum unit pricing, we have robust evidence in place in case there was ever to be a legal challenge to a potential increase to the minimum unit price. It is so important that we have that robust evidence base in order to determine and support any decision on a change in level of MUP.

The review of the level of MUP will be concluded in late 2023. Willie Rennie has asked me to see whether that can be brought forward. I will do that—I will have that discussion. However, I go back to my first point that it is so important that we have robust evidence in place for any decision that is made on minimum unit pricing.

Recorded Rape Statistics

5. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to new Police Scotland statistics showing that the number of recorded rapes has increased to its highest level in six years. (S6F-02046)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Let me say first and foremost that it is abhorrent that women continue to face violence and rape. We will continue to take robust action to tackle sexual offending through Scotland's equally safe strategy, which is focused on prevention, on improving support and on modernising the law. It is vitally important that anyone who faces sexual violence, and rape in particular, has the confidence and

support to report the crime and that the justice system responds.

Jamie Greene will be well aware of—in fact, I think that I heard him on the radio this morning speaking about it—the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced to Parliament this week. That will further strengthen the response of the justice system, putting victims and witnesses, crucially, at the very heart of the justice system. It also proposes to implement the significant reforms that were recommended by Lady Dorrian in her report to improve the management of sexual offences, including creation of a specialist court for sexual offending.

Jamie Greene: I echo many of the comments that the First Minister has made. We should also, as a Parliament, commend the bravery of those who come forward to report this horrific crime.

However, it is dangerous to make the assumption that a rise in recorded cases is simply a by-product of more people coming forward and does not show an underlying rise in the levels of crime of this nature. That is the sort of qualitative work that I would expect the Government already to be doing in this regard.

The real problem is that the entire system, from end to end, is letting the victims of crime down, from the initial reporting experience to the lengthy delays in getting trials to come to pass. It is up to four years in some cases; it is horrendous. The court experience itself is retraumatising and, even if a conviction is secured—it is an “if” because we all know that conversion rates are notoriously low in Scotland—the victim of that crime faces the injustice of watching the perpetrator being dished out a lenient sentence relative to the gravity of the crime that was committed against that victim.

Will the First Minister, as a former justice secretary himself, make a personal commitment to the victims of this horrific crime to undertake a root and branch review of how this country handles and processes cases of rape? Will he undertake a review into why the figures are at such high levels in Scotland, and will he commit to working with victims organisations and victims themselves to finally put them at the heart of the justice system? Far too many women have been let down by the system and that has to change.

The First Minister: I thank Jamie Greene for what was a really important question. Many of the points I agree with; some I will try to address, and I will come back to him in writing with further detail. He is right that we should not assume that the rise in cases is simply down to greater reporting and greater awareness, although it is fair to say that we have seen a rise in reporting of non-recent, historical cases. That is the case not just in

Scotland but right across the United Kingdom and, I suspect, in many jurisdictions right across the world. There has been a focus on trying to raise awareness and reporting of cases of rape and sexual offences, in particular. There has also been a greater consistency in approach and the use of specialist police officers in that regard.

A few of the points that Jamie Greene raises, which he is absolutely right to raise, relate to the entire purpose of the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill that has been introduced. That bill will put victims and witnesses as the heart of our justice system. I had the great pleasure of meeting a number of families, activists, campaigners, victims, witnesses and survivors yesterday at a meeting to discuss the bill. I say that it was a great pleasure because, out of the most horrific circumstances and enormous tragedy, they have been at the heart of campaigning, through their bravery and courage, for better reform to the justice system. I think that it is fair to say that, by any objective measure, the bill that we have introduced is bold and ambitious. It will probably be the biggest change that we will see in our justice system, if the bill is passed, in decades—some might even say in longer than that.

Jamie Greene has asked for a root-and-branch review of sexual offences and rape cases. That review was, of course, done by Lady Dorrian, and many of the sections in the bill are a direct result of the work that was done by Lady Dorrian. We will continue to invest in the justice system to continue to bring the court backlogs down, and they are falling. Angela Constance, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, is leading on the bill and she will be engaging with every Opposition member, as you would expect her to. We will take the bill forward in as open-minded and constructive a way as we can, and I hope that all of the Parliament can take these justice reforms through together.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The alarming statistics on rape are a further indication of ingrained levels of violence against women and misogyny across our society. Scottish Labour has been running a consultation with the full involvement of Government officials on tackling violence against women. Sadly, it has confirmed existing research findings that young girls are being subjected to a rape culture in schools and across university campuses. Many have received unwanted sexual images, which is becoming a too-normalised behaviour. I hope that the First Minister will agree that we need to tackle the root cause of the problem in our society by talking directly to boys and young men in all of our schools and campuses about their attitude to women and girls.

The First Minister: I could not agree more with Pauline McNeill's question and the statements that she makes. When I was justice secretary, I had, again, the pleasure of seeing a programme being delivered in a school not too far away of the Parliament, which was talking directly to young boys particularly around the issue of consent. It was a really engaging session. Pauline McNeill is absolutely right that we have to tackle the root cause which, unfortunately, is predatory men, and we have to intervene as early as possible. I support everything that Pauline McNeill said in her question.

As a Government, we have supported and will continue to support EmilyTest. I know that Pauline McNeill is very aware of the fantastic work that Fiona Drouet and Emily's family are doing, who are using a horrific tragedy to ensure that, hopefully, nobody else has to suffer what Emily had to suffer. We have supported EmilyTest to create its groundbreaking gender-based violence charter, which I think is the only initiative of its kind in the United Kingdom.

If I heard Pauline McNeill correctly, I believe that she said that the Scottish Labour Party is undertaking its own consultation. When it is ready to be published, I ask Pauline McNeill whether she would not mind sharing the results of that consultation with me and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, as I would be very interested in them.

National Health Service (Waiting Times)

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that published national health service waiting times for treatment are accurate. (S6F-02053)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Published statistics are collated and quality-assured by Public Health Scotland. They are published as part of the full release of national statistics each quarter. National statistics status means that the official statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value. The United Kingdom Statistics Authority has designated PHS stats as national statistics, therefore signifying its compliance with the code of practice for statistics.

Jackie Baillie: One in seven Scots is currently on a waiting list, and senior clinicians have warned that the waiting times statistics that are published on nhsinform.scot are both inaccurate and misleading. I wrote to the UK Statistics Authority in October last year; it agreed and asked the Scottish Government to make changes. Six months later, very little has changed. Clinicians are still up in arms about the stats being skewed and the Scottish Government continues to use median

waiting times and to mix emergency and elective care.

Will the First Minister now stop pulling the wool over people's eyes and rectify that misleading data? Can he tell us whether he published the stats while knowing about the criticism of their flaws?

The First Minister: No, we did not. We received the letter from the UK Statistics Authority. I have engaged with the Scottish Committee for Orthopaedics and Trauma—SCOT—and I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care will continue to meet with the same organisation.

It is incorrect for Jackie Baillie to suggest that changes were not made. She is right that we received that letter in October 2022. We then worked with Public Health Scotland and NHS 24 to review and address the key points that were made. Following the recommendations of the Office for Statistics Regulation, we made a number of changes, which included highlighting both the strengths and the limitations that the data showed on the website. There are now additional links for the full release of national statistics on the PHS website, which provide further information in relation to the distribution of waiting times for patients who have completed their waits and those who are still waiting.

In relation to the criticism from SCOT, the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care will continue to meet with the organisation. I commend it, its members and all those who work in NHS Scotland for the fact that, despite significant on-going pressure, the number of out-patients who have been waiting longer than two years for a new out-patient appointment has reduced by 50 per cent since September 2022 and by more than 60 per cent since June 2022.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

South Lanarkshire Sports Clubs (Price Increases)

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): The First Minister might be aware that South Lanarkshire Council has recently increased the costs to local youth teams and clubs who hire football pitches, swimming pools and halls by up to 114 per cent. I have spoken with many from across the Rutherglen constituency, who fear that they cannot afford those costs and are worried that the clubs might have to fold.

Does the First Minister agree that the Labour administration at South Lanarkshire Council should be focusing on increasing uptake of sports and physical activity; that temporarily suspending the increase is not good enough; and that, instead,

it should scrap those damaging price increases without further delay?

The Presiding Officer: Before the First Minister responds, I remind members of the requirement that questions should relate to matters for which the Scottish Government has general responsibility. I ask the First Minister to answer in that light.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): While it is clearly for local administrations to determine their own priorities, I am, like Clare Haughey, frankly appalled at the actions of the Labour-led authority in South Lanarkshire. I saw a protest taking place by young people who were suggesting that it is time for Joe Fagan, the leader of South Lanarkshire Council, to go. I have to say that I think that those young people have, frankly, very good judgment indeed.

While families are facing on-going eye-watering hikes in food and energy bills and are having to cut back on other expenditure, this is not the right time to ramp up these charges and potentially deny children and young people in constituencies such as Rutherglen the chance to take part in sport. I can only hope that the council sees sense and turns the temporary reprieve into a permanent one.

Tayside Aviation

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On Friday last week, Tayside Aviation, based in Dundee, went into administration with the immediate loss of 22 jobs. Tayside Aviation partnered with a number of universities to provide degree courses in pilot training. Students on those courses, some of them my constituents, now face an uncertain future. They are unable to complete their degrees and they have lost thousands of pounds in fees that were paid to Tayside Aviation up front, which may not be recoverable. Some students now have student loans to repay but nothing to show for the money. How can the Scottish Government help my constituents who are caught in this desperate situation?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): This is a very important issue, and Murdo Fraser is right, of course, to raise it here. I am very saddened to hear of the job losses at Tayside Aviation, and my thoughts are with the workers who have been affected, their families and the students. I appreciate that the position has put the students in great difficulty and I understand their concerns about money that they have paid for lessons.

Anybody who is impacted should contact the joint administrators. Further information, including links to the joint administrators' insolvency portal, is on the Tayside Aviation website.

We are actively taking steps to understand how this will impact students who were funded by the Scottish Government. University students should have been contacted directly by their university. We are also engaging with Middlesex University, which is a delivery partner for the course.

In relation to the workers, our partnership action for continuing employment team stands ready to offer any assistance that it can.

We will continue to examine and explore the issue to see what we can do to minimise the impact on the students in particular, and I will report back to Murdo Fraser in due course.

Yes Recycling (Fife)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Last week, Yes Recycling (Fife) entered administration as a result of cash flow difficulties stemming from its inability to operate at full capacity. Only opened in September last year, it is a state-of-the-art recycling centre. Now, 60 jobs are on the brink. It received £520,000 from the circular economy investment fund that is administered by Zero Waste Scotland, with funding from the European regional development fund and the Scottish Government.

What discussions has the Scottish Government had to determine why this important facility has collapsed after less than a year and why it has been unable to operate at full capacity? What support is the Scottish Government offering the employees?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am concerned about the difficulty that Yes Recycling finds itself in. My thoughts are with the 60 staff members who work at the company and the facility in Glenrothes. This will be a very difficult time for the staff and, indeed, for their families.

To give the member some reassurance, I note that Scottish Enterprise is engaging with the administrator and will provide all possible assistance to help to maintain jobs at the site. In the unfortunate event that any individual should be facing redundancy, the Scottish Government will provide support through partnership action for continuing employment. I understand that PACE has reached out to the administrator to offer support to the affected staff. I can confirm that a local PACE team has provided information on the support that is available for employees and has requested to meet the administrators. Hopefully, through providing skills development and employment support, PACE will minimise the time that individuals affected by redundancy are out of work.

However, I will take away everything that Claire Baker has said and see whether there is anything

further that we can do in relation to what is a very difficult situation at Yes Recycling in Glenrothes.

Quantum Energy Partners (Investment)

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Will the First Minister welcome this week's announcement of planned investment by Quantum Energy Partners, to a value of £300 million, in my constituency? The investment will focus on a site in Ardersier that will develop work in offshore wind and oil decommissioning, which will bring massive benefits—benefits that might last for the remainder of the century—in employment in the renewable energy field.

Does the First Minister agree that that development strengthens yet further the case for the dualling of the A96, which is supported by more than 90 per cent of the readers of the excellent *Press and Journal*, which is the authentic voice of the north? Will he expedite, at long last, the delivery of the dualling of the section from Inverness to Auldearn, including the Nairn bypass?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Yes, I welcome the news of that very important investment. Decommissioning is integral to the pursuit of an orderly, managed transition to net zero, and it has the potential to create significant benefits and opportunities for people right across Scotland. Since 2017, through our decommissioning challenge fund, the Scottish Government has invested £12 million in supporting innovation and building capacity in the decommissioning sector.

Turning to roads, we remain absolutely committed to improving the A96. Of course, the current plan is to fully dual the route, but, as the member knows, we are currently undertaking a review of the A96 corridor, the outcomes of which we expect to be ready for consultation this summer. In addition, we remain absolutely committed to dualling the Inverness to Nairn section, including the Nairn bypass, and we will complete the statutory process for that as soon as possible.

“Adult Human Female” (Screening at University of Edinburgh)

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Last night, for the second time, the screening of the documentary “Adult Human Female” at the University of Edinburgh had to be cancelled, as protesters blockaded entrances to the venue. Women were shut out, and discussion about women's rights was shut down. Does the First Minister agree that freedom of speech should be defended in our academic institutions? Will he join me in urging Edinburgh university to ensure that the event can take place?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I agree with Tess White on the importance of freedom of speech, especially in educational institutions such as our universities. They should be a safe space for debate and discussion, robust as that may be.

I have not seen the film in question—“Adult Human Female”—and I do not know what the contents of it are. My understanding is that there was a protest against the film taking place and then there was a separate protest, which ended up denying people who wanted to see the film access to the screening.

Of course, the issue is one for Edinburgh university. In that sense, I will not look to intervene, but I have made my stance on freedom of speech, particularly in universities, perfectly clear. I see that as not being in conflict with my stance, of which I am very proud, of supporting trans rights, which I am unequivocal about.

However, we should ensure that our universities—and society more generally—are places where we can have even robust exchanges of ideas. I am sure that Edinburgh university will have heard what I have had to say and what Tess White has had to say, but it is important that, ultimately, the decision is one for the university to take.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister’s question time. The next item of business is a members’ business debate, which will be led by Ariane Burgess. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery before the debate begins.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:50

On resuming—

Community-led Housing Supporting a Sustainable Future

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-08476, in the name of Ariane Burgess, on community-led housing supporting a sustainable future. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the vital role of community-led housing in tackling what it considers is the rural and island housing crisis, and in supporting those communities towards a sustainable future; believes that there are diverse and significant challenges facing rural and island communities in providing housing and the varied implications this has for sustaining the rural population; recognises what it considers as the enabling role of community housing trusts and organisations, such as South of Scotland Community Housing, Communities Housing Trust and Rural Housing Scotland, which support communities through what it understands can be a burdensome and long process; notes the belief that more can be done to facilitate community-led housing and remove barriers to locally-based projects; further notes the view that there is a need to support community-led affordable housing as a priority, and that the upcoming Land Reform and Community Wealth Building bills have the potential to do so; congratulates those organisations that have accomplished community housing projects and utilised available funds, such as the Rural and Island Housing Fund; considers that there is a need to learn from these organisations and continually improve, and congratulates what it sees as trailblazing projects that are testing alternative models, such as rented cohousing in the Hope CoHousing project in Orkney, and creating place-based communities through models such as Stòras Uibhist and Rural Housing Scotland’s Smart Clachan project.

12:51

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): It is said that 1,000 affordable homes across the north and west of the Highlands would have a more positive impact than adding 1,000 houses to the urban sprawl of Inverness or tacking them on to Nairn. I first heard that from Ailsa Raeburn of Community Land Scotland. I heard it again when talking to Ewen McLachlan of the Assynt Development Trust in relation to the trust’s ambitious community-led housing and place-making project in Lochinver, and I have heard it from others. Building four or six new homes in a village can be transformational.

We have a commitment to build 11,000 new and affordable rural homes by 2032. All too often, our rural and island communities are low on the priority list. Let us not leave it until 2028 to turbocharge that effort. We have what we need in

place to deliver the experience and effort in all parts of rural and island Scotland, but we need input from the Government to streamline funding and delivery processes, and we need public bodies to work constructively with communities, recognising that their needs are different from those of private developers.

The remote, rural and islands housing action plan is due imminently and should acknowledge that we have the necessary know-how and local commitment, as well as a history of constructive partnership working. With the commitment of £25 million to help councils to buy affordable homes for key workers in rural communities, the First Minister has recognised that something must be done.

There is a range of measures in place, or being developed, to ensure that we steer housing away from the extraction model and towards one that will lay the foundations of a wellbeing economy and will build community wealth. Those measures include regulation of the short-term lets market and a consultation on council tax on second and empty homes, but we still need to get on with building new homes in places where nothing is available. Young people and families are crucial to ensuring the long-term future of our communities, but, if they cannot find affordable homes, they cannot stay or settle in a place.

Communities in the Highlands and Islands have been leading the way and are ready to do more. The rural and islands housing fund and the Scottish land fund are game changers. With Greens in the Government, both funds have been secured, with a commitment to increase them. Greens have also secured a commitment to ensure that community housing trusts are adequately funded to support the delivery of our enhanced rural homebuilding plans. Those trusts are crucial in helping communities to find confidence and build capacity to take on their homebuilding and place-making projects.

The people at the heart of those organisations have been working on this for long enough to understand the hurdles that communities must overcome. They can help with building design, financial packages and the mix of tenures, and they can bring together constructive partnerships. In my region, the work that the Communities Housing Trust has undertaken is not only about housing. The trust supports communities in relation to place making and community wealth building by ensuring that income-generation elements go beyond housing.

In the Highlands, along with providing 25 houses, the Gairloch and Loch Ewe Action Forum has developed a tourist information hub, shops and training facilities. On Skye, the Staffin community trust, as well as providing new homes,

workshops and business units, rents a purpose-built health centre to NHS Highland, which makes much-needed medical services more accessible for people. In Moray, the Tomintoul and Glenlivet Development Trust has recently handed over 12 eco-homes to new residents and is developing a bunkhouse.

Pipeline projects include those by Assynt Development Trust, the Invergarry Development Trust and Woodland Trust Scotland. They all have housing in their plans, along with other amenities including woodland crofts, path networks, enterprise work units, and education and training facilities.

Given the desperate need for affordable housing in my region, I know that Highlands and Islands Enterprise would love to see the CHT's capacity being doubled. It has told me that we have much employment potential in the region, but, without housing, we will not be able to take full advantage of it. I have heard from communities that want to develop co-housing models, in which housing is designed to include shared common spaces. Hope CoHousing in Orkney, supported by Orkney Islands Council, is establishing the United Kingdom's first rented tenure co-housing for over-50s. It says that it will involve

"looking out for each other, not looking after each other".

With the Government's commitment to a preventative approach, and the rapid closure of care homes in rural Scotland, that model must be urgently explored and invested in—not just for over-50s but for intergenerational housing for families.

I come back to the 1,000 new homes in the Highlands. The CHT and the communities that it is working with propose rolling them out at scale, just as though we were building a housing development in Inverness. That could be done by setting up hubs, which would be staging areas for materials and equipment at key locations so that we would not be starting from scratch every time. Materials could be purchased in bulk for a number of projects, which would reduce costs and carbon emissions from hauling them for long distances and would create local employment. That would utilise the often-overlooked north Highland circular economy and community wealth-building potential.

The model is not just for the Highlands; it could work in other parts of my region and in the south of Scotland. I have focused on rural housing, but we also have beautiful but neglected town centres that are ripe for redevelopment into housing. In the south of Scotland, we have the transformational Midsteeple Quarter in Dumfries, which is supported by South of Scotland Community Housing. It is being keenly studied both nationally and internationally, and Scott Mackay from the

project will be the keynote speaker at the upcoming town centre regeneration conference in Moray.

As the minister will know, town centre redevelopment and retrofitting align well with our new national planning framework. Such initiatives should be enabled across Scotland. That process needs to start with a pilot project fund for market towns that would be similar to the rural and islands housing fund.

I welcome the minister's keenness to understand the need in Scotland's rural and island places and his intention to make visits. However, communities know what they need, and they have a proven track record and a tremendous network for peer-to-peer learning. Community-led housing enables rural communities to thrive and is an investment in people and place.

Let us support communities to get on with it and follow their lead. Let us deliver on the Bute house agreement commitments, fund the enablers, invest in the set-up of hubs for materials and prioritise a dedicated workforce. Let us start rolling out community-led housing at the scale that will be needed if we are to reach our ambitious commitment to deliver more affordable homes by 2032.

12:58

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Given that Brexit has already made it far more difficult for farmers and rural businesses to recruit people, I am sure that all members will welcome the new housing minister's creation of a £25 million fund for affordable homes for key workers in rural areas. That comes on top of a commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with at least 10 per cent of those being in remote, rural and island areas.

I also welcome the minister's announcement of a delivery plan to address issues relating to transport, repopulation and economic development. In Balmaha, a rural village in my constituency, a 20-unit project supported by the Communities Housing Trust and the Scottish Government cannot get on to site because no contractors are willing to work in that area. I hope that the minister will consider that urgently in his delivery plan.

Although we welcome the new providers, we should recognise the significant contribution that community-based housing associations and the co-operative movement have made to housing across Scotland. However, the Parliament needs to recognise that the movement is under severe threat from the Scottish Housing Regulator. The regulator was set up to protect the interests of tenants, and it is completely independent of

Scottish ministers. It reports to Parliament only once a year, and its decisions, unlike the decisions of the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, cannot be appealed to an independent body.

I worked for housing associations for 25 years, but I do not speak only from personal experience. A former director of one housing association said:

"Our tenants did not need protection by the regulator, but they needed protection from it."

The regulator has intervened in several community-led housing organisations in recent years. That has involved third-party investigations by consultants who are approved by the regulator and are paid £1,000 per day. That has resulted in costs of literally hundreds of thousands of pounds of tenants' money and in several community-based housing associations merging with larger organisations.

A recent proposal to merge Reidvale Housing Association, one of Glasgow's most successful community-owned housing associations, prompted the director of one representative body to claim that the regulator

"has an unwritten 'merger culture'"

that reflects

"an indifference to smaller scale community ownership".

At the same time, however, the regulator has presided over the failure of Scotland's second-largest landlord, Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership, which owned 12,000 properties. Following serious Government failings, DGHP concluded that it could not continue as an independent organisation and joined the Wheatley Group.

However, the situation is far worse than that. The January 2020 edition of *Scottish Housing News* reported "heavy-handed interventions" by the regulator's staff, with a common theme of bullying. It said:

"the style of work employed by the"

regulator

"is aggressive, over the top and frightening".

A constituent recently presented me with credible and supported evidence of the regulator's bullying. That approach resulted in staff feeling suicidal and unable to work. However, when I asked the regulator's chair to independently investigate those very serious allegations, he refused, saying that the regulator's board had been assured by staff that all was in order. He also failed to release information to me that I had requested as a member of Parliament.

Members will be aware of the tragic case in England in which a headteacher took her own life following an Ofsted inspection of her school. I am

worried that, without an urgent independent investigation into the regulator's practices, something like that could happen in a Scottish housing association.

It is great that the rural housing organisations that are mentioned in Ariane Burgess's motion can flourish and innovate, and long may that continue outwith the regulator's scope of activities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that speeches should be about four minutes.

13:03

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Ariane Burgess on securing the debate. Before I get into the meat of the subject that she has raised, however, I highlight that what Evelyn Tweed had to say should be taken extremely seriously, and the matter should be investigated by the minister as a matter of urgency and taken forward in some way.

I turn to community-led housing, which is the subject of the debate. I know how passionately Ariane Burgess feels about it, because we both sit on the cross-party group on housing. We recently held a session—in fact, it was our most recent meeting—at which we looked at community-led housing and discussed some of the projects that Ariane Burgess mentioned, including the project in Gairloch, where 25 affordable homes are being built, and the one in Staffin.

It is fair to say that community-led housing is a success story, where it exists in Scotland. It provides an additional supply of homes, it helps the local economy and local industry, it encourages investment in communities and it helps younger people to realise their housing ambitions.

At the meeting that I mentioned, we heard from Ailsa Raeburn, the chair of Community Land Scotland; Ronnie MacRae, from Communities Housing Trust; and Mike Staples, from South of Scotland Community Housing. Following the meeting last month, I, as convener of the cross-party group, wrote to the then Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, Shona Robison, with the following asks. First, we asked the Government to publish the remote, rural and islands action plan; secondly, we asked that it consider forming a Government action group; thirdly, we asked it to commit to funding the activities of intermediary organisations; fourthly, we asked for a review of grant conditions for community-led housing; and, fifthly, we asked for funds to be made available for urban community-led housing, which Ariane Burgess mentioned in her speech, because it is not only rural housing that we are talking about.

Fast-forwarding to the present, we now have a dedicated housing minister who, to his credit, has responded swiftly to the CPG. He sent a letter dated 12 April, which I am happy to share with any member who wishes to see it. It covers most of the things that we addressed in our letter—in some respects, it is quite vague, which is not unusual for a letter from a minister, but at least it is a response. The minister has also offered to meet me—I think that that offer should include Ariane Burgess—and I hope that he will attend a meeting of the cross-party group at which we can discuss this subject, which I recognise that he feels strongly about, too.

This is an example of where Parliament can work together and shows the value of cross-party groups. If we remove party politics from an issue, we can achieve good things.

I thank the minister for his encouraging response and his approach to this issue, and, once again, I thank Ariane Burgess.

13:07

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Before I begin, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am the owner of a private rented property in the North Lanarkshire Council area.

Today's debate on community-led housing is welcome, particularly as it allows us to discuss the role that that can play in addressing the rural and island housing crisis. I congratulate my colleague from the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee on securing the debating time today.

I am an MSP for Central Scotland, and there are actually many rural villages in my region. People who live in those villages tell us that they feel very distant from Edinburgh, Glasgow and other cities in Scotland. They also tell us that they know best what suits their own area and what does and does not work, which is a sentiment that would be reflected in all of Scotland's communities. That is a vital reminder for us that a one-size-fits-all policy or decision rarely works for all of Scotland. Even worse, such decisions can sometimes have a negative impact if they lose the buy-in of the communities that they impact in a way that is not desired.

We can all agree that more can and should be done to facilitate community-led housing and remove barriers to locally based projects that rely on local knowledge and local input about what people's needs are and what local people think are the solutions for their own towns and villages.

In November last year, I visited the Western Isles to learn about the severe housing crisis there and the impact of the cost of living crisis that

people faced. That was at the start of a devastating winter that would leave 80 per cent of residents in fuel poverty. They felt badly let down by the UK Government's energy support scheme because their heating oil and solid fuel had not been capped. Residents, the council and local organisations said that they felt let down by the Scottish Government, too. Tighean Innse Gall, or TIG, which is the organisation tasked with delivering the area-based scheme for the council, cited a lack of rural proofing in the PAS 2035/2030 retrofit standards as the reason for the closure of its insulation department, with the loss of 14 jobs and the loss of that service.

The Hebridean Housing Partnership told me about its maintenance regime. Maintaining its stock is absolutely crucial considering that that stock bears the brunt of the Atlantic weather. The partnership talked about how a potential social sector rent freeze might impact on its ability to do that good work.

I also heard about the huge variations in the costs of building housing in the Western Isles. It costs tens of thousands of pounds more to build on Barra than on Lewis. Most decision makers in Edinburgh would consider the Western Isles to be one homogeneous area, but, in fact, there are real differences there.

We debated Scotland's national housing emergency yesterday. However, as Ariane Burgess's motion points out, for rural and island communities, the emergency is compounded by the diverse and significant challenges that they face, with the implications that that has for sustaining their populations. Ferries, fuel poverty, the increased costs of just about everything, the ability to access healthcare and education and poor digital connectivity all interact with the housing crisis and make island and rural life extremely challenging.

Local people will say that they know best what does and does not work for them. We should trust them to tackle their own local housing emergency. They know best, and we should give them the tools to do that.

13:12

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Since I was elected to represent Orkney, back in 2007, challenges around housing have rarely been off the radar, but I cannot recall a time when demand for housing has been so out of kilter with supply and the need for new investment, new thinking and new approaches has been so obvious and, indeed, urgent. Therefore, I thank Ariane Burgess for allowing members this brief opportunity to debate at least some of the issues, concerns and potential solutions in the area.

The motion focuses specifically on community-led housing, which is entirely reasonable, but it is worth acknowledging that that is only one element—albeit an important one—of a wider debate.

I welcome the specific rural target that is now set within the Government's overall commitment to building 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. That is helpful, but we are off the pace in meeting both the overall and the rural-specific targets.

That underlines the urgency of the minister coming forward with the remote, rural and islands housing plan that was originally promised for spring this year. Indeed, it would be helpful if the minister could spell out what role he expects community-led housing to play in that plan, including co-housing, which is not mentioned at all in the Government's vision in "Housing to 2040". However, whatever is in the plan will need to go hand in hand with a commitment to adequate funding. Without question, funding gaps remain the single biggest issue highlighted by all the stakeholders to whom I have spoken in Orkney, including all those involved in community-led housing initiatives.

The sources of the costs are many and various. Acquiring land and planning permission can be costly and time consuming. That is often the obstacle at which community-led housing projects fall. Projects often compete for land with private developers who have easier access to funds. Material costs are high and getting higher and, in the pre-construction phase, the cost of getting surveyors' reports, building warrants and legal advice can run into six figures, even for quite modest developments.

There is often a relative shortage of contractors and indeed professional support in rural and island communities, particularly when there is a lot of building going on. That is certainly the case in my Orkney constituency. Looking further ahead, the introduction of the welcome higher standards in relation to Passivhaus will inevitably increase costs further. Those high and increasing costs are not being matched at the moment by increasing commitments to funding. The value of the funding that is currently available is being inflated away, so the Government needs to address this particular issue—and, as Mark Griffin said, there will be variability within island groups and within rural areas.

In the time remaining to me, I would like to particularly welcome the reference in Ariane Burgess's motion to the Hope CoHousing project in Orkney. It was not recognised in the "Housing to 2040" strategy; I hope that that will now be addressed. It is an initiative that builds a community of homes with shared functions and amenities, bringing together groups of private

individuals who are looking out for—rather than looking after—each other. It provides collective living and is mutually supportive. It has particular benefits for older members of the population, as it addresses issues of social isolation and loneliness through joint activities and interactions and, in turn, it keeps individuals engaged within the wider community, strengthening those communities as well. The Hope CoHousing model is slightly different in that it is a rental model rather than the leaseholder model that has been more traditionally pursued.

It offers older people the opportunity to live somewhere between independent living and care homes and formal retirement housing, reducing care costs and maintaining that sense of independence and agency. However, there are challenges. There is no obvious source of funding for the pre-construction phase, and, in the case of Hope CoHousing, that cost amounted to over £150,000, so the Government needs to look at that particular aspect as well as at making it easier for community-led housing projects to acquire land and to be facilitated through the planning process.

Housing—community-led housing, in particular—is crucial to sustaining and building resilience in our rural and island communities and I very much hope that the Government will embrace that and take on board some of the ideas that have been referred to in this debate. The Government would certainly get my support in those endeavours.

13:17

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the member for the Highlands and Islands, Ms Burgess, for her members' business motion today.

Community-controlled housing associations are vitally important to the prosperity of communities across Scotland. In recent years, we have seen more and more of them being swallowed up by larger, locally unaccountable housing associations, many with head offices outwith Scotland. That is a great shame, because the whole purpose of social housing in Scotland is to ensure that there is a social element to the basic commodity of housing. There is a rich history of success in the community-controlled housing sector. It is not—or, at least, it should not be—a method for wealth extraction or the stripping of assets that are currently owned and managed in the community; it should not be a corporate game of boardroom Monopoly with no get-out-of-jail-free card for tenants when the big boys fail to deliver; and it should not be a lever by which to control finance, remove democratic power and exert unwelcome external influence.

If we go back to the original pioneering days of the Glasgow Corporation slum clearances and the first community housing association that was set up to save those tenement districts in Glasgow, we see that it was done on the basis that those taking control of the assets were management committees of committed volunteers, elected by local people, who were rooted in their communities and knew what was best for the local people who lived and worked there. That was the very genesis of community-controlled housing associations and, sadly, I fear that we are swiftly departing from that stated aim.

Let me just put on the record that not all large housing associations are bad. In some instances, they are actually very good, and there is undoubtedly a role for them to play in this sector. However, we are now seeing community-controlled housing associations that are financially robust, solvent and providing great services to their tenants being taken over at board level and railroaded into mergers, with promises of a land of milk and honey.

There is no better example of that than Reidvale Housing Association in the east end of Glasgow, as the member for Stirling pointed out earlier. It was set up in 1975 as one of the first community-run housing associations in the UK. It acquired a swathe of tenement properties in Dennistoun and prevented the evisceration of that community. Since then, it has refurbished its 900 properties and brought its community back to life through the introduction of traffic-calming measures in a densely populated part of Glasgow. Indeed, it is one of the most attractive communities to live in in the city today.

Reidvale Housing Association is financially robust, solvent and able to easily provide the services that its tenants and the wider community require. Yet, it has been earmarked for what is being dubbed as a transfer but is in reality a takeover. The housing association that is looking to acquire Reidvale's assets and stock has named itself Places for People Scotland, yet in reality it is a massive England-based parent company called Places for People, which operates in Scotland as Castle Rock Edinvar Housing Association—some of our Edinburgh colleagues may be aware of it. They may also be aware that the parent company appoints Castle Rock Edinvar Housing Association's board and that it can remove members at will, as well as placing its own staff on the board. Currently, the Reidvale board is elected annually at its annual general meeting by tenants and other service users, and the board members are free and able to stand for election. That is a democratic right that will be ripped away if Places for People and Castle Rock Edinvar get their way.

To entice current Reidvale residents, the company is offering a five-year rent freeze guarantee, despite the housing regulator's website showing that Places for People's rents elsewhere in the country are up to 26 per cent higher than the Scottish average. Let us have a quick look at its performance compared to Reidvale's: the average rent that is charged by Reidvale for a three-bedroom flat is £69 per week; Places for People charges £98 per week. Reidvale has a current overall satisfaction rate of 95 per cent; PFP has a satisfaction rate of 81 per cent. Eighty-nine per cent of Reidvale's stock meets the Scottish housing quality standard; quite shockingly, only 3 per cent of PFP's stock meets those standards. Reidvale's average response time for emergency repairs is three hours; PFP takes 14 hours on average, which is more than four times slower. For non-emergency repairs, Reidvale takes one day on average; PFP takes 17 days, which is 17 times slower.

The whole thing stinks, and it begs the question: why? Why would a housing association that is predominantly based in England with an outpost in Edinburgh want to acquire a Glasgow-based housing association? I think that the answer is quite straightforward: profit. It knows that it would be incredibly profitable in the long term, due to the area in which Reidvale sits, and it knows that it will be incredibly profitable because Reidvale is a profitable organisation with zero debt.

I am conscious of the time, but, just before I finish, I will say that the minister and the Government more generally will be wondering why this is a political issue and not something that can just be left to the regulator to sort out. The reality is that, unless we introduce legislation in the Parliament that compels the Scottish Housing Regulator to provide on-going practical support to community-controlled housing associations to ensure that they are not swallowed by poorly performing behemoths, this charade will continue unabated. Organisations that have a proven track record of bringing about regeneration, prosperity and inclusivity to neighbourhoods and communities are being lost. If we are all going to stand here and wonder why that is happening, while allowing it to happen, we are all complicit.

The modus operandi of the big, unaccountable housing associations is to build new soulless schemes. We do not need that, especially not in Glasgow. We need strong, locally-run community controlled housing associations that are rooted in our local areas and are determined to grow and develop, with quality and inclusivity at the forefront of their minds, alongside providing a real influencing role for tenants and volunteers. Let us be clear that, like every other sector in this country, the big players and corporates do not do this out of the goodness of their hearts: they do it

because it makes them very rich. They can dress it up all they like with promises that they will not keep, but I can assure them that we and the local community will fight them every step of the way.

I ask colleagues across all parties to seek to agree to the need for legislative and regulatory change urgently in order to preserve and further develop a community-controlled housing model that will continue to serve Scotland's people well and deliver the real and measurable outcomes for its communities that we sorely need.

13:23

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): I refer members to my entry in the register of interests. This is the third housing-related debate within a week, and, as I said yesterday to Mr Griffin and others, I welcome as many housing debates as possible to discuss the issues that have been raised. I thank Ariane Burgess for securing the debate in the chamber in order to highlight the important role that community-led housing plays in rural and island communities, as well as the vital role that organisations play in supporting areas to bring forward their own housing projects to meet people's needs in their localities.

Housing of the right type and in the right place can have a powerful, intergenerational impact, as we all know, supporting people to access the housing that they need, enabling young people to stay in the communities they grew up in and supporting local businesses to retain and attract employees. Community-led housing plays an important role in our broad approach to deliver more affordable homes in our remote, rural and island communities. To the point that Mr Sweeney made, it is not just in those communities; it is across Scotland in our urban communities, too. I will pick up that issue with the member later, if that is okay.

The Scottish Government wants everyone to have a warm, energy-efficient home that meets their needs. That is why housing is a key part of the interdependent missions that were published this week. We are clear in the "Equality, opportunity, community" document that affordable housing is a key part of our mission to prioritise our public services. The document sets out two important plans for rural areas. The first one is obviously the published rural delivery plan, which focuses on how all parts of the Scottish Government are delivering for rural Scotland, including through our policies in areas such as agriculture, land reform, repopulation, economic development, transport and, of course, housing.

We will also publish a remote, rural and islands housing action plan that will set out our approach

to rural housing delivery, including support for community housing projects. When that is published, I want to meet and engage with as many stakeholders as I possibly can. That is open to anybody in the chamber—please invite me to come along and speak to organisations that you think it would be useful for me to speak to in that context.

The plan will include up to £25 million from our affordable homes budget to allow properties, including empty homes, to be purchased or long leased and turned into homes for rural key workers and others who need affordable housing in rural areas.

Liam McArthur: Although I very much welcome the funding that the minister referred to, I understand that it is targeted through councils and RSLs. That is understandable to some extent, but it excludes development trusts, which can play a pivotal role in the delivery of housing in rural and island communities. Might he reflect on whether routing through development trusts might be added to that funding pot?

Paul McLennan: Yes, I will look into that and come back to Liam McArthur, if that is okay.

As I said, that is in addition to the £30 million programme through the affordable housing supply programme. That fund plays an important role in offering community organisations and others who are not able to access traditional affordable house funding a way to deliver affordable homes in remote, rural and island areas while complementing delivery through our mainstream programme by councils and housing associations. There is also the point that Mr McArthur made about development trusts.

That programme has been a success. Between 2016 and 2017 and 2021 and 2022, we supported the delivery of 8,000 affordable homes in rural and island areas. We are now working towards our target of 110,000 homes by 2023, 70 per cent of which will be available for social rent and 10,000 of which will be in remote, rural and island communities. That is backed up by £3.5 billion of funding in this parliamentary term.

Alongside that new delivery, it is important that we ensure that local areas have the tools to make use of their existing housing stock. I will come on to that in relation to some of the contributions in a minute or so.

Over the past decade, the growth of online platforms has fuelled the trend for residential homes, particularly in tourist hotspots, to be changed from primary homes to short-term lets or second homes. That can cause problems for local residents and make it harder for local people, particularly young people or those with fewer resources, to find homes to live in. We also remain

concerned about the number of empty homes in Scotland that could be brought back into use for people to live in. There is a review of that at the moment, which will be published later this year.

On 17 April, we announced a joint public consultation with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on giving local authorities the power to increase council tax on second and empty homes as well as on considering whether the current non-domestic rates thresholds for self-catering accommodation remain appropriate. That is the first joint consultation with COSLA, recognising that local authorities have an essential role in considering the right balance in their local areas, taking into account local needs.

Every community is different. Although some have experience of delivering housing solutions to meet their own specific housing needs, some do not. Ariane Burgess mentioned South of Scotland Community Housing and Communities Housing Trust among other organisations. Those have been, and continue to be, vital in supporting those communities to realise their housing ambitions.

Opportunity, equality and community are vital to everyone, no matter where they live. However, delivering affordable housing in rural and island areas presents additional challenges. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the delivery of more homes in those communities is vital, with solutions developed collaboratively by partners including community groups, rural housing enablers and local authorities among others to drive projects forward to delivery.

Community-led local development was mentioned, which is key in supporting thriving and resilient rural communities. The community-led local development network of local action groups works across Scotland's rural and island communities and is important for delivering grassroots projects with local determination, which can address a number of rural development projects.

I will touch on a few of the contributions. Ariane Burgess mentioned construction and employment, which I would be keen to discuss with her. That is important not only in our rural communities but across our delivery programme. I totally agree that community-led housing is an economic enabler in the wider community. It can drive communities.

Mr Griffin mentioned his visit to the Western Isles. I visited South Uist a number of months ago with the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Housing there would drive forward economic prosperity, which is vitally important.

On the points made by Evelyn Tweed regarding the regulator, the regulator operates independently; it reports directly to the Scottish

Parliament. I am happy to take up any issues that she and Paul Sweeney raised in that regard.

Graham Simpson talked about me meeting with the cross-party group. I would be delighted to meet him and the group, and I hope to come along to the next meeting. If I can get the date in the diary, I am more than happy to do that.

Mark Griffin talked about his visit.

Evelyn Tweed: I heard the minister say that he is going to look into the concerns that both Mr Sweeney and I raised. I completely understand that the Scottish Housing Regulator is independent of Government. However, if it is operating in a way that is not good for community-led housing associations across Scotland, is it not for the Government to look at that?

Paul McLennan: As I said, the regulator reports to the Parliament. I will take advice from officials about how we can address it. I am happy to meet Evelyn Tweed and Paul Sweeney, and officials, to discuss the issues that have been raised.

Paul Sweeney: The Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations has been very strident in its concerns about the behaviour of the regulator as well as about the culture of consultancy that has crept in around it. That is a very insidious and potentially corrupt practice that needs to be urgently investigated, and I urge the minister to look into it.

Paul McLennan: I make that commitment. I will take that on. I am happy to meet Paul Sweeney and Evelyn Tweed in that regard.

The point that Mr Sweeney made about community-controlled housing associations is key. It is about not only our community-led organisations but organisations throughout Scotland. He mentioned in his speech how important that is in some areas in Glasgow.

Mr McArthur mentioned community-led housing and the target, which is incredibly important.

The co-housing model is also worth considering. I worked with a number of extra-care housing groups and set up an extra-care housing task force, which had a parliamentary event and a stall here. That model is key to how we explore rural housing.

I thank members for their contributions. I am delighted that this is the third housing debate that we have had in a week. I am aware of the time, so I will conclude.

I thank Ariane Burgess for bringing the debate forward and all those who took part. I recognise the crucial role that community-led housing plays in our vital rural and island communities. As I said, the offer is there; I am happy to visit any suggested groups that members think it would be

worth while for me to go and visit. I am grateful for the work that has been undertaken and that continues to be undertaken by communities and rural housing developers to deliver more affordable homes in our rural and island communities. They deserve that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:32

Meeting suspended.

14:29

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions on education and skills. I remind members who wish to ask supplementary questions to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question. There is an enormous amount of interest in asking supplementaries, so if I am to get them in—I will try—supplementaries will need to be brief, with no long preambles or five questions masquerading as one. I invite, and would be much obliged to have, brevity, as far as that is possible, in ministers' responses.

The first question comes from Colin Smyth, who joins us remotely.

Learning Estate Investment Programme

1. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason there has been a delay in announcing the projects that will form phase 3 of the learning estate investment programme. (S6O-02148)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I understand that local authorities are keen to get clarity on phase 3 of the learning estate investment programme. In March, the Scottish Government wrote to all local councils to explain that consideration was still on-going for the projects that would form phase 3, and set out the further time that was needed to consider the scope of phase 3, including the need to take account of the impact of market volatility on current projects. However, I am committed to announcing the successful projects by June.

The learning estate investment programme follows on from the successful £1.8 billion Scotland's schools for the future programme, which delivered 117 new or refurbished schools across Scotland.

Colin Smyth: I do not think that I heard an explanation for the delays. On 22 December 2021, the Scottish Government told Parliament that the projects that will form phase 3 will be announced "within ...12 months" but, 16 months on, we are no further forward.

I hope that, this time, the Government will stick to its new timetable, because the consequences of those delays are that projects such as Dumfries learning town have been put on hold, and the overall cost of projects will be higher, due to the delays. Will the Government ensure that there will

be additional funding to take account of the construction inflation—including funding to cover the council's share of those costs, which have been caused by the Government's delays—so that no project loses out as a result of the delays?

Jenny Gilruth: In my initial response, I gave an outline in relation to the delay, and that related to market volatility. Colin Smyth will also appreciate that we have had a change in cabinet secretary and that, therefore, there has been a pause in that respect. However, I am absolutely committed to bringing forward the programme in time for the June deadline that I set out.

It is worth recognising that the latest school estate statistics show that a record number of schools are now in good or satisfactory condition: the proportion of schools in good or satisfactory condition has increased from 61 per cent in April 2007 to just over 90 per cent in April of last year. That is welcome news and there is more that we can do. I recognise the member's interest in the matter and I look forward to giving him an update in the coming weeks.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Recent analysis has shown that, between 2015 and 2022, the cost of construction materials including cement, timber and steel increased by 60 per cent. Can the cabinet secretary outline the pressures that that brings to delivery of projects such as new schools and how the Scottish Government is tackling that?

Jenny Gilruth: As we heard at First Minister's question time today, there has been a period of particular market volatility, which has impacted on a lot of infrastructure projects. From my previous experience as Minister for Transport, I know that between 2015 and 2022 material, labour and overall project costs have steadily increased. We need to be mindful of that pressure and recognise what it brings to some of our projects, but I absolutely commit to Parliament to bring back an update on the LEIP, because I know how vitally important it is that we invest in our schools estate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question comes from Neil Bibby, who joins us remotely.

West College Scotland

2. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with West College Scotland, and what was discussed. (S6O-02149)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Scottish Government's most recent engagement with West College Scotland was last week, on Tuesday 18 April. My officials met members of the senior management team, as part

of a programme of active engagement on the interim purpose and principles for post-school education, research and skills that were published last December. The discussion focused on the college's reflections on the interim purpose and principles.

Neil Bibby: Recent months have been particularly tough for Inverclyde, with job losses at Amazon. Meanwhile, West College Scotland's Finnart Street campus in Greenock has expired and urgently needs to be replaced, but plans for a new campus keep getting kicked down the road. Does the minister accept the need for a new college campus in Inverclyde? Will the minister meet me to discuss that issue as well as support for the existing estate, to make sure that it remains fit for purpose and compatible with net zero targets?

Graeme Dey: There has been an increase in the Government's capital funding for colleges this financial year, but I recognise the challenges that colleges are facing not only around maintenance but in relation to upgrading and replacing buildings. In relation to West College Scotland, I am aware of issues with the Oakshaw building in Paisley, for which, I believe, the Scottish Funding Council has provided support of £500,000 towards a temporary rewiring solution. As Mr Bibby alluded to, I also know that the SFC has provided financial assistance to the college to update the outline business case for improving the situation at Greenock.

If an opportunity arises to meet the college in due course, I will be happy to accept that and to discuss whichever matters it might wish to discuss.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): This Scottish National Party-led Scottish Government is providing our further education students with record levels of support—£141 million in 2021, which is a 54 per cent increase in real terms since 2006-07. Will the cabinet secretary detail how that investment in the future of our young people is benefiting students such as those at West College Scotland?

Graeme Dey: Our investment continues to make a real difference to the lives of young people across Scotland by helping them to continue in their studies. West College Scotland is one of our largest colleges, with more than 20,000 students. It provides valuable opportunities for those who are furthest from the workplace. It is doing really good work, and I am delighted that we have been able to continue the level of funding for student support in this coming financial year.

Universal Free School Meals (Secondary Schools)

3. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide an update on what progress has been made on its commitment to pilot access to universal free school meals in secondary schools. (S6O-02150)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): All primary school pupils in primaries 1 to 5, children in funded early learning and childcare, and eligible pupils in primary 6 through to secondary 6 can already benefit from free meals in Scotland, which is the most generous provision anywhere in the United Kingdom, saving parents on average £400 per eligible child per year.

We will need to go further. Our additional investment that was announced on 15 December will continue to fund the expansion of free school meals for all primary 6 and 7 pupils who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment. We remain committed to delivering a pilot of universal free school meals in secondary schools, and we continue to work closely with key delivery partners on our free school meals expansion programme.

I have asked for further advice from officials once that planning work is further progressed, and I will be happy to provide an update at that point to members.

Monica Lennon: I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new role.

The Scottish Government's commitment to expanding access to universal free school meals is welcomed by the whole Parliament. Will the cabinet secretary give an indication of how many secondary schools will be involved in the pilot schemes and when she expects they will start?

What progress has been made on the P6 and 7 roll-out, given that 90,000 children in Scotland have been in receipt of emergency food parcels in the past year?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Monica Lennon for her interest in the issue. She will know that it is a subject that is very close to my heart, as it is to hers.

In relation to the specifics of the question on the free school meals pilot in secondary schools, as I mentioned in my initial answer the detail of that is still being considered by officials. I am more than happy to provide Monica Lennon with an update on that. Additionally, if the member has suggestions about how the pilot might be carried out, I would be more than happy to hear them.

On the question about the wider roll-out to primaries 6 and 7, I am more than happy to give

Monica Lennon further updates on that. It is really important that we get the roll-out of the next phase right for Scotland's children and young people, so we should all be working in a spirit of cross-party consensus, given its importance to our education system.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary noted, Scotland has the most generous provision of free school meals in the UK, and £400 per eligible child is a very notable amount. What difference do free school meals make to the education journey of our young people in Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: As Karen Adam suggests, and as I alluded in my response to Ms Lennon, the policy is vital to the life chances of our children and young people—especially given the on-going impacts of the cost of living crisis, with many families struggling with the cost of food. We know that school can play a key role in alleviating that burden, and there is evidence that suggests that provision of free school meals can help to close the poverty-related attainment gap, raise attainment and improve school attendance.

As I mentioned in my response to Ms Lennon, there is cross-party support for the policy, and it is important that we continue to work together on that expansion.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the ministers to their new positions.

We need to understand why the number of pupils who are taking school meals is at its lowest for 10 years and why, on census day last year, 60,000 fewer pupils than in 2016 were having a school meal.

I have had teachers and people who work in the school meals service tell me their concerns about how appetising the meals are and about the lack of investment in facilities. What will the cabinet secretary do to increase the take-up rate for school meals?

Jenny Gilruth: Stephen Kerr raises a valid point. I know from my experiences in the classroom that there can often be stigma associated with free school meals. It is important that local authorities and Government work closely on the matter, and I am happy to work with the member on it, additionally. We need to increase uptake, and we need to ensure that there is nutritional value in the meals that are provided.

Higher Education Sector (Support)

4. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to support the higher education sector. (S6O-02151)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme

Dey): Our 2023-24 budget allocated nearly £2 billion to Scotland's universities and colleges through the Scottish Funding Council, demonstrating our commitment to supporting our learners and institutions.

I welcome the recent publication by the SFC of the indicative core funding allocations for 2023-24, which maintain funding levels in teaching and research despite the challenging fiscal environment. That will enable colleges and universities to move forward with their planning for the year ahead.

We have kept our investment in excellent university research at current levels, while increasing our investment in university innovation.

Michael Marra: The minister must be concerned to hear the reaction of Professor Dame Sally Mapstone to the figures that he has laid out, because it raises concerns that the Government's approach to higher education represents "managed decline". With a flat-cash budget for universities, which has been loosely termed "transformation funding", and a failure to invest adequately in research excellence grants, under this Government "managed decline" is what we are seeing.

Can the minister define what the £20 million of transition funding will be spent on? What will he do differently from his predecessor to arrest that managed decline?

Graeme Dey: As Mr Marra is well aware—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Marra—please.

Graeme Dey: As Mr Marra is well aware, we are in an extremely challenging financial environment. We are working very closely to deliver the funding that the universities request, against a very difficult financial backdrop. He knows that.

We continue to spend nearly £2 billion a year on Scotland's universities and colleges through the SFC alone, despite the financial pressures that the Government faces. We remain committed to the long-term success of universities and colleges, as we have demonstrated with the increase in research and innovation funding.

I recognise that Mr Marra and I will disagree on this, but the flat-cash settlement in indicative allocations that he refers to was, against the economic backdrop, as fair as was achievable. Of course, it sets challenges for our colleges and universities. That is why I will, over the coming weeks and months, be engaging with the representative bodies and the individual institutions—I met Sally Mapstone last week—and listening to any ideas that they have for flexibilities

or innovative approaches that can help them to meet better the financial and practical challenges that confront them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of requests for supplementaries. I want to get through all of them, but they will have to be brief, as will the responses.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Would the minister agree that our students and our universities and colleges have benefited from exchanges with Europe, both with our students going there and top students coming here? Is it not ironic that Labour supports barriers between us and Europe?

Graeme Dey: Since Brexit, European Union students have become ineligible for funding. As a result, there has been a reduction of 64 per cent in the number of students from Europe choosing to study at Scottish universities. That reduction has undoubtedly impacted on our universities.

The Scottish Government welcomes the contribution that European and other international students make to our higher education sector, as well as to our society, our culture and our economy. They add diversity. Any proposals from the United Kingdom Government to add more restrictive visa requirements for European and other international students would be deeply damaging to our world-class university sector.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I, too, welcome the minister to his new position.

I met Edinburgh College representatives last week. They told me that they are facing extremely difficult budgetary decisions and that they will not receive any funding for pay rises above 2 per cent, and that every 1 per cent over that will cost them £500,000.

I know that the minister shares my concerns for Edinburgh College and other colleges that are facing similar situations. Given the critical role that colleges play in tackling the attainment gap and supporting our economy, can he provide detail about the steps that he is taking to ensure that colleges are fairly funded?

Graeme Dey: I will resist the temptation to make a political point about the impacts on the budget of the Scottish Government that are consequences of economic incompetence at Westminster. I have way too much respect for Sue Webber to go there.

As I just highlighted to Michael Marra, over the next few weeks and months I will engage directly with the colleges and universities. The financial position is extremely serious; the Government is feeling the consequences of that, and so are they. I will listen to any innovative ideas that they have about what we can do differently to support them

to cope with some of the financial and practical pressures that they are facing.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I hear grumbling from Scottish National Party members about “managed decline”. Those are the words of Sally Mapstone, and she knows what she is talking about, because she leads one of the best universities in Scotland.

The decline is never clearer than it is when we look at research performance. We used to get 15 per cent of UK Research Council funding—now, it is down to 12.5 per cent. What is the minister going to do to reverse that decline?

Graeme Dey: What I am going to do is behave more constructively than Willie Rennie just did by engaging with the sector. I met Sally Mapstone last week and will be in listening mode as I go round the universities and colleges, genuinely prepared to listen to any ideas that they have to help to address the challenges that they face.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): There have been cash cuts to the research funding for 2023-2024 of seven of Scotland’s universities, all of which deliver world-leading research. Does the minister find that to be consistent with the Scottish National Party Government’s stated priority to “boost research and innovation”, as is set out in the national strategy for economic transformation?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Be as brief as possible, minister.

Graeme Dey: I am not sighted on the specifics of individual universities’ allocations, so I say with respect that I will not go there. However, I will tell you what the financial position is consistent with. It is consistent with the challenges that we have been set by your Government in Westminster—*[Interruption.]*—I am sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer; I mean the Conservative Government in Westminster—because of the economic incompetence of Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Support (Primary Schools)

5. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can provide an update on what progress it has made towards delivering the Bute house agreement commitment to ensure that every child has access to mental health and wellbeing support, including counselling services, in primary school. (S6O-02152)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We continue to support local authorities with £16 million a year to ensure that every secondary school has access to counselling services, which are now in place across Scotland. Authorities provide six-monthly

reports on the services. More than 14,500 pupils accessed the service between January and June 2022, and more than 6,000 of those reported improved outcomes. The majority of the remaining young people are still accessing the service and therefore outcomes are not yet captured.

It is also important to say that school counselling is just one of a range of services that schools have in place to support pupils' wellbeing.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response and welcome her to her new post. We look forward to working with her constructively.

It is critical that every child and young person has access to that support. As the cabinet secretary has already said, councils have been required to share six-monthly reports on access to counsellors in secondary schools and community-based services. Those reports show that the efforts to increase access to counsellors in high schools are really succeeding. However, we lack the equivalent data for primary schools. What consideration has the Government given to expanding the requirement for councils to produce those six-monthly reports to primary schools as well?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Ruskell for his supplementary question and look forward to working with him. We worked closely in my previous ministerial post and I hope that that can continue.

I very much agree that all children and young people should have access to mental health and wellbeing support in schools. We all know of the impacts of Covid on our school system—the ongoing impacts continue to be played out in our classrooms across the country. We need to be mindful of that and provide that support.

I am advised that the six-monthly reports that the member alludes to on community mental health services and school counselling include data on primary school children—the returns from authorities in relation to school counselling services include a breakdown of children and young people accessing the service per year group. Between January and June 2021, 1,300 children in primary schools accessed the school counselling service. More than 1,800 did so between July and December 2021 and more than 3,000 did so between January and June last year. I hope that that gives the member some level of reassurance in relation to the six-monthly reporting.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, there are a number of supplementaries. We will try to get through all of them, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Although it is essential to ensure that good mental health services are available in our education system, I am not sure that the increasing need for those services is the only aspect of the crisis. Surely we need to divert resource and attention to preventing poor mental health. Does the cabinet secretary agree that mental health and physical health are related? If so, does she agree that the education system, from pre-school onwards, is the ideal battleground in which to introduce physical activity as a way of combating the rising need for mental health services?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much recognise Brian Whittle's interest in the issue. Brian Whittle and I were elected at the same time, and I can recall a number of occasions when he has raised the issue in the chamber in the intervening years. I recognise the connection between physical activity and good mental health—very much so in my own life. We need to extend that understanding to young people as well.

The school curriculum in Scotland is built on the four capacities, and in that context there is a capacity for ensuring better mental health. Supporting that through physical activity is vital, so physical education teachers in our secondary schools are fundamental. In our primary sector, our teachers have a key role to play in that endeavour as well. We will continue to provide that additionality in relation to the support for counsellors in our schools.

I was in the Royal high school, not far from the Parliament, last week, where I previously taught, listening to some of the impact that the school counsellor has in that school community. However, the member is right in saying that it is not just about school counsellors in our schools but about that broader approach to support throughout the school community.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Another commitment that was made in the Bute house agreement was to raise awareness and understanding of mental health issues in schools and colleges. However, the National Union of Students Scotland, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland have said that student counsellors across Scotland are facing imminent redundancy due to funding ambiguity beyond this academic year.

Will the cabinet secretary commit to providing absolute clarity to the higher education sector today on funding for student counselling services in order to prevent those redundancies and reassure students that they can access the mental health support that they need?

Jenny Gilruth: We confirmed a further £2 million in this academic year—to March of this

year—and the Scottish Funding Council has now published guidance on that. We remain very committed to funding the entirety of the current academic year to an amount broadly in line with what was provided in 2021-22, and we have confirmed that to the sector.

The member will understand that final allocations will be confirmed through the Scottish Funding Council shortly. However, I want to put on the record my support for that commitment. It is really important that we continue to support good mental health across our education system.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Recruitment of healthcare professionals in rural and island areas continues to be a challenge. What measures can be taken to clear waiting lists for mental health treatment and to ensure that counselling services are provided in rural and island primary schools?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure whether the member is discussing the issue of child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—waiting lists. If that is the point that the member is making, I am more than happy to give her an update. It is important to reflect that the number of children starting treatment from CAMHS in the most recent quarter is comfortably one of the highest figures on record; the past four quarters show the four highest figures on record for the numbers of children starting treatment from CAMHS, which is good.

We will need to do more. As I mentioned, I think, in my response to Mr Kerr, I am cognisant of the impact of the pandemic—on-going as it is—on the young people who went through it and were out of formal education for a number of years. We will need to do more, working in local communities to help the provision of support for good mental health.

The Promise

6. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work to keep the Promise to those who are care experienced. (S6O-02153)

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): The Scottish Government is strongly committed to keeping the Promise, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to lead that work through this new ministerial post.

I am heartened by the cross-party commitment across the Parliament to introduce the change that is required to ensure that our children and young people feel loved, safe and respected.

Since coming into post, I have received correspondence from a range of partners, and I

am excited to have the opportunity to see for myself, in the coming weeks and months, the great work that is under way across Scotland. Last March, the Scottish Government published its Promise implementation plan, “Keeping the promise to our children, young people and families”, and we continue to build change in our education, health and justice agendas.

Collette Stevenson: I welcome the minister to her new role. Will she outline the continued engagement that the Scottish Government is having with children and young people who are in the care system as well as those who are care experienced? What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that young people have the support of scaffolding to lead independent lives as young adults?

Natalie Don: The previous First Minister and Minister for Children and Young People met regularly with members of the care-experienced community, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to carry that engagement on.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that, in developing the policy and legislative change that is required to keep the Promise, the voice of the care-experienced community continues to inform the actions that we take. That is essential. We continue to work with our partners, including The Promise Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland, the local champions network boards, and through the Promise design school, to ensure that their voice is heard.

We know that many young people with experience of care might not have access to the same family networks, support or opportunities as their non-care-experienced peers. Providing the right and timely support in the move to independent living is essential, and we are committed to supporting transition through inclusive and accessible support for education, employment, transport and housing. We have committed £10 million to the introduction of a care leaver payment in this parliamentary term to provide further support to the 50,000 young care-experienced people between the ages of 16 and 26.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the cabinet secretary and ministers to their new and transferred posts.

With regard to the data that is required, the Data for Children Collaborative has highlighted a shortfall from the third sector and stakeholders by the use of questionnaires. What will the minister do to address the concern that obtaining quality assurance over information will require on-going resource and work?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be as brief as possible, minister.

Natalie Don: We understand that the recording of that data is absolutely essential, and that is something that I will be working on. As the member is aware, I am fairly new to this post, but that is something that I am happy to come back to him on.

School Buildings (Condition)

7. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that school buildings remain safe and in good condition. (S6O-02154)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): It is the statutory duty of local authorities to manage and maintain their school estate and we expect them to provide a safe environment for all school users. There are a record number of schools in good or satisfactory condition, and the proportion of schools in those categories increased from 61 per cent in April 2007 to just over 90 per cent in April last year.

The Scottish Government, in partnership with local councils, is providing significant funding for schools through the £2 billion learning estate investment programme, which will provide benefits to tens of thousands of pupils across Scotland.

Miles Briggs: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. The danger of toxic asbestos is common knowledge. Despite that, however, over 1,700 schools across Scotland still contain this hazardous material. It is critical that the Scottish Government and councils act as quickly as possible to remove asbestos from the Scottish school estate to ensure that pupils, teachers and staff across Scotland are learning and working in a safe environment.

What progress has the Scottish Government made on removing asbestos from schools? What impact assessments have been undertaken to look at where there is currently asbestos in the school estate and where it should be removed? What timescale will the Government develop to make sure that that happens?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his question. He raises a really important point. It is, of course, the case that local authorities have a responsibility for our school buildings, but I recognise that the member's colleague made a freedom of information request on the matter very recently and I have asked officials for additional advice in relation to action that the Government may be able to take on the issue.

It remains on-going. A number of the schools that we are talking about are in historically old buildings. I confess that the last building that I worked in, over in Fife, had asbestos in it. It is soon to be replaced with a brand new building, thanks to this Government. That is hugely

important as we move forward in improving the school estate, but we need to recognise some of the challenge here.

The other point to mention is that health and safety legislation is not devolved to the Scottish Government. The Health and Safety Executive is a United Kingdom-wide body. I have therefore commissioned advice from officials on what more we might be able to do in this space in relation to school buildings.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will have a brief supplementary question from Stephanie Callaghan.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is worth mentioning that the management of asbestos is the same right across the UK. It is vital to note that asbestos should remain in situ while it is in good condition as it is dangerous only when it is disturbed. Can the cabinet secretary expand on some of the detail of that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: As I reiterated in my response to Miles Briggs, it is the case that the Health and Safety Executive operates at a UK-wide level. I have commissioned advice from officials in relation to further action that the Scottish Government might be able to take in this space.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. We have a bit of time over the course of the afternoon, so I call question 8.

Scottish Funding Council (Indicative Budget Allocations 2023-24)

8. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the announcement of the Scottish Funding Council's indicative budget allocations for 2023-24. (S6O-02155)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Scottish Government very much welcomes the publication of the 2023-24 indicative core funding allocations by the Scottish Funding Council, which enables colleges and universities to move forward with their planning for the academic year.

Roz McCall: I thank the minister for that response. A full-blown mental health crisis is unfolding in our universities, as has been pointed out previously. Last year, almost every university reported a sharp increase in the number of mental health support requests, with the number of students coming forward almost tripling compared

with the number 10 years ago. It is therefore deeply concerning that the Scottish Funding Council is to cut 80 counsellors, whose funding ended earlier this month. Colleges and universities have made it clear that that counselling will not remain in place without that financial support.

As a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, the minister shared my concerns about the impact that those cuts will have on students who are in desperate need of support. What can he do in his new role—I welcome him to it—to ensure that that vital support for our young people in our universities continues?

Graeme Dey: The member is right. I do have an interest in this matter, not just as a minister but prior to that. I offer her the assurance that no such decision has yet been taken, not least because I will have a meeting on this very subject in about an hour and a half's time.

There are significant financial challenges, which I alluded to earlier, but I fully recognise the benefit that the counsellors have brought to the colleges and universities. I was at Queen Margaret University last week and I heard about that at first hand.

I can make no commitment at this stage, but we recognise the need to provide accessible mental health provision for our students, not only in the universities but in the colleges as well. A student mental health plan is also being developed. I offer the member the reassurance that no decision has been taken on that as yet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have time for a couple of supplementaries, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The latest higher education student statistics show that, since 2006-07, there has been an increase of 31.4 per cent in the number of Scotland-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to our universities. What link does the minister see between that increase and the decision to introduce free university education by scrapping the graduate endowment? Which party was it that did that?

Graeme Dey: Bearing in mind the Presiding Officer's instruction, I will say only that it is self-evident that there is such a link and, if memory serves me correctly, it was the Scottish National Party that took the decision in question.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the minister to his role.

In last year's letter to the Scottish Funding Council, the Government said that it expected institutions to create a fair and equal society through their work as anchor organisations. The cabinet secretary and the minister will be aware of the University and College Union's action to

boycott marking and assessment as a result of the on-going disputes over pay and conditions, with some universities threatening deductions of up to 100 per cent from the wages of those staff who participate.

Therefore, I ask the minister whether he considers those pay deductions to meet the Government's expectations; to condemn that action as an attack on the right of workers to strike; to agree to write to institutions and remind them of their fair work obligations; and—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is a multiple question, Ms Duncan-Glancy. Minister.

Graeme Dey: I will be brief, Deputy Presiding Officer. It is a matter of concern that the dispute has arisen. As recently as last week, I was at Queen Margaret University, where I met lecturers, spoke to the principal and made the point that the issue needed to be addressed.

Space Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08713, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on opportunities for the space sector in Scotland.

15:02

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation and Trade (Richard Lochhead): I am delighted to host today's debate on Scotland's space sector, which is a Scottish success story and a sector that, in opening up new frontiers, is delivering benefits for humankind, our planet and our economy. I hope that today's debate will be the first in a series of debates that shines a light on Scotland's transformative and growing cutting-edge sectors of the future.

The industrial revolution is the name for a time of great change in industry, technology and science. We are all familiar with the industrial revolution. In the 1780s, which was the lift-off decade for the industrial revolution, Scotland played a leading role and paved the way for what came after and for the modern world.

I believe that this decade is the lift-off decade for the further revolutions that are changing our lives and shaping our futures, whether through rapid advances in technology, the net zero agenda, artificial intelligence or other developments. Once again, ingenuity, innovation and invention, and our talented people, are allowing our relatively small country to play a leading role. The space sector is an industry that exemplifies the pace of change and our country's leadership.

When people think of space, they might think about NASA and Sputnik, the race to put man on the moon or the enormous rockets and shuttles that took astronauts into orbit, but that is no longer what space is about. Space has become a fundamental aspect of modern-day life. It provides us with services that help us to navigate, to stay connected, to use our credit cards and banking apps anywhere in the world, to monitor climate change and to predict the weather.

Commercial entities are driving growth, the innovation that we need and competition to satisfy an insatiable requirement for data. In 2018, there were an estimated 2,000 active satellites in orbit. Today, that number is about 5,000 and, by 2030, it is forecast to reach 27,000.

The global market for the space sector is projected to grow to £490 billion by 2030, and that is just the start. A wealth of future opportunities—from space-based energy to asteroid mining and in-orbit manufacturing, to name but a few visions

for what might happen in space—could result in science fiction becoming scientific fact.

Asteroid mining might sound far fetched, but members might not be aware of asteroid 16 Psyche, a metallic body that exists within the main asteroid belt. One sixteenth of the diameter of the earth's moon, it contains vast quantities of precious metals whose worth is estimated to be many times that of the global economy.

Although our Scottish space sector has grown rapidly in the past 10 years, it has had a strong academic base, predominantly focused on earth science in Edinburgh, for far longer. That strong base continues to this day. For example, Scottish skills and innovation played an important role in the development of the James Webb telescope. However, it is the miniaturisation and standardisation of spacecraft in the past decade that has allowed Scotland's space sector to flourish.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Does that also present a challenge? The skills that the minister mentions are very much based on academic research but, as we scale up and grow the space industry, we will also need technical skills. Will a change in our approach to skills development be required to support that sustained growth?

Richard Lochhead: Daniel Johnson outlines an important challenge. As the sector grows, so will the demand for people. In the past few days, the industry made the important point to me that the sector will require a variety of skilled workers, from welders to engineers and scientists. It is important that the skills system adapts to the needs of many of Scotland's growing sectors. A review is under way and steps are being taken.

There has been enormous change. The main change is in the size of satellites, which have gone from being as big as double-decker buses to being as small as a shoe box. The cost has dropped from tens of millions of pounds to hundreds of thousands of pounds, and the time to design, build and deploy a satellite has reduced from between 10 and 20 years to six months.

As I found out during my visits yesterday, Glasgow is at the heart of that transformation. An industry that had two people in a room now has numerous companies, which employ hundreds of highly skilled satellite engineers and build more small satellites than any other place outside of California. There I was by the Clyde, in a place famous for building the world's ocean-going vessels, holding in my hand the small space vessels that are being built there in the 21st century to support humankind and protect our planet. Those satellites now track global aviation

and shipping, forecast the weather and help to prevent forest fires in the Amazon.

However, satellites are valuable only if they can provide the right data at the right time to support effective decision making. Scotland also has expertise in data gathering and analysis. Scotland is the data capital of Europe, with Edinburgh hosting Europe's largest infomatics centre and more than 170 data science companies.

We also have a number of excellent downstream data companies that are monitoring the earth's forests and crops, making peer-to-peer trading much fairer and easier and delivering precise positioning services on a global scale to an accuracy of less than 5cm. That will, in turn, aid autonomous vehicles, precision agriculture and the internet of things.

Those capabilities provide a wealth of opportunities, but what will set Scotland apart will be a full end-to-end value chain—a one-stop shop for small satellites.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister is making an interesting speech. It is important to maintain Scottish ownership of that value chain. I was disappointed when AAC Clyde Space, one of the real stars of the Scottish sector, was bought by a Swedish company in 2019. Do we understand the reasons why that happened? It might have been due to a lack of access to capital or to scaling restraints in Scotland. How do we address those challenges in order to maintain control?

Richard Lochhead: That is an important part of the debate. There are two ways to look at that. First, Scotland would not have a burgeoning space industry without inward investment, which comes from a variety of routes, including venture capital and takeovers. Likewise, we want to grow Scottish companies, particularly those that spin out of our fantastic universities. We hope that those will grow to become substantial Scottish companies. We have to get that balance right, so the member is right to highlight the issue.

The end-to-end capability that I referred to will be so important in providing Scotland with advantages. It will support our ambition to become a leading European space nation, capture a £4 billion share of the global market and support up to 20,000 jobs over the next 10 years.

Launch is the final gap in the process, which will soon be closed. Our vertical spaceports in the Shetland Islands and in Sutherland are due to commence operations shortly. Those will be followed by suborbital activity in the Western Isles and horizontal launches from Prestwick, supported through the islands and Ayrshire growth deals, which made significant investments in those areas.

Our spaceports are attracting international customers from Europe and the US, but we also have domestic companies that are developing their own launch vehicles. Skyrora plans to launch its XL vehicle from SaxaVord, which will also play host to the UK Pathfinder Launch programme from Lockheed Martin. Orbex, from my Moray constituency, will launch its Prime vehicle from Sutherland, having completed its latest funding round for £40.4 million, led by £17.8 million of investment from the Scottish National Investment Bank. It is now ramping up recruitment towards its first launch, with about 100 people now employed across its three buildings. I attended the Orbex vehicle unveiling last year. It was an absolutely awesome spectacle, and I look forward to visiting the team again in the coming days.

However, it is not just the economic prize that makes space such a key opportunity sector; its role in the global fight against climate change is equally as important as its economic contribution. Data and imagery from satellites are critical to monitoring changes in our planet. That is another area in which Scotland is genuinely world leading. The industry is sensitive to the global conversation about climate change and its own role within it—both as a force for good via climate monitoring and in mitigating its own environmental impact through manufacturing processes, launch and end of life.

Sustainability is at the heart of the Scottish space sector, and it forms a key part of the Scottish Government's strategy. Last year, we launched the world's first sustainable space road map to encourage responsible growth and set us on the path to becoming the greenest space sector in the world. The world has taken notice, and it wants to learn from Scotland about embedding sustainability in the industry.

The whole Scottish space community is already taking action to reduce its carbon footprint and support the transition to net zero. Our launch manufacturers are using lightweight materials, innovative designs, and fuels to develop green launch vehicles. We launched an innovation challenge fund to help Scottish businesses to develop innovative space-based solutions that can support the net zero transition.

We can also develop solutions to the problems of other nations, and we have already built strong international interest, including by organising a dedicated mission to Switzerland to promote the Scottish sector. Space is, by its nature, a global sector, which means that it presents significant opportunities but also strong competition. International positioning and marketing will be essential to maintaining existing progress and supporting further growth.

Mangata Networks and Spire before it chose Scotland as a base for their satellite manufacturing

and operations. That is clear evidence that our approach is working. Our ability to understand, support and effectively engage in the international arena is further boosted by the formation of the Scotland International Space Advisory Committee. The committee, which is a voluntary group, is co-chaired by GlobalScot's Joanna Peters and Dr David Alexander, and it brings a wealth of expertise and connections across the globe that we can use to tell the world about our sector.

As we have heard, like many other sectors across the economy, our space sector is facing skills challenges. However, it is important to recognise the value of the jobs that we have. Space is high value, with gross value added per employee estimated at £144,000, which is 2.5 times the United Kingdom's average labour productivity. It has the power to inspire and excite like few other sectors, and it is an attractive destination for international workers with the right skill sets. We must utilise that to build a strong pipeline of talent and form an inclusive sector that is accessible for everyone. The sector takes such issues very seriously.

Scotland has a thriving space ecosystem that already employs more than 8,500 people. The recent publication on the UK space industry reaffirms that Scotland is "punching above its weight" on performance, with almost one fifth of all UK space sector jobs being based here. It also recognises strong growth in our company base and annual income. The sector has seen impressive growth of 12 per cent year on year, and we expect that to continue.

All that has been achieved, and all that we hope to achieve in the future, is possible only through strong partnership between industry, academia and the Government. That is why we have Space Scotland and the Scottish space academic forum. An important part of our strategy involves industry, academia and the Government working in partnership to achieve our collective ambition for Scotland to become a leading European space nation through the provision of the full end-to-end value chain for small satellites.

As I draw my speech to a close—I see that I am slightly over my time due to the interventions that I took—I highlight that the combination of the full end-to-end provision for small satellites, with sustainability at its core, and the strong partnership between industry, academia and the Government will put the Scottish space sector in a genuinely world-leading position.

As I said, Scotland was famously at the heart of the first industrial revolution, and now, in this pivotal decade, we are again shaping the future. The future for space, as one of Scotland's transformative and cutting-edge sectors, is really exciting. We have left the launch pad, and we are

heading for the stars and new frontiers. I commend the sector for all that it is achieving, and I commend the motion to Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the continued growth of the Scottish space sector; recognises that the sector accounts for 18% of all jobs in the UK space industry; notes that the sector has been identified as a key economic opportunity through the National Strategy for Economic Transformation and that, in October 2021, industry, academia and government set out their collective ambition for Scotland to become a leading European space nation through the Scottish Space Strategy; welcomes the major investment by Mangata Networks in building its new hub in Scotland, which will support up to 575 highly-skilled jobs; recognises the strengths of the space sector in Scotland and the role of space data in tackling climate change; acknowledges the importance of strict environmental and safety regulations to this industry, given its wider impact, and understands the significant opportunities for Scotland in becoming the home of space launches in Europe through the development of spaceports for civilian, science and technology programmes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I advise members that we have some time in hand.

15:16

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the debate, and I am delighted to open it for the Scottish Conservatives. I am speaking with a number of different hats on today. I am my party's lead on business, and I note that there are real economic benefits for Scotland and for the space industry supply chain. I speak as a Highlands and Islands MSP, representing a region that is already a key player in Scotland's space sector but which has so many new opportunities to explore. I am also deputy co-convenor of the Scottish Parliament's recently established cross-party group on space, which we hope could play an important role in promoting awareness of the sector, the opportunities that it offers, the challenges that it faces and what we, as parliamentarians, can do to help it to grow.

Space has captured the imagination of humanity from the very earliest days. From the sci-fi of the late 19th century and the start of the space race between the US and the USSR, through the shuttle launches of the 1980s, humanity has for generations now sought

"To boldly go where no man"

—or woman—

"has gone before."

Whereas the first journeys were by NASA and the Soviet Union's space programme, countries across the world are now involved, and the private sector is playing an increasing part as well. While space remains a place to explore—there is quite a

fair bit left to explore—it is also now a vital part of our planet's infrastructure, with satellites orbiting the earth, providing broadband and other telecommunications links and playing a huge part in our daily lives.

With the global space economy projected to reach £490 billion by 2030, there is a new space race, and the United Kingdom and Scotland are very much part of that. The UK space sector is a growing industry that offers exciting opportunities for the future. It is already worth billions of pounds every year to the UK economy and is estimated to employ nearly 50,000 people. It supports at least 126,000 jobs in the UK across a wider supply chain and, in 2021 alone, its contribution to the UK economy grew by an extra £1 billion. It created 1,800 new jobs and saw almost 300 new space organisations start up. Income is growing at a faster rate in the UK in comparison with the global space industry.

As the minister outlined, there is much happening in Scotland, too. Income from Scotland's space sector rose to £180 million in 2021. The number of space organisations increased to 183—the fourth largest boost across the whole UK—and there were 8,500 people working in the sector.

As the Scottish Government motion mentioned, and as the minister highlighted, there has recently been investment from Mangata Networks in a hub at Prestwick airport, in Ayrshire. I am sure that my colleague Sharon Dowe will say more on that later.

Scotland is home to several spaceports, including in Shetland and Sutherland, in my Highlands and Islands region. Companies that are part of the space sector or are working with it as part of the growing supply chain are based across the country. AAC Clyde Space in Glasgow has already delivered 13 satellites for launch, with a further 21 in various states of production, and Glasgow alone produces more of those small satellites than does anywhere else in Europe.

The Scottish National Investment Bank has invested £17.8 million in the orbital launch services company Orbex, which is based in Forres—again, in my region. Orbex is developing the first orbital rocket powered by a renewable biofuel.

This week, my colleagues Douglas Ross and Graham Simpson visited Skyrora in Cumbernauld to see for themselves the work that it is doing and to hear its plans for this exciting sector. Skyrora is just one of the organisations that are working with the SaxaVord UK spaceport on Unst, which, again, was recently visited by Douglas Ross, but is also a site that I visited a number of years ago. Although I admit that, at that time—surrounded as

we were by grazing sheep and not much else—it was hard to imagine the site as a major launch facility, I know how much progress has been made, particularly at the Lamba Ness peninsula.

SaxaVord expects to create around 140 jobs and put nearly £5 million every year into the local economy on Unst alone, with further jobs and investment in other parts of Shetland. I look forward to visiting the site again soon and seeing for myself the work that is being done and, hopefully, one of the 30 vertical launches that it is looking to support every year from the site.

Paul Sweeney: The member makes a point about polar orbital launch being a huge opportunity for Scotland, yet industry has raised concerns about the Civil Aviation Authority regulation regime being onerous and way too expensive and uncompetitive. Will the member take steps to address that with his UK Government colleagues?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The key thing is that we should all be working together—the Scottish Government, the UK Government and members of my party. Where there are challenges—there will be challenges—we must work to address them, because this is such an important sector. I think that we will find today that we all agree on that. If there are areas in which we can play our part, it is important that we do so.

If members will excuse the pun, I say that it is not rocket science to see that this is an increasingly important sector, one that Scotland and the UK are at the forefront of, and which already provides high paid, high skilled jobs. However, in another sense, it is about rocket science, because skills are a vital part of ensuring that the sector has the highly qualified people that it needs. More than a quarter of the sector's employees hold at least a primary degree, which is higher than in any other sector in the Office for National Statistics census.

It is therefore vital that the Scottish Government ensures that the educational pathways are there for the sector, that the necessary subjects are available in schools, that apprenticeships and university degrees are in place, and that they are accessible to Scottish students. That is important, because one of the issues that has been raised with me by some employers is that places at Scottish universities for degrees in areas where we have serious skills gaps are dominated by foreign or non-UK students. We are using our world-leading universities to train up the workforce of our economic rivals, causing recruitment issues here, in Scotland. The Scottish Government needs to look at that and think about how we ensure that our education system—our schools, colleges and universities—are fit for purpose to provide our businesses with the skills pipeline that they need.

I know that one of the things that most impressed Douglas Ross on his visit to Skyrora was its engagement with local schools and its determination to ensure that young people learn of the opportunities of this exciting new sector. That is key, and we know that Scotland needs to do more to provide the opportunities for young people to take science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—STEM—subjects, and to provide the encouragement for them to take them up. It should not be hard to get young people excited about the possibilities of the space sector and get them interested in the opportunities that it offers and how they can be part of it.

However, it is not just about skills. The Scottish Government must ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support the growth of our space sector. That means delivering fast and reliable broadband to local communities, particularly the more remote island communities such as Unst, which are often left behind. It means ensuring that local road connections and—of course—local ferry links are fit for purpose. Further, it means ensuring that there is housing available to meet any increasing demands, which is an issue in communities across Scotland.

The Scottish Government launched its Scottish space strategy in October 2021, aimed at securing a share of the global space market for the Scottish economy. Although the Scottish National Party might be going through its own rapid unscheduled disassembly at the moment, I share the ambitions of the Scottish Government that Scotland should take advantage of the opportunities that this new sector offers and ensure that we are at the forefront of it.

I welcome the UK Government's commitment to support the space sector right across the UK, including the £373,000 that it has provided for Space Scotland to strengthen the Scottish space ecosystem.

The Scottish Conservatives want to see Scotland's two Governments working together to support the Scottish space sector and ensure that it has the investment and the business environment that it needs to grow. We recognise the huge potential that the sector represents for Scotland, and its potential to be an industry that is successful across our whole country.

We will support the motion and both amendments today.

I move amendment S6M-08713.2, to insert at end:

“, and welcomes the UK Government's commitment to support the space sector in the UK, including the recent £6.5 million of funding from the UK Space Agency, which benefitted UK-wide projects such as providing £373,000 for

Space Scotland to strengthen the Scottish space ecosystem.”

15:24

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I share the sentiment that we heard from the minister. When we talk about the space industry, for many people, that will conjure up images of science fiction and things in the far future, and not necessarily things that are relevant to them. However, the reality is that space is already a significant part of Scotland's economy, and it will, if we make the right decisions, be a significant part of its future economy.

When I was looking at the Scottish direct investment web page, I was struck by a web clip that outlined Scotland's strengths and advantages. That was not only compelling to watch; it had been filmed in my constituency, at the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh, which is the base for the UK Astronomy Technology Centre and the Higgs Centre for Innovation. It is one of the key components of the expertise that Richard Lochhead set out.

Although Richard Lochhead was absolutely correct to say that Glasgow is very much the centre for the manufacturing of vehicles, Edinburgh is very much the centre for data analytics, which is the other part of the crucial mix that we have in Scotland. When we add in assets such as the future spaceports in the north and south of Scotland and things such as the satellite receiving station in Errol, just outside Dundee, we quickly realise that space is all around us. Scotland has deep opportunities. We have the expertise, driven by our world-class universities and research and the existing companies.

A number of insights from the debate apply not just to the space sector but more broadly, to new technologies and advanced manufacturing. We need to start thinking about Scotland not as having separate clusters but as one cluster. We are a small country, and that gives us significant advantages. All the assets in the north and the south of the country, in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee, are very close in global terms. That gives us a huge strategic advantage to grow the sector.

We must all sit up and recognise that the 8,000 jobs growing to potentially 20,000 jobs in 10 years' time, with potentially five times 8,000 jobs thereafter, is a significant opportunity for Scotland but also a critical one. As much as we look forward, we must look at our current industrial mix. The oil and gas sector employs more than 200,000 people, and the median wage is £45,000 a year. Those jobs will not continue for ever. It is imperative that we look to future industry so that we can replace those highly paid and high-value jobs.

We very much agree with the sentiments that are expressed in the Government's motion, but we cannot rest on our laurels. Active intervention and significant planning and policy will be required to seize the advantage in investment, infrastructure, location and people in order to make good on that. That is why we put forward the suggestions in our amendment, and it is why I will move it.

Skills gaps are apparent right across the economy in Scotland. Despite the increasing discussion about that, the reality is that we have seen a decline in the number of employees receiving job-related training over the past 15 years. Indeed, in the most recent budget, we saw a £10 million decrease in Skills Development Scotland's budget compared with the previous year. Audit Scotland has said that the Scottish Government has failed to provide the necessary leadership or oversight in skills planning. Therefore, there is a lot riding on the skills review. I know that that is forthcoming. It is clear that, if we are going to make good and build those 20,000 jobs, we need an agile and responsive approach to skills. I acknowledge that that is set out in the national strategy for economic transformation, but, in order to deliver that, detail is required.

I would go further. We need approaches that enable partnership between industry and Government for insight, setting the content and delivery of skills training, and leveraging private finance to deliver funding. That is what genuine partnership looks like, and that is what a future skills approach for space and, indeed, other areas will require, and that must come forward.

We also need flexibility. The reality is that a skills regime and approach that is overly focused on those at the start of their careers will not get this right. We need to reskill people and repurpose skills from industries of the past so that they are relevant to the industries of the future. We have plenty of engineers, but we need more of them; we also need to redeploy engineering so that the skills that engineers have are relevant to the skills that they need.

We also need to look at our places. Much is made of words such as "infrastructure" but I think that we need to break down that language. Much of what high-tech sectors need is actually quite simple—they need space, not in terms of the space up there but in terms of space in industrial units and sheds. The real appetite in industry for the green ports is not so much about deregulation; it is simply about getting the space in which they can set up and run businesses. We need to learn that lesson, because it is what is needed for the space industry as well as for other high-tech industries such as life sciences.

In terms of places, it is also about housing—Jamie Halcro Johnston was absolutely right about

that. Unless businesses can be set up and run in places that are accessible to people who are able and willing to work in those businesses, we will not be able to make a start. There is plenty more to say, but, ultimately, we need an industrial strategy to make good on our potential in relation to the space industry.

I move amendment S6M-08713.1, to insert at end:

“; further understands that ensuring that employers in the space sector have access to the skills and expertise they need in the workforce is essential to long-term success in the sector, and recognises that this will require improving delivery of STEM subjects in schools and revitalising skills delivery so that it is flexible, aligned to industry, and capable of reskilling and upskilling; emphasises the requirement for physical space for advanced manufacturing to be set up affordably and in proximity to supply chains to deliver effective clustering effects for the space sector; acknowledges the importance of cooperation and pooling, such as at the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, to enable the development of advanced manufacturing in the space industry, and highlights the importance of a supportive regulatory regime and of the Scottish Government engaging collaboratively to ensure that this is delivered.”

15:31

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome this debate on space sector opportunities and the potential for Scotland. Scotland has the UK's fastest-growing space sector and there are ambitions to grow a £4 billion space industry by 2030. We are on our way—in 2020-21, the sector had an income of £180 million, which is an increase of 30 per cent since 2018-19. As the motion highlights, we punch above our weight, with 18 per cent of all UK space-related roles in Scotland, which is double our share of the UK's population.

More satellites are built in Glasgow than are built anywhere else in Europe, and, with the increased emphasis on data in our lives, as the minister has highlighted, the opportunities are evident. Small and medium-sized enterprises, which are vital to the wider business economy, are making their mark in Scotland's space industry. On Tuesday, I saw this for myself in my constituency in relation to the impact on the supply chain of the development of the SaxaVord spaceport, home to the UK pathfinder programme, which is backed by Lockheed Martin.

Unst, with a population of around 650, is the most northerly inhabited community in Scotland—indeed, in the UK. It is the final frontier. The SaxaVord spaceport, which is sited at the northern tip of Unst, has been an important national infrastructure link for decades. RAF Saxa Vord, which was a vital radar base operated by the Royal Air Force in the second world war, became

a listening ear during the cold war. The Ministry of Defence continues its presence there today.

In 2017, entrepreneur Frank Strang and his business partner Scott Hammond gave a presentation to Shetland Islands Council. Their vision of a spaceport in Unst seemed light years away to those of us sitting in the council chamber that day. However, just as Shetland did 50 years before with the oil industry, we welcomed this new opportunity for Shetland plc.

SaxaVord spaceport leads the way. It will provide vertical launch and ground station facilities for a range of US, European and British launch providers and satellites. Construction work began just over a year ago and one launch pad has already been completed. The company now employs around 60 people, with more to come, and contributes millions of pounds to the economy.

On Tuesday, I was one of the guests at a joint event that was hosted by SaxaVord spaceport and German company Hylmpulse Technologies to see engine testing for a small orbital launcher. Hylmpulse has been working in Shetland on the development of the system and testing programme, and this joint working should see its first suborbital launch from SaxaVord spaceport later this year. That will be a significant landmark moment for Hylmpulse, for SaxaVord spaceport, for Shetland and for Scotland. Unst will be the headline, not the footnote, in Scotland's space sector.

Shetland's local supply chain is also benefiting. With massive experience in supporting the oil and gas sector, local firms are now turning their skills to supporting the space industry. Those firms include fabricating and engineering companies such as Ocean Kinetics, which built the main support frame for Hylmpulse to test its rocket engine, and Lerwick Engineering and Fabrication, which is building the launch rail for the suborbital launch at SaxaVord spaceport.

Shetland's geography is challenging. Interisland transport could be improved with short tunnels, but, when it comes to space, Shetland is an asset as its location at the crossroads of the North Sea and the Atlantic makes it an ideal spot to launch small satellites into orbit. That northerly point is looking to the stars for the next chapter in space technology and development, alongside community and educational collaboration, with SaxaVord having already attracted a quarter of a million children to its online STEM lessons.

I will now turn to the opportunities that might lie in defence. In a recent session of the Scottish Affairs Committee at Westminster, my colleague Christine Jardine MP asked about the potential for defence in the high north and north Atlantic that

the space sector could provide. In response, there was a discussion about tracking ships and the protection of at-sea infrastructure. At the end of last year, Shetland experienced a serious telecoms outage as a result of a damaged undersea cable. Media reports have also highlighted concerns about Russian vessels performing cold war action off Shetland.

There is great opportunity for Scotland to be at the forefront of modern technology development for use at home and across our vast sea territories. We can also help allies by being poised with such technologies and open to future developments. As we embrace a new challenge and take up those opportunities, Scotland must embrace its share of responsibility, too, and help to clean up space with the same zeal that we have for the transition to more sustainable living here on earth.

We can, and should, be ambitious about the contribution that Scotland can bring to the space sector. We should allow the growing and exciting sector to help us to reassess the current status quo, and we should be forever forward thinking in what we can do and about the responsibilities that we have to future generations and the environments that we reach. Scotland's space future is bright and buoyant. May we go boldly.

15:36

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): First, I congratulate Richard Lochhead for securing the debate. He obviously has a better relationship when it comes to Parliamentary business, because that is something that I failed to do in more than five years of working with the sector.

Secondly, I recognise the fact that the concept of the Scottish space sector has gained cross-party participation and support. It is great to see that Lorna Slater has supported the motion, because I know that the Greens have had some issues with the sector in the past. However, I do not think that there are any Green Party members in the chamber for the debate, which is disappointing. Adam Tomkins famously put out a tweet a few years ago that ridiculed the concept of Scotland's space sector as pie in the sky. It is great to see the Conservatives on board, too.

It has been recognised that there is work to be done to raise public recognition of what the Scottish space sector is all about and how people can be involved in its success, as, over time, it will no doubt become one of Scotland's mainstay sectors. Indeed, work to analyse the relative sizes of different sectors and what they contribute to the economy was done as part of the national strategy for economic transformation. Over the coming years, the space sector has the scope to replace

some of the activity from sectors that perhaps will not be with us for ever.

As has been highlighted, Scotland has significant advantages. Our geography allows us to do sun-synchronous and polar orbits, which is a huge advantage. The end-to-end capability that we have from satellite manufacture, rocket manufacture, launch capability, data analytics and ground stations is unique in Europe and probably globally. We are focused on building on that capability.

It was a real pleasure to work with the sector over that period; it is hugely dynamic. I pay tribute to Craig Clark and Dr Hina Khan at Space Scotland; to Malcolm Macdonald and the team at the Scottish space academics forum; and to the work of the Scotland international space advisory committee. Under that tremendous initiative, a group of global Scots self-organised into a sector-based group and came forward with excellent proposals, which gave Scotland's space sector true global reach into some significant parts of the global sector. I am sure that the minister will look to roll out that model across other sectors with regard to the global Scots network.

I was delighted to engage with Mangata three times during the journey when Scottish Enterprise and others were involved in landing its investment in Scotland. I am delighted that that came to fruition. Not only will it take manufacturing to the next level, which will allow Mangata to build satellites of up to 1,000kg, but the work that it is doing on the 5G network locally and beyond will be a real asset to Scotland's broader connectivity ambitions.

I look forward to publication of the innovation strategy. Our space sector has a strong position as one of our key horizontal enabler sectors and that will further cement the sector's place.

Paul Sweeney made an important point about regulations. Responsibility for the legislation lies with the UK Government, as the policy is reserved. It is important to make progress on the role of the Civil Aviation Authority, which I have met a number of times to discuss the matter. The pressure on it needs to be kept up; the sector wants us to do that to ensure that the CAA delivers on its end of the bargain.

Points about sustainability have been well made. Scotland's focus is on space for good and on sustainability. As the minister said, Scotland is the first country in the world to have a space sustainability road map, which is a lesson to the sector in other parts of the globe, where people are watching with interest what we are doing in moving into new space. We are moving away from the traditional focus on defence and large satellites to something that will have a huge

impact on our ability to tackle the challenges of climate change and net zero as we move through this decade and into the next.

Over the past few days, I have spoken to people in the sector to gauge how the minister and the Government could work increasingly closely with them to take forward opportunities together to develop the sector. The concept of a national space mission has been raised with me previously, and it was good to see more feedback on what shape that might take. I will highlight four areas where the sector has identified that more work needs to be done, as we build the sector, as it moves into the next phase of its maturity and as we secure Scotland's place in the £490 billion market.

The first area is skills. All the speakers so far have discussed the importance of attracting skills into the sector and of using the sector's attractiveness to drive the broader STEM agenda in schools across Scotland. It is great that work is happening in some schools locally—I commend that—but a programme to work with education colleagues in the Government and make that a more significant part of our STEM education efforts would be welcome.

Another part of the skills agenda that we should not forget is talent attraction, particularly from the rest of the UK. With the industry advisory group for rest-of-the-UK talent attraction, I was taking forward hugely important work, which space and aerospace were a key part of. It was great to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture say yesterday that that work will continue. I encourage the minister to make himself aware of that work, if he is not leading on it, and to ensure that it continues to attract talent from the rest of the UK to the Scottish space sector and other sectors.

The second area is international aspects and, to be frank, what I call space diplomacy—Scotland leveraging its excellent position in the sector to best effect in raising Scotland's profile globally. I engaged in that with a number of countries, including Luxembourg, Ireland and Switzerland. Malaysia is probably the standout example. In Singapore in February, I met the Malaysian space delegation, which was extremely keen to engage with Scotland on a number of levels and had a detailed plan to do that. I encourage the minister to take that work forward with a visit from the Malaysian space delegation to Scotland as quickly as is feasible.

The third area is infrastructure. The sector has asked for engine and platform test capability, integration capability and facilities that can be shared across businesses in the sector, including growth space, which Daniel Johnson highlighted, to allow the sector to build on the progress that it

has made, to expand further and to encourage growth businesses.

The sector's fourth point, which is a bit more ambitious but which the Government should look at, is about co-designing and launching satellites on the Government's behalf, not only to stimulate the sector and businesses, particularly on the downstream data side, but to highlight and make a statement about Scotland's seriousness in developing the sector. Data that came from a satellite or constellation would benefit Scotland's people and Scotland as a whole, particularly on our net zero agenda. There are many examples of where space data—on heat in buildings or other aspects of the net zero agenda—could be extremely valuable.

The sector has given a number of pointers that I hope that the minister will consider. As always, I remain available to support the growth of Scotland's space sector in whatever way I can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sandesh Gulhane, who joins us remotely.

15:44

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Thirty-four years ago, Neil Armstrong uttered the immortal words:

“one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind”.

Since the last manned lunar mission in 1972, human space exploration has focused largely on low earth orbit missions, communications and observation satellites, and unmanned scientific exploration. Now, with space attracting high levels of private funding, coupled with advances in technology and growing public sector interest, more and more countries are looking to the stars. Over the next 17 years, the annual revenue that is generated by the global space industry is expected to hit £1 trillion. The challenge for Scotland is to ensure that it competes and collaborates in the global space economy—to infinity and beyond.

How are we doing today? Glasgow alone produces more small satellites than anywhere else in Europe. A key player is AAC Clyde Space, a UK-Swedish venture that produces satellites for weather forecasting, precision farming and environmental monitoring, which we have heard about before.

Outwith Glasgow, the UK Space Agency is supporting the development of vertical and horizontal launch spaceports across Scotland, including in Shetland, Sutherland, Argyll, Prestwick and the Outer Hebrides. On the Lamba Ness peninsula, preparation work is under way on the first integration hangar, where rockets will be assembled and satellite payloads will be

integrated. Shetland's SaxaVord spaceport is part of the UK-wide effort to gain a £4 billion share of the global space market over the next seven years. The site was completed in 2022 and will support up to 30 vertical launches a year from a former Royal Air Force site. With regard to jobs, up to 200 people are engaged in each launch. Scotland's space sector generated an income of £180 million in 2021. Scotland now has more than 180 space organisations, while our total space industry workforce numbers 8,500.

Our fantastic universities also play a vital role in developing Scotland's space industry. At the University of Edinburgh, backed by £30 million of UK Government funding, the £45 million Bayes centre is home to world-class data science and artificial intelligence, which is required to support growth on the data side of the space industry. The University of Glasgow's space Glasgow research cluster focuses on cutting-edge research into space flight and exploration and has partnerships with industry and organisations such as the European Space Agency. The University of Strathclyde's space cluster works with industry partners to support space research on the likes of satellites, handling space debris, robotics and data analytics.

The UK Space Agency is launching a £20 million fund to support international partnerships that will harness the UK's national strengths, support new space capabilities and catalyse investment. Up to £2 million will initially be available to help to strengthen the space sector's partnerships with other space nations. Funding is available to industry, academia and research organisations to work with international partners on projects that could help, for example, to bring new services to market or support cutting-edge research.

Scotland truly has the potential to benefit from the global growth in the space sector, but that will require a sharp focus on investment in our universities' funding for research and development. In turn, that will attract a highly skilled workforce to live and work in Scotland. The UK space sector is a growing and exciting industry that the UK Government is fully committed to supporting and investing in, including in Scotland, where opportunities abound. Unleashing the possibilities of Scotland's space sector can occur only if Scotland remains within the UK, where our resources can be pooled, knowledge can be shared and the UK Government can provide significant investment into a range of exciting projects.

15:49

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I, too, welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate this afternoon, and I am very happy to support the motion. I thank the University of Edinburgh for its briefing and I extend my thanks to Angela Mathis, chief executive officer of ThinkTank Maths, for the time that she has spent engaging with me and for her commitment to Scotland's place in the space sector. I also commend Space Scotland and the many other organisations and talented individuals working in Scotland's space sector.

As I prepared for today, I reflected on a presentation that I attended at which Professor Maggie Aderin-Pocock, who is a well-known space scientist in the UK, described how her career in space was inspired by "The Clangers". "The Clangers" was a children's television show in the 1970s, which I remember, although many members here today will not, about a family of creatures living in peace and harmony on a planet. I will return to the importance of encouraging talent into our space sector later.

It is remarkable to think that this is the first space debate that has been held in the Scottish Parliament since the session began, and I am sure that that is courtesy of our colleague Ivan McKee, who has been quietly laying the foundations for us to reach this point. However, space is fundamental to our modern-day existence and to the future of our planet. As Professor Brian Cox said,

"The best way to protect the Earth is to look down from space."

As the motion outlines, the Scottish space sector is an exciting area of growth, accounting for about 18 per cent of all jobs in the UK space sector, which is significant, given that Scotland is home to around 10 per cent of the UK population. We are punching above our weight. We have well over 100 companies, from start-ups to SMEs and larger companies, which are involved not only in manufacturing but in space applications that benefit other sectors and areas of the economy. Of course, that work is underpinned by the Scottish space strategy, which sets out our collective ambition for Scotland to become a world-leading European space nation. The strategy aligns to the UK space strategy, but it also outlines areas where Scotland has an advantage. For example, for the development of spaceports and vertical launch projects, which we have already heard about, our geography and location place at us some advantage.

An important aspect of our growing space sector, as we have already heard, is sustainability and the space sustainability road map. It sets out three areas: making manufacturing and launch as

sustainable as possible; tackling space debris; and using space data to benefit planet earth.

The north-east currently hosts around 11 companies that support the sector. One company in my constituency provides high-accuracy global navigation satellite system services. I note that the just transition of Scotland's energy sector review highlights potential employment opportunities for certain oil and gas roles, which is welcome. However, the relationship between the energy and space sectors is not new. Today, space has a key role in monitoring gas emissions and its climate impact, with around half of all essential climate variables that help us to understand and predict the evolution of climate being measured by satellite.

Although the space sector continues to underpin the collection of data about planet earth, space itself remains a domain in which we do not yet know everything. We do not understand all the dynamics, and we do not fully know how things move; therefore, we have to move with cautious steps while holding on to our dream.

We look into space and see something clean and untouched. However, the orbital paths around our planet already contain a lot of debris and junk, and when satellites come to the end of their lives, they can break up into small pieces and collide with other satellites. As such, in growing our space sector, we also have a duty to keep space clean, safe and accessible to future generations. Therefore, I ask the Scottish Government to outline what it intends to do to ensure that Scotland plays its part in keeping space clean.

As we have heard, underpinning our space sector is talent. I note that the Labour amendment sets out the need to ensure that employers

"have access to the skills and expertise"

required to ensure the longevity of the space sector in Scotland, with a focus on the delivery of STEM subjects in school. I am particularly interested in that area, and I agree that it is critical that STEM learning, and mathematics in particular, is supported at the earliest point in our tertiary education system.

I commend the work of Scottish Development International and others to grow our space talent. I welcome workers from Europe and beyond to create a workforce that is rich in skills, experience and, importantly, languages. However, my research for the debate revealed concern among some working in the sector that the UK is not seen as a welcoming place and that it can be challenging to recruit into Scotland. We run the risk of companies being unable to secure contracts and, ultimately, moving to Europe. Therefore, I ask the minister to do all that he can to ensure that those who contemplate coming to

Scotland to work in our space sector know that Scotland is a welcoming place to live and work.

I welcome today's debate highlighting this growing and exciting sector, and I look forward to playing my part in helping it reach its full potential.

15:56

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Like many others we have heard from today, I am very enthusiastic about the possibilities that will become available to us with increased investment in the space industry. I join colleagues in encouraging even further investment across Scotland to push our economy forward and bring much-needed jobs to our country. They would be the kind of technical, varied, skilled and well-paid jobs that we need to see more of. It is heartening to come here to discuss job creation instead of yet more people suffering the threat of job loss or precarious and unreliable work.

To be ready for this growing industry, however, we have to increase the number of young people studying STEM subjects, as Audrey Nicoll said in the previous speech. Having STEM subjects at school is really important, as is the ability to carry them forward all the way to relevant degrees and qualifications. That is about how we structure education and the link to understanding all the learning styles and learning options that are, or should be, available to young people and other people throughout their lives.

I have met fantastic apprentices at flourishing businesses such as Spirit AeroSystems in Prestwick, which is training young people in intricate and technical jobs that can sustain them for life. It is an example of supported learning taking place in a work environment, and it came across as an excellent way for the apprentices to learn.

There has to be co-operation among schools, universities, businesses and Government, as we have heard, to achieve this over the long term, for generations to come. I am glad that the minister seems to have the mindset to ensure that that is what we will seek to happen.

I would like to see a much higher proportion of young women studying STEM subjects, which we know continue to be dominated by men. When I spoke to the young apprentices, they spoke about how hard it was to make the decision to go into this field. The issue is not just how to develop relevant skills among young women but how to retain women in these professions as they advance through their careers. We definitely need to work on that. Too many young women do not see engineering and this kind of development work as an environment that they can continue in

throughout their lives. It feels a bit closed to them, and that definitely needs to change.

The proposed Mangata Networks development will be of great benefit for Prestwick and the surrounding area in my region of South Scotland, as other members have spoken about. Fears about the long-term sustainability of Prestwick airport have been growing for some time, and the proposed development provides great news for an area with a long and proud history in the aviation and aeronautics industry. It is a wonderful development for the community as a whole, which is full of people who have worked in this kind of industry. I am sure that the spaceport and the industries that pop up around it will be firmly welcomed by everybody in South Scotland.

Increased investment like that will also be a fantastic benefit to our world-leading university sector, which is training the scientists, data analysts and engineers of the future right on the doorstep of the proposed plans for the space industry and at pioneering institutions across Scotland, as we have heard from other members about their regions. This is an opportunity for us to be on the cutting edge and it is very exciting.

Foremost, however, I see this as a brilliant opportunity to bring well-paid, highly skilled jobs with proper trade union representation to the area, and a wonderful chance for future generations to get in on the ground floor in the exciting development of the spaceport and all its surrounding industries. I must stress the importance of those being good trade union jobs—that is so important.

Union representation leads to the long-term sustainability of industry across Scotland; it does not detract from it. Workers who feel represented stay in their jobs and drive innovation. Workers who feel short changed and undervalued go elsewhere, so it is important that we make sure that these jobs come from an industry that welcomes that role of the trade union movement. I will be making that point very clearly to the businesses and investors in the space industry in my region and ensuring that the Government sticks to its promises in that regard—about work and the importance of representation.

I join with my Scottish Labour colleagues and all members across the chamber in celebrating the investment opportunities in the space sector and encouraging others to look at Scotland and, in particular, my region of South Scotland. It is a place where the space sector can make advancements, flourish and be an excellent place for people to work and for communities to be involved in the process.

16:02

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Well, I had to say it: I am boldly going where Christine has not gone before. What do I know about space and satellites beyond “Star Trek”? Actually, I may surprise you and even myself.

It all started when Derek Harris got in touch with me, as he lived in Penicuik, in my constituency. He introduced me to Skyrora, which has been mentioned before, and Black Arrow. Black Arrow was the UK’s only rocket to successfully launch a satellite into orbit, but it had lain at its crash-landing site in the South Australian outback for 48 years prior to Skyrora stepping in to preserve it and return it to Scotland. I sponsored its coming to Parliament—outside, of course. It represents an important piece of heritage in the space sector, which continues to thrive today in Scotland, and serves as inspiration to the next generation of space scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs.

Since being established in 2017, Skyrora has invested approximately £50 million in developing technology and infrastructure and in creating a skilled workforce, which is now 70 people based in a manufacturing and assembly facility in Cumbernauld. Outside investment over that time includes a grant from the UK Space Agency for £2.5 million, which is currently being extended in delivery time period and in scope; a recently confirmed horizon 2020 grant of €500,000 over four years for advanced manufacturing 3D printing; and a national manufacturing programme supporting the licensing of Skyrora’s 3D printer, which I have seen.

According to Skyrora, there has been no further funding from any institutions including Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish National Investment Bank, despite extensive engagement. I leave that for the minister to consider.

I am advised by the company that the key challenges are as follows. Not unexpectedly, one is funding. Another is a UK regulatory regime that is not competitive, even unfit for purpose. That issue has been referred to by other contributors and I will return to it. Also, there is a lack of a clear co-ordinated approach by all levels of Government, starting from understanding why launch is required, and of a road map or plan with clearly articulated steps to make launch happen.

There was strong initial engagement across the space industry, academia and Government. However, more recently, that co-ordination and collective drive has somewhat fallen back to individual companies’ “private aspirations”, as opposed to continuing to garner support and push collaboration.

I go back to licensing. In spring 2022, Skyrora submitted its application to the UK Civil Aviation Authority for its launch licence, after extensive engagement that included a 23-month process from February 2019 to help establish the safety case process approach to evaluation. It is now April 2023, and Skyrora is still waiting for qualitative feedback from the CAA on its submission and, indeed, for any indication of when it might receive a launch licence.

In the meantime, to pursue its requirement for undertaking launch, Skyrora has assisted the Icelandic authorities to establish a permit process over the course of 2021-22 and, in October 2022, Skyrora launched the suborbital test vehicle Skylark-L in Iceland.

In the context of Scotland, Skyrora sought to suggest that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency might be able to take a lead on managing and enabling the regulatory process of procuring a licence, in a similar way that SEPA took the lead on decommissioning oil and gas infrastructure.

For the future, Skyrora’s ambition is to realise income to the Scottish economy of more than £2.1 billion by 2030: 428 full-time equivalent manufacturing jobs, with salaries that it hopes will be 26 per cent above Scottish average, which deals with the issues that Carol Mochan has raised; a research and development investment of more than £5 million every year—five times the Scottish average; and, by 2030, more than 300 internships, 30 apprenticeships and sponsored skills programmes in welding, 3D printing, advanced manufacturing and so on, taking use of Scotland’s national engine test centre in Gorebridge in my constituency.

I turn now to Thistle Rocketry, which is located in Tweedbank in my constituency. That early-stage business received a Scottish EDGE award of £100,000 to support it. It is a space launch start-up, which is currently developing scalable rocket systems for cube satellites. Its award is made up of a £30,000 grant and a £70,000 soft loan.

At the moment, Thistle Rocketry is at the climax of a six-month project. On only a £50,000 budget, it has designed and built an 8-kilonewton suborbital rocket engine—please do not intervene for a technical explanation—with the goal of advancing its proprietary propellant pump, and it is lighting the engine for the first test fire tomorrow, weather permitting. Testing will continue for another few days, with both the engine development and the advancement of its intellectual property representing major milestones for the company. With the completion of that test project, it will formally commence its seed raise, which is planned for this year.

It is the tale of two space satellite companies that I know quite well, one far more advanced than the other, which will both, I hope—and I will end where I started—be businesses that live long and prosper.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I call Colin Beattie, who will be the final speaker in the open debate for a generous six minutes. We will then come to closing speeches, for which all members who have participated will need to be in the chamber.

16:08

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak on opportunities for the space sector in Scotland. It still surprises me how many people are unaware of the opportunities that the space sector has here. Even our own Scottish space strategy states that

“The space sector has been one of Scotland’s best-kept secrets”.

As some members might be aware, I recently launched—pardon the pun—a cross-party group on space to give MSPs and people who operate in the industry in Scotland a chance to come together to raise awareness of the importance of the space sector to the Scottish and wider UK economies; to promote the sector’s growing benefits that arise from Scottish investment in the space sector, including its pivotal role as a force for good in the global challenge to address climate change; and to encourage and strengthen Scotland’s position in the wider space industry.

I mention that in order to establish that CPG I appeared in front of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to justify its formation. The convener of the committee referred to my “childlike enthusiasm” regarding the space sector. He was absolutely correct. Of course it is exciting, although it is still in its early days. I will seek to nurture and continue my enthusiasm. I am pleased that the CPG has continued to gain interest among my colleagues from across the chamber, combined with support that it has received from organisations in Scotland. If any member in the chamber has room for another CPG in their schedule, let it be that one.

The space sector is expanding faster here, in Scotland, than it is anywhere else in the UK. It is, reportedly, due to grow in value to £4 billion by 2030, which equates to about 20,000 jobs in the sector by that year. Scotland has planted its flag on the space industry map. As we heard, Scotland now builds more small satellites than anywhere outside California.

We have all the right components for the sector to flourish while enhancing Scotland’s economic

development and contributing to meeting our net zero ambitions. It is therefore only right that the space sector has been identified as a key economic opportunity in the national strategy for economic transformation. We should take full advantage of the opportunities that the sector has to offer Scotland.

I can confidently say that the demand for the sector exists, and I am sure that my colleagues across the chamber will agree. Scotland is currently home to more than 130 companies that operate in the space sector, together with over 170 data science companies. We have heard about SaxaVord spaceport in Shetland, Space Hub Sutherland and the major investment by Mangata Networks, which is building its new hub in Scotland—a hub that will support up to 575 highly-skilled jobs.

However, I give a special mention to one of the companies that is operating in my constituency, because I want to highlight its work in the sector. Once again, I mention Skyrora, which has gained recognition locally and nationally for space sustainability and innovation. Sustainability is a key aspect of the space sector, and it is commendable that Skyrora is driving the way forward with its flagship orbital rocket Skylark L. It is designed to use a fuel mix that produces 45 per cent less CO₂ emissions than most launches. The Scottish space sector shares in the collective responsibility to tackle the current climate emergency, and Skyrora, as it has demonstrated, is already innovating through use of greener fuels, lightweight materials, smart design and reusability.

It comes as no surprise that Scotland is leading the way in such an innovative sector. Our history lends itself to great scientists and inventors, and it is vital that we continue encouraging such innovation, especially among our young people. Currently, Scotland is home to 18 per cent of all UK space sector jobs, which represents just over 8,400 jobs. However, if we are to reach 20,000 jobs by 2030, we need to engage with young people on the roles and we need to find ways to upskill our existing workforce. Scotland is lacking deep tech, but the continuing success of the sector will depend on its workforce.

The University of Strathclyde in Glasgow runs the week-long Scottish space school, which is open to secondary 5 pupils in Scottish schools. It allows them to learn from some of the world’s leading figures in space travel, including NASA astronauts and engineers. The programme has been a huge success in previous years, with many pupils going on to study engineering at Strathclyde university. I would like to see the sector and our universities doing more outreach work in our primary and secondary schools. Education has the

power to inspire the next generation of space industry workers.

Today's debate focuses on the opportunities for the space sector in Scotland, but we must not dismiss the challenges that come alongside them. Like many other sectors, the space sector knows that it is no easy feat to find the right people with the right skills, and hiring conditions are becoming tougher. Scotland's doors have always been open to the world, and they remain so, but the UK Government consistently tries to close those doors, which has depleted our recruitment pool.

ADS—the industry trade association for the sector—has called for the creation of a transferable skills catalogue to enable a larger overseas worker recruitment pool and to allow businesses to upskill and address workforce shortages far more quickly. Greater flexibility would allow workers who have a good foundation of transferable skills to apply for roles that are listed on the shortage occupation list. That list is updated only every 12 months; perhaps updating it more frequently—for example, every six months—would help to address labour market shortages more effectively. Labour markets and industries are continually changing and, with our drive to meet our net zero ambitions, different skills are demanded. It is only fair that we keep in step with those changes.

Of course, here, in Scotland, we have no remit to make the changes that are required, so I ask that the Scottish Government and the industry continue to put pressure on the UK Government to make the changes that are required in order to make the sector a huge success. It is imperative that a solution be found in order to minimise the risk of hampering Scotland's scientific and economic progress.

The space sector is one in which we are thriving. I mentioned the fact that the sector has been one of Scotland's best-kept secrets. Let us now celebrate the industry and the long-term prosperity that it offers to Scotland, our people and beyond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:15

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to engage in the debate and to close on behalf of Labour in what has been a vital discussion about one of Scotland's most successful and vibrant sectors.

Like Christine Grahame, I had the pleasure of visiting Skyrora in Edinburgh and Loanhead in 2019, during my time as an MP and shadow under-secretary of state for Scotland, and I am

thrilled that the company is still thriving—it now has more than 60 headquarters staff and more than 100 research and development staff, who are based in Cumbernauld.

It is exciting to see the scale and potential of the space sector in Scotland, from Skyrora—which I already mentioned—to Alba Orbital in my Glasgow region, to SaxaVord spaceport on Unst in Shetland, to name but three of many players in the sector. The industry is innovating nationwide.

I commend the minister for using Government time to hold the debate, and my fellow members from across the chamber for their engaging contributions. I trust that we will all, in our own way, continue to carry forward our passion and hard work on behalf of the space sector. It is clear that we are all anxious to ensure that we do not deny or miss opportunities for it to be successful. We must work intensively, rigorously and urgently to ensure that we achieve our potential in the best way that we can in what is a competitive global sector.

My colleague Daniel Johnson has hit the nail on the head with the Labour amendment. It is key for the space sector and beyond that the Scottish Government grasps the bull by the horns and engages much more intensively, rigorously and formally with industry to ensure that the sustainability of advanced manufacturing jobs in Scotland is secured. As has been mentioned extensively, the two most critical aspects in ensuring that jobs and work programmes can be supported in Scotland are skills—especially of people who are at the start or in the middle of their careers—and infrastructure.

Those of us who regularly meet the industry—including Colin Beattie, who set up the cross-party group on space—recognise that the industry is desperate to make a long-lasting impact in Scotland. We know that there is enormous interest in creating jobs and establishing long-term work programmes here, but people in the industry tell us that they need workers and the necessary training so that our schools, colleges and universities can provide excellent outputs and an appropriately qualified labour force. That is critical. They also say that the Scottish Government must help them in securing the facilities in which they can do their work well.

I see parallels with the advanced manufacturing sector, which needs the right facilities to do what it does best. That is particularly the case in the shipbuilding and maritime sector, which, at meetings of the cross-party group on maritime and shipbuilding, tells MSPs time and again that if Scotland would invest in shipyard infrastructure to build ships, companies would bend over backwards to make vessels in this country. There is a similar issue in the space sector. I hope that

the minister hears me when I say that industry leaders have been loud and clear in making the point to members in cross-party groups that if we build it, they will come. They need the Government to respond in a mission-focused way. That will involve the Government taking on risk, where necessary, to ensure that companies can crowd in wealth and take root here in Scotland.

I am pleased that the minister has high ambition for the sector. The Government has set out the

“aim to grow the workforce in the space sector by 26% year on year”

and the stronger

“commitment to grow the sector by 2030”.

I will be looking carefully to see whether the Government’s cuts in education budgets and the proposed cut of £10 million in Skills Development Scotland’s budget will hamper those efforts. I fear that they will do exactly that.

Only this week, I was contacted by constituents of mine, who stated their concern about the fact that their children cannot take advanced higher maths, chemistry and physics in Glasgow schools because Glasgow City Council has cut the advanced higher hub at Glasgow Caledonian University and their schools do not provide those courses. That means that children at state secondary schools in Glasgow cannot access undergraduate engineering courses at the universities of Strathclyde or Glasgow. I think that that is a shameful situation and one that needs to be urgently addressed.

More can be done to protect the Scottish Government’s ambitions and the development of the space industry here and in the rest of the UK.

Despite the challenges, we can, with assets such as the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, be a powerhouse for innovation and advancement. That is why Labour is passionately advocating for the Scottish Government to celebrate organisations whole-heartedly and to work closely with industry and the UK Government to ensure the best possible environment for the industry to thrive in.

The member for Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale mentioned additive manufacturing. I recall that, during my visit, Skyrora said that that was exactly the sort of thing that could be done at the National Manufacturing Institute, so that all companies in the sector could buy time for that particularly specialised form of advanced manufacturing. Many small and medium-sized enterprises would be unable to finance that on their own, but they could do it collaboratively.

I beg the minister to do all that is in his power to prevent the branch-plant effect that was discussed in his opening speech, and to ensure that our innovative space sector is maintained by wealth that is controlled in Scotland, and not sapped by global corporations.

I worked with Clyde Space during my previous career at Scottish Enterprise and was saddened in 2019 when the Swedish company AAC Microtec bought it over. Both companies—Clyde Space and AAC Microtec—were founded in 2005. Why was it that the Swedish company acquired the Scottish company and not vice versa? Although they are doing great work, we need to understand why that happened. Scottish companies should be acquiring overseas businesses, not the other way around, and we should see more of that happening. Scottish headquartered companies will be key to our future, so we cannot allow them to go into overseas control.

I could refer to numerous members’ comments about that, and about the regulatory issue that was also brought up. We must ensure that the Civil Aviation Authority adopts reforms so that the sector can achieve first-to-market launch into polar orbits, because if we are not careful Iceland and northern European countries will steal a march on us. That is absolutely critical.

I was particularly taken by the comments from the member for Glasgow Provan about the need for a national space mission. That is critical. It will require the state to take risks, although many previous Scottish Administrations have taken a risk-averse approach. We look need to look at the idea of talent acquisition and skills, as was mentioned by the member for Aberdeen South and North Kincardine. We should look at international engagement and driving export markets, and at critical infrastructure and shared facilities such as the NMIS in Inchinnan.

My colleague Ms Mochan mentioned the huge potential of Prestwick airport because of the opportunity for clustering with Spirit Aerosystems. We should also look at opportunities to contributions to our achievement of net zero—for example, using the heat from data centres to drive district heat networks. There are huge adjacencies and many opportunities for clustering. We should work rigorously across the sector to seize all those opportunities.

I thank the minister again for the opportunity to debate a sector that is vital for Scotland. I hope that members from across the chamber will support the amendment that was lodged by my Labour colleague, the member for Edinburgh Southern.

16:22

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): As has been mentioned in contributions from other members, Scotland's space sector continues to grow and contributes significantly to our economy. The space industry is a rapidly growing field, and Scotland has the potential to be at the forefront of that exciting sector. The war in Ukraine is affecting satellite launch capability around the world and there is a renewed need to develop that technology here, at home, and to fully harness that expanding market.

Scotland is home to more than 140 space organisations, including significant players such as Spire Global, AAC Clyde Space and the universities of Strathclyde, Edinburgh and Glasgow. The industry generates around £5.6 billion in turnover and provides 22,000 jobs and 910 apprenticeships across the country, adding £2.3 billion to the Scottish economy.

That is why the recent partnership between Spirit Aerosystems and Astraius to improve future satellite launch capability at Prestwick spaceport is fantastic news not only for Ayrshire but for Scotland and the United Kingdom. That collaboration is part of the UK's plan to secure a larger share of the global space economy, which is expected to be worth £490 billion by 2030, as Richard Lochhead said earlier.

The Prestwick spaceport aims to become Europe's premier location for launching small satellites into orbit via air launch, and the collaboration between Spirit and Astraius will speed up the development of system components and key processes for the Astraius horizontal launch platform. It has the potential to drive growth in the science and engineering supply chains, create new jobs and career paths and inspire the next generation of space professionals across the UK.

The recent announcement by Mangata Networks, which plans to establish a new space engineering, manufacturing and operations hub in Prestwick as part of the Ayrshire growth deal, demonstrates Scotland's welcoming environment for investors. It will create up to 575 new jobs over the coming years, making the Prestwick airport hub a significant economic driver for Ayrshire. We must make sure that Scotland has an attractive economy so that we can best capitalise on this booming industry.

Scotland's geographic location and robust aerospace manufacturing sector make it an ideal location for polar rocket and satellite launches. However, the availability of talent is crucial to Scotland's space industry's success, as several members mentioned in their contributions. The same engineering pool is stretched across a

variety of engineering sectors, including aerospace and military, meaning that employers are in stiff competition with each other. As one industry expert told me,

"The success of Scotland's space sector is predicated on one thing—people. Whether Research & Development, supply chain opportunities, whatever, it is all built upon our supply of skills. As the space sector has fantastic growth, so too do other engineering sectors such as aerospace, defence, advanced manufacturing and so on, they all draw from the same engineering talent pool, and that pool is already running close to dry."

As the demand for skilled workers continues to rise, it will be increasingly important for Governments, the industry and educational institutions to collaborate on adapting and improving training programmes. Such co-ordinated thinking will enable us to identify the skills and knowledge that are most in demand and ensure that training programmes are designed to meet those needs.

Paul Sweeney: The member makes an important point about the need for greater collaboration to drive critical mass into the sector and all parts of engineering in Scotland. Does she agree that the current landscape is way too cluttered and that there is way too much confusion about what is out there? We need to rationalise that and have a focused approach through a body such as Scottish Enterprise to make everything join up a bit better.

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

Sharon Dowey: I absolutely agree with everything that Paul Sweeney has just said. We need to have a less cluttered environment. It needs to be a lot clearer so that businesses know where to go for help so that they can get employees with the skill sets that they need. They also need to be able to highlight that to the Government and educational institutions so that we know which courses we need. Having visited Ayrshire College, I know that a lot of work is already under way between it and the local industry to provide pathway courses for young people to give them the skills that will enable them to enter the sector.

As we attract more investment and highly skilled workers, we will also need to have the support of both our Governments to ensure that adequate funding is delivered so that the building blocks that we put in place now are fit for purpose in the future.

We cannot underestimate the cost of acquiring land and erecting buildings for that work to take place—and the work does not stop there. If we are to entice the brightest and the best, they will need homes to live in and roads to drive on, which means that we must invest in local infrastructure.

Scotland has many opportunities in the space industry, but we need to lay the groundwork today to ensure success tomorrow and in the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Richard Lochhead to wind up the debate. You have around nine minutes, minister.

16:28

Richard Lochhead: I am grateful to members for their really good contributions to the debate. It has been great to see unity and the Parliament getting behind a growing key Scottish sector. I am sure that that will be welcomed by all the companies and people who work in the space industry in Scotland. The sector has certainly captured the imagination and attention of colleagues from across all the parties.

Over the next few minutes I will touch upon a few of the contributions, or at least the themes raised by members.

I was particularly interested in Sandesh Gulhane's contribution, which appeared to come to us from the space station. He had dialled in remotely, and his backdrop made it look as though he was genuinely somewhere in space. I agreed with most of his speech, and I thought that he made some good points until he got to the end, when he seemed to say that our space industry was somehow a reason for our remaining in the union. It was then that I realised that he was definitely on a different planet to the rest of us. [*Laughter.*]

There were many other good and helpful contributions to the debate, and some important themes were raised.

As someone who has been in Parliament since 1999—there are a few other colleagues in the chamber who have been here since then—I know that, if someone had said to us back then that we would be debating Scotland's growing space industry in the Scottish Parliament, I am not quite sure that we would have believed them. As the MSP for Moray since 2006, I think that if someone had said to me that there was going to be a rocket company based in Forres, I would have thought that they had been having too many local drams, because I would not quite have believed that that could happen either.

Nevertheless, the fact that we are debating the space industry in Parliament, and that these companies are setting up the length and breadth of Scotland, shows how quickly the sector is advancing and the agenda is changing, and how well placed Scotland is to develop a vibrant space sector that makes a huge contribution to the economy.

The Government will accept both amendments. With regard to Jamie Halcro Johnston's

amendment, we very much welcome the UK Government's research funding and other funding towards the space sector in Scotland, as it is very important. Research funding is reserved to the UK Government and it is important that we have our fair share. The regulation of space and the issues around that are, likewise, reserved to the UK Government.

I say to all members, therefore, that I will do my utmost to have a constructive relationship with both the regulators. In due course, I will meet with Sir Stephen Hillier, the chair of the Civil Aviation Authority—I know that he has been in touch, seeking a meeting with me to discuss regulation with regard to all those issues—as well as with my counterparts in the UK Government in order to ensure that, working together, we can continue to promote Scotland's space sector.

With regard to the Labour Party's amendment, we agree with a number of the issues that it highlights, including the importance of science, technology, mathematics and engineering subjects. Attracting people with the right skills, and supporting the development of those skills in the Scottish economy into the sector, is also important. Building effective clusters across the country, which is already happening, and the role of the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland in advanced manufacturing and working in tandem with the space sector, are important themes too. We will therefore support the amendments today.

I asked my officials to put together a little map of space activity across Scotland, and they helpfully provided one for me. It reinforces the issues that many members raised when they spoke about companies in the space sector in their constituencies in different parts of Scotland. I cannot go through all the parts of Scotland that have space activity, but the map highlights Shetland, the Western Isles, Glasgow, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire, Argyll and Bute, West Lothian, Moray, Tayside, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, the area south of Edinburgh and so on. Beatrice Wishart, Christine Grahame, Colin Beattie and others also mentioned companies in their constituencies. The space industry in Scotland is now very much a national industry.

Alongside other innovative and high-growth sectors such as quantum technologies, photonics, robotics and autonomous systems, Scotland's space sector is one of the world's best-kept secrets. I hope, therefore, that we can all, together, endeavour to ensure that it no longer remains that way and that we bring the space industry and those other key sectors out of the shadows. Colin Beattie and other members made that point.

What is currently going on in the Scottish economy is absolutely staggering. In the chamber,

we have a tendency to dwell on the negative and the downsides, and on the challenges, which we understandably have to discuss. However, there are an enormous number of success stories in the Scottish economy. I have mentioned quantum technologies, photonics and robotics, and of course space, but those are just a few examples of high-value sectors that are growing and creating jobs, and giving Scotland opportunities for international leadership. We should be proud of that—we should celebrate it more often in the chamber and let the people of Scotland know about it.

My colleague Ivan McKee made an excellent contribution. I thank him—and John Swinney, who is also in the chamber—for playing a significant role in getting the space sector in Scotland to where it is today. Ivan McKee, in particular, oversaw the strategy and the sustainable road map. He mentioned earlier some of the trade missions that he has been on to secure vital inward investment and build relationships. He deserves huge credit for that, and I know from speaking to people in the space sector that they always mention how much support they got from him. All that I can do is stand here and say that I am going to do my best to follow in his footsteps and ensure that we deliver on-going support of that nature to the sector.

However, he did get me slightly concerned when he said that I, as the trade minister now, should support a national space mission. I thought that he meant that I was to lead a mission to outer space—however, I realised when I listened to him that he was speaking about a different definition of “mission”. I agree with some of the points that he made in his speech about supporting our international reputation building, and some other issues that he mentioned, and I certainly want to ensure that we take those forward.

One issue that he did talk about was about encouraging the Scottish Government and public sector organisations in Scotland to become anchor customers of the space sector. That is an important point, and the space companies that I spoke to also raised it with me. They would like to see the Scottish Government and public sector in Scotland working in close partnership to give them business and recruit the space sector, the satellite companies and the data science companies to help to solve some of Scotland’s problem. That is an important theme that we should pursue.

I am pleased that that has begun. Space Intelligence, one of the companies that is in partnership with Scotland’s nature agency, NatureScot, has already produced a groundbreaking new mapping system for Scotland. It is the country’s first ever nationwide, high-resolution habitat map and it gives an insight

into how Scotland’s natural capital is changing over time. That will have value for landowners, land managers, farmers, environmentalists and so on.

We have begun that work, but there is a long way to go to make sure that we can make the most of the excellence that is on our own doorstep.

Audrey Nicoll and other members talked about the importance of having a clean sector. People have an image of sending thousands of satellites into space, possibly creating debris and other environmental issues. That is why we should be proud of the fact that Scotland is again leading the world in space sustainability. When I spoke to the space companies, I learned about all the techniques that they are adopting to ensure that leadership. The rocket company Orbex, which is in my constituency, uses a clean fuel to put the rockets up. It took me by surprise that the company has developed that technology, but it just shows the advances that we are making in science and technology in Scotland, and the leadership that the space sector is showing in saying to the rest of the world that this can be done in a sustainable way. It is also great to see that other countries are now learning from Scotland.

I see that I am running out of time, so I will just pick up on skills. Carol Mochan, Daniel Johnson and other members talked about the need to ensure that we have the skills. We do face some challenges in that area, and this is also an issue in the sectors. In a way, they are good challenges to have, because Scotland is so popular for inward investment. We have companies that are about to employ hundreds more people in this country, so we must ensure that those people are available. It is a great sign that companies from around the world want to invest in Scotland. We are seeing that with Mangata Networks at Prestwick, which is about to create 500 new jobs. In the Highlands and Islands, 740 jobs are about to be created, reminding us that the industry is national and not just for the central belt. It is great news that all those jobs are going to be created, but we have to work with the skills system, which is being reviewed, and with our universities and colleges to make sure that the skills are available in the times ahead.

Scotland already has an amazing reputation for so many industries, including whisky, renewable energy, oil and gas—I could go on and on. When we come back to the chamber to debate the space sector in a year or two—or five, or whenever—I hope that the space sector will get the same recognition that the globally renowned industries that I have just mentioned already have all around the world.

Space has a key role to play in supporting Scotland's economy, in tackling climate change domestically and globally, and in making many other contributions to humankind and the future of our planet. We are already punching way above our weight globally. Given the rapid growth of the global space industry, now is the time for us to step up and seize the opportunity to make Scotland Europe's space nation.

I commend the motion to Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on opportunities for the space sector in Scotland.

Motion without Notice

16:39

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): At this point, I am minded to take a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, to bring forward decision time to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.39 pm.—[George Adam]

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I will be brief, but I seek your guidance on this. It seems to me that we are very thin on the ground in the chamber, particularly on the Conservative side. This erosion has been happening for a period of time. I seek your guidance on what the rules are about attending Parliament in person and remotely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Christine Grahame for her point. It is not a matter for the chair. [*Interruption.*] I invite the members on the front benches to stop exchanging views at this stage.

Does Parliament agree that decision time be brought forward to now?

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: An outbreak of harmony—thank you.

Decision Time

16:40

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We come to decision time. The first question is, that amendment S6M-08713.2, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08713, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on opportunities for the space sector in Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-08713.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08713, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on opportunities for the space sector in Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08713, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on opportunities for the space sector in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the continued growth of the Scottish space sector; recognises that the sector accounts for 18% of all jobs in the UK space industry; notes that the sector has been identified as a key economic opportunity through the National Strategy for Economic Transformation and that, in October 2021, industry, academia and government set out their collective ambition for Scotland to become a leading European space nation through the Scottish Space Strategy; welcomes the major investment by Mangata Networks in building its new hub in Scotland, which will support up to 575 highly-skilled jobs; recognises the strengths of the space sector in Scotland and the role of space data in tackling climate change; acknowledges the importance of strict environmental and safety regulations to this industry, given its wider impact; understands the significant opportunities for Scotland in becoming the home of space launches in Europe through the development of spaceports for civilian, science and technology programmes; welcomes the UK Government's commitment to support the space sector in the UK, including the recent £6.5 million of funding from the UK Space Agency, which benefitted UK-wide projects such as providing £373,000 for Space Scotland to strengthen the Scottish space ecosystem; further understands that ensuring that employers in the space sector have access to the skills and expertise they need in the workforce is essential to long-term success in the sector, and recognises that this will require improving delivery of STEM subjects in schools and revitalising skills delivery so that it is flexible, aligned to industry, and capable of reskilling and upskilling; emphasises the requirement for physical space for advanced manufacturing to be set up affordably and in proximity to supply chains to deliver effective clustering effects for the space sector; acknowledges the importance of cooperation and pooling, such as at the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, to enable the development of advanced manufacturing in the space industry, and highlights the importance of a supportive

regulatory regime and of the Scottish Government engaging collaboratively to ensure that this is delivered.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:40.

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