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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 25 May 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.

New Acute General Teaching Hospitals

1. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government where the new acute general teaching hospitals will be built over the next 10 years. (S6O-02284)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): In February 2021, the Scottish Government published its infrastructure investment plan, which outlined the Government's priorities until 2026. The timetable for the following five-year period is still to be determined, but I would expect the next plan to be published in late 2025 or early 2026.

Edward Mountain: The cabinet secretary will be aware that support is growing hourly for my petition to replace Raigmore. Given that there is such an appetite in the Highlands for a brand-new hospital, will the cabinet secretary agree to meet the board of NHS Highland and me to discuss that?

Michael Matheson: As a Government, we are committed to investing £1 billion over the next 10 years in health capital projects. That will include looking at facilities such as Raigmore when it comes to considering plans for either refurbishment or replacement programmes. We are committed to making sure that we make the right investments, and I engage with NHS Highland—I have just come from a call that involved a discussion with the chief executive of NHS Highland—to look at what further investments are necessary.

Of course, the member will be aware that we have just opened the new national treatment centre in Highland at a cost of almost £50 million and that, over the past two years, two new community hospitals have been provided, one in Aviemore and the other in Skye, at a cost of £18 million and £20 million. We have also agreed to take forward work on the redesign of services in Lochaber, which will see the replacement of the Belford hospital.

I assure the member that we are very much committed to making sure that we continue to

invest in healthcare in the Highlands, and we will continue to do that in a way that is planned with the local health board.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): It is important that we learn lessons from recent national health service capital investment projects elsewhere in the United Kingdom. As we know, in England, 10 of the 40 new hospitals that were pledged by Boris Johnson have faced lengthy delays as a result of not having the full planning permission that they needed to go ahead. Can the cabinet secretary advise what steps can be taken to guard against similar delays being experienced here, and can he provide any further information about anticipated pressures facing capital investment in NHS hospitals, given the current difficult economic context?

Michael Matheson: The member is right. To avoid the type of scenarios and problems that have been impacting on the hospital capital investment programme in England, we created NHS Scotland Assure, which has a very specific purpose. It does a thorough analysis and challenges every part of our capital investment programme in health to make sure that there is appropriate governance and that we have the appropriate permissions and so on in place, including planning permission, before capital projects are able to start, specifically to avoid the types of problems that they have been having in England.

The member is also right to highlight that construction inflation has had a significant impact on capital expenditure. If we look at the spring budget that was announced by the UK Government, we anticipate that, by 2024-25, we will see a 16 per cent reduction in our capital budget here in Scotland as a result of the cuts that are being made by the UK Government in capital expenditure. That will, of course, have an impact on our ability to invest in new projects. More of that will be set out in the medium-term financial strategy, which will be published later today by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance.

Sudanese Community in Scotland (Support)

2. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it can support the Sudanese community living in Scotland, in light of the on-going humanitarian crisis in Sudan. (S6O-02285)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government stands with the international community and communities across Scotland in our shared deep concern over the violence in Sudan. That particularly impacts the Sudanese community living in Scotland, many

of whom have friends and relatives directly affected.

On 10 May, I met representatives of the Sudanese community in Scotland alongside representatives from the national health service and third sector support organisations. That meeting was a starting point for dialogue about how we can support the Sudanese community in Scotland, including ensuring that Sudanese nationals who live here are aware of the support services that they can access and, where necessary, raising issues with the United Kingdom Government.

Clare Adamson: It would be helpful if some of those signposting bits of information could be shared with colleagues, as the situation is ongoing.

In my role as committee convener, I met Sudanese health workers online from across the UK, from senior staff and senior consultants to nurses and support services staff in our NHS, each a vital cog in making our NHS work. Some of their colleagues who work for the NHS were in Sudan at the time the crisis arose; others have gone back there to bring friends and family to safety, particularly elderly parents and children, and now find themselves in Egypt and Dubai, unable to obtain family visas.

The Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, please?

Clare Adamson: Those people are vital workers in our communities. Can the cabinet secretary make representations to the Home Office about the situation?

Angus Robertson: First, Clare Adamson is absolutely right to highlight the role of Sudanese nationals and people of Sudanese descent who work in our national health service. It is important to understand quite how many there are, and they deserve our recognition and support.

Secondly, I undertake to share with the member and other MSPs the signposting information that individual MSPs might wish to share with Sudanese nationals and constituents.

As asylum and immigration are reserved matters, we will press the UK Government on them. I have written to the Foreign Secretary and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice has written to the Home Secretary to call for safe and legal routes and arrangements for family reunion to be put in place. Those arrangements must be flexible enough to enable people who are forced to leave Sudan to safely come to the UK and join family who already have leave to remain here.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a supplementary from Foyso Choudhury. I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The situation in Sudan is not improving. Almost 1 million people have been displaced just one month into the conflict, and neighbouring countries are already overwhelmed with refugees. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government about the possible influx of refugees coming from Sudan if the conflict continues indefinitely?

Angus Robertson: Foyso Choudhury will have heard my previous answer, in which I talked about the communication that I have had with the UK Government and my cabinet secretary colleague has had with the Home Office on that question. He is absolutely right to ask what we can do to help families come together in this time of need, and I would be happy to work with him and colleagues across the chamber to do what we can to impress on the UK Government its responsibilities to ensure that that can happen

South Lanarkshire Health and Social Care Partnership (Meetings)

3. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with South Lanarkshire health and social care partnership, and what was discussed. (S6O-02286)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet representatives of all health and social care partnerships, including South Lanarkshire, to discuss matters of importance to local people. The cabinet secretary chaired an introductory meeting with the integration joint board chief officers, chairs and vice-chairs on Wednesday 17 May, and a representative of South Lanarkshire IJB was in attendance. Integration progress and priorities, and seasonal planning were discussed.

Collette Stevenson: Can the minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's work to support the provision of palliative care as well as on discussions with the hospice sector on a potential budget uplift to help retain and hire new staff?

As the minister knows, Kilbryde hospice in East Kilbride is Scotland's youngest hospice and it does not yet have the same legacy donations that others do. Would the minister or officials be able to meet representatives of Kilbryde hospice to discuss its unique situation?

Jenni Minto: The Scottish Government is considering the issues that the hospice sector raised at its meeting in March with the then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and

Sport, including immediate and longer-term funding issues.

It is the responsibility of the IJBs to plan and commission adult palliative and end-of-life care services for their areas using the integrated budgets that are under their control. My officials are engaging with health and social care partnerships and Scottish hospice sector representatives in relation to the issues and, separately, met Kilbride hospice on 10 May to hear its specific concerns.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Kilbride hospice and all other hospices are facing a funding crisis, because only a third of their money is given under statute and they have to raise the rest. When will the hospice sector find out for definite how much money it will get from the Government?

Jenni Minto: As we speak, my officials are working on the concerns of the hospice sector in Scotland. I am looking forward to working more closely with the sector and visiting some hospices to understand directly their concerns.

Healthcare Professionals (Continuing Professional Development)

4. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is ensuring that opportunities for continuing professional development are regularly available to healthcare professionals. (S6O-02287)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): NHS Scotland staff have access to good-quality training and professional development opportunities through clinical training and our Turas learning platform. All staff can expect support from their employer to help them to acquire new skills to meet the demands of their post.

Our personal development planning and review policy is being refreshed as part of the once for Scotland policy programme, to ensure that learning opportunities are available to NHS Scotland staff. An agenda for change review is also being conducted, in which protected time for learning is an immediate priority area.

Brian Whittle: Throughout my time on the Health and Sport Committee and the Public Petitions Committee, I heard consistent calls for general practitioners and other healthcare professionals to receive more information on a range of conditions such as ME, Lyme disease and Huntington's disease. At the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, there has been a call for GPs to receive specific training so that they can recognise long Covid. However, regular CPD sessions stopped during Covid while our

healthcare professionals dealt with that single issue.

The chief executive of NHS Ayrshire and Arran told me that we must restore CPD opportunities for GPs if we are to retain them. What will the Scottish Government do to restore CPD opportunities for our GPs in order to give them the tools that they require to ensure the very best healthcare?

Michael Matheson: We provide a range of training opportunities, and NHS Education for Scotland has a considerable level of online programmes and in-person training available for healthcare professionals, including GPs, covering a range of areas. As part of their CPD work, general practitioners are required to ensure that they maintain their knowledge of new and developing conditions.

As we recover from the pandemic, we want greater progress on the scope for more training provision. That is why some of the work that we are doing through the once for Scotland policy programme and the agenda for change review is to ensure that we provide healthcare professionals across NHS Scotland with a much broader range of training.

Fire Estate (Modernisation)

5. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to modernise the fire estate. (S6O-02288)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Steps to modernise the fire service estate are decisions for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to make. The Scottish Government has provided the service with a capital budget of £32.5 million for 2023-24. The allocation of the capital budget, including the decision on whether to prioritise fleet, equipment or the fire service estate, is a matter for the SFRS.

Katy Clark: This month, freedom of information responses to my office confirmed the poor state of Scotland's fire estate, with about 45 per cent of fire stations assessed as being in either bad or poor condition. Four fire stations are known to have no running water, and many have inadequate showering facilities, although we know that the toxins that firefighters come into contact with are carcinogenic. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is failing its duty of care to firefighters. Will the Scottish Government commit to an emergency funding package to address those issues?

Siobhian Brown: I agree that the safety of firefighters should be our priority. The fire stations with the least facilities are in remote locations and deal with very few incidents. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has introduced procedures to ensure that firefighters in those locations have

workable solutions to ensure that contaminated personal protective equipment is dealt with safely.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I recently had the pleasure of holding a members' business debate to recognise firefighters memorial day and to support the Fire Brigades Union's decon campaign. There is widespread support from the Scottish Trades Union Congress, Scottish Hazards and many individual trade unions for responsibility for health and safety legislation to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Given the Tories' race to the bottom when it comes to workers' rights and the disappointment over Labour's parking the idea during the Smith commission, does the minister support those calls, and will she press the United Kingdom Government to support them?

Siobhian Brown: The FBU's decon campaign highlights exactly why health and safety powers need to be devolved to this Parliament as a matter of urgency, so I am happy to support those calls.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Libraries (Community Ownership)

7. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding what support it can provide to communities to establish and operate community-owned libraries. (S6O-02290)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): I regularly meet my ministerial colleagues to discuss many cross-cutting issues, including that of libraries.

The Scottish Government's current support for libraries is through our annual funding to the Scottish Library and Information Council, which provides leadership, advocacy and advice on public library matters. More broadly, we provide support for communities to take forward meaningful cultural and creative activity through schemes such as our Culture Collective programme.

Evelyn Tweed: Strathblane Community Development Trust recently opened the first newly built community-owned public library facility to be opened in Scotland for many years. Services at the Thomas Graham library will be operated in partnership with Stirling Council.

Will the minister join me in congratulating Strathblane Community Development Trust on its efforts? Does she think that that model could be replicated elsewhere?

Christina McKelvie: Absolutely. The opening of the Thomas Graham community library represents

an incredible achievement by the community. It is the first time in Scotland that public library services are being delivered by a community and council partnership, and it is important to mark that.

Libraries are a part of Scotland's social fabric. They have a long-standing reputation as safe places, and they are free and open to all. That means that they are uniquely placed in communities across Scotland and are capable of promoting meaningful change. I know that the Thomas Graham community library is a sustainable model and one that the Scottish Library and Information Council was keen to encourage. I congratulate those involved on the work that they are doing, which I hope will be replicated across the board.

Dental Services (Patient Access)

8. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action is being taken to improve patient access to dental services. (S6O-02291)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We are working closely with the dental sector to ensure that it has the support that is necessary for it to be able to offer access to national health service care for patients. That includes the Scottish Government providing Scottish dental access initiative grants and recruitment and retention allowances to dentists and dental practices in qualifying areas.

The Scottish dental access initiative grant pays out a potential £100,000 for the first surgery, and £25,000 per additional surgery, to practices that set up a new NHS practice or extend an existing NHS practice. The recruitment and retention allowance provides up to £37,500 across three years to eligible NHS dentists.

Sharon Dowey: The current funding model for NHS dentistry is broken. Basic NHS procedures, such as denture-fitting or extraction procedures, are delivered at a loss, and no practices in South Ayrshire are taking on new NHS patients. Morale is at an all-time low and we are seeing an exodus from the NHS dental workforce. What is the minister doing to fix that?

Jenni Minto: The issue of dentistry has been raised a lot in the chamber over the last wee while, and I recognise that there are concerns about it. However, we are working incredibly closely with dentists to find a suitable process and fee structure that will support them to ensure that we have a sustainable dentistry service in Scotland that also provides NHS care.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank the minister for her comment about recruitment and retention. She will recognise that there are particular issues in rural and island areas. Can she

provide reassurance that any support for recruitment and retention will not be spent so thinly as to be ineffective in delivering the additional capacity that we need in rural and island areas?

Jenni Minto: As the member says, funding for retention is important. My officials have looked closely at where that should be concentrated in order to get the best results.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Police Scotland (Institutional Discrimination)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members that my wife is a serving Police Scotland officer.

Let me be clear: the vast majority of Scotland's front-line police officers do a fantastic job under incredible pressure. However, a new report to the Scottish Police Authority raises a number of serious concerns about systemic issues throughout Police Scotland. The independent review found "first hand" instances of "racism, sexism and homophobia".

In response, the chief constable of Police Scotland, Sir Iain Livingstone, said this today:

"It is right for me as chief constable to clearly state that institutional racism, sexism, misogyny and discrimination exist."

He continued:

"Police Scotland is institutionally discriminatory and racist."

What is the First Minister's response to the chief constable's statement?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Douglas Ross for raising the issue. First and foremost, I commend Sir Iain Livingstone, the chief constable of Police Scotland, for acknowledging institutional racism, misogyny and other discriminatory behaviours within Police Scotland. That is the first step that is required in order to dismantle the institutional and structural barriers that exist.

Douglas Ross is right to emphasise that this is not a criticism of individual police officers, who we know put themselves in harm's way to protect us day in and day out, but there is no doubt that institutional racism exists in our society. I take the opportunity to say, as a person of colour, that the chief constable's statement is monumental and historic. I remember raising the issue of racism in Strathclyde Police, as the force then was. I was stopped and searched more than a dozen times when I was a boy, when I was in my car, walking with my friends in the street or at airports.

The chief constable's acknowledgement is very welcome indeed. I hope that it also serves as a reminder to all of us that, whatever organisation we belong to, we have a responsibility to question the organisations that we lead—and that is certainly the case for me in the organisation I lead—and to reflect on whether we are doing enough to dismantle not only institutional racism but the structural discrimination that exists for

many people because of disability or sexual orientation or because they are women.

I welcome the chief constable's statement. As he himself has said, now that the acknowledgement has been made, it is so important that we see action to dismantle those barriers. I say once again that I take my responsibility as First Minister seriously and that I rededicate myself to doing everything that I can to dismantle the barriers of institutional racism, misogyny, bigotry and discrimination where they exist here in the Scottish Government and to doing all that I can do right across society in that regard.

Douglas Ross: The chief constable also said this today:

"When an organisation doesn't have all the necessary policies, processes, practices and systems in place to ensure that doesn't happen, it's an institutional matter."

The SPA report also found

"significant concerns about the absence of effective performance management systems during the first decade of Police Scotland's existence"

So, the problem is wider and is systemic. It starts far from the front line, with management and leadership. Does the First Minister agree? Given that he has just rededicated himself to tackling the issue, what urgent action will his Government take in response to the SPA report and the chief constable's statement?

The First Minister: Those in management and leadership positions absolutely have to bear responsibility. In particular, in organisations that we lead, it is our responsibility to examine the evidence, collate the data and come to a conclusion about the structural barriers that exist. That is true for me as the First Minister and I am certain that Douglas Ross will reflect on the organisation of the political party that he leads. That is an important point for those who are in management or leadership.

For all the disagreements that I have had with Anas Sarwar, one phrase that he uses captures the issue very well: this is a "fight for us all". That is absolutely right. Although management and leadership absolutely have a role to play, we all have a role to play in our organisations in confronting those barriers and reflecting on what more we can do to undermine them.

I am committed to working with Police Scotland. However, above and beyond that, I want to make sure that, for all organisations—in particular, those in the public sector—we collect the data, we have a view on the structural barriers that exist, and then we work with senior management and leadership, right across the public sector in particular, although I also challenge the private sector in this regard, to dismantle the barriers that

we know have existed and still exist right across our society.

Douglas Ross: The SPA review also found "outright fear" among officers about bringing forward complaints. At paragraph 5.8, the report notes:

"We heard of people being 'punished' for raising issues or concerns".

It is so clearly unacceptable that police officers who raised concerns internally were "punished". We must surely all agree that officers should be able to raise legitimate concerns without suffering any consequences.

My party has raised officers' concerns about the broken police complaints system for some time. It is clearly not fit for purpose. Given the severity of the report to the Scottish Police Authority, and the chief constable's statement, will the First Minister vow to change the current complaints system and the process within the force that in the past has let down and continues to let down front-line officers who raise legitimate concerns?

The First Minister: That is a very fair point from Douglas Ross. We are already taking forward work from Dame Elish Angiolini's review and various reports from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland in that regard. If there is more work that we can do, I absolutely commit to responding to the challenge that Douglas Ross and others have raised of looking at the complaints process.

Process is one thing, and it is important that we look at having the correct process. However, culture is equally if not sometimes even more important. That is why the chief constable's statement was so monumental. It demonstrates from the very top of the organisation that that culture is simply not acceptable. It is important that that permeates down through the ranks.

I go back to the point that Douglas Ross has made. Of course, I will absolutely seek to do what more can be done about the process that is in place. As I have said, we are taking forward the recommendations of Dame Elish Angiolini's review and various HMICS reports in that regard, but I welcome the statement from the chief constable. It is about more than just process, although process is important. Culture is vital, too.

Douglas Ross: Dame Elish Angiolini's report was published in 2020. Three years on, officers are still commenting about a system that is broken. My party has been raising that in the chamber for some time. The further report to the SPA and the chief constable's statement today make that a crucial issue that must be dealt with with the utmost urgency.

The SPA report also found that front-line pressures have left officers without the time to take part in vital training exercises. It found that officers did not feel that they had time to deal with legitimate complaints and grievances, because they were so stretched with their responsibility to maintain public order. It found:

“The greatest challenge we heard, and observed, to driving cultural change within the service was the pressures on frontline resourcing.”

Unison has said that there is a £74 million shortfall in the policing budget. Absolutely none of that excuses discrimination, but it is a serious problem that limits Police Scotland’s ability to change its culture and leaves thousands of first-class officers without the resources that they need to do their job. Does the First Minister accept that Scotland’s police officers are being asked to do too much with too little?

The First Minister: I do not agree with that characterisation. I re-emphasise a point that Douglas Ross just made. Of course, funding—and he is absolutely within his rights to question us in relation to our funding—can never be an excuse for institutional racism, institutional misogyny or institutional discrimination wherever it exists. That is a point that, in fairness, Douglas Ross himself has made, but I just want to re-emphasise it.

In terms of the funding that we provide for Police Scotland, despite UK Government austerity over the years, we have increased police funding year on year since 2016. We have invested more than £11.6 billion in policing since the creation of Police Scotland in 2013.

Of course, police officer numbers are operational matters for the chief constable, but the latest comparable data that we have shows that there are 30 police officers per 10,000 in Scotland. That compares favourably with 24 officers per 10,000 in other parts of the UK, in England and in Wales.

As for what more we can do to reduce the burden on police officers, which again is a very fair and legitimate point for Douglas Ross to raise, we are doing a fair bit of work in relation to the mental health call-outs that police officers often have to attend and which we know take up a significant amount of their time. I am happy to write to Douglas Ross with the detail of that work that we are progressing.

As for the crux of the questions that Douglas Ross is asking, we have been working alongside policing partners to deliver Dame Elish Angiolini’s recommendations. To date, 58 of those recommendations have been delivered and, given the urgency of the issue, the Government will introduce later this year the police complaints and

misconduct handling bill to deliver on the recommendations.

I go back to the central point, which I think that everybody will agree with. It is so important for institutional racism and other discriminatory behaviours to be recognised. What, then, is really important is to work together to ensure that we dismantle those barriers, and I am certainly committed to doing so. I have no doubt that the chief constable is committed to that, too, and I am certain that whoever succeeds him in his role will also look to do so.

Freedom of Information Requests (Response Times)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I, the First Minister and many others have been campaigning on the issue of racism, prejudice and hate for many, many years, and I do not think that we can downplay the significance of the chief constable’s bold statement today. However, it is important to emphasise that not a single organisation or institution is immune to prejudice. That means that we must not see just words, although words are important. The statement must inspire action, and as the First Minister has said, that is a responsibility for each and every single one of us.

There is a culture of secrecy and cover-up at the heart of this dysfunctional and incompetent Scottish National Party Government. The dodgy deal with Liberty Steel, the ferry fiasco, the shambolic deposit return scheme and even heartbreaking tragedies at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital are all shrouded in secrecy. Incompetence has consequences, whether or not it be hidden from view.

Freedom of information laws are one of the last defences against SNP cover-ups, but ministers are riding roughshod over them. New data that we are publishing today shows that the number of FOI requests that the Scottish Government has passed on to ministers for approval has risen five-fold, and once a case goes to ministers for sign off or cover up, the waiting times double, with one in every six FOI requests breaching legally binding response times. Can I therefore ask the First Minister this: what has he got to hide?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There is nothing to hide, and I think that it is a sign of increasing desperation that Anas Sarwar is relying on insinuation, on trying to throw as much mud as he possibly can in the hope that things stick and on that sort of scattergun approach. Actually, this Government has a very good record in responding to freedom of information requests. We are the Government that has the most ambitious targets on these islands when responding to FOI legislation.

Yes, there have undoubtedly been challenges. When I was questioned on the issue at the Conveners Group meeting yesterday, I responded by saying that I was more than happy to review, look at and investigate what more the Scottish Government can do to ensure that we are the most transparent Government on these islands. That is what we will seek to do. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: I say to Anas Sarwar that there are, of course, legitimate reasons why ministers may have to sign off on freedom of information requests. I have made it very clear to our cabinet secretaries and ministers that, when those approvals come up, they should be signed off with urgency and at pace.

Anas Sarwar mentioned Ferguson's shipyard. In relation to transparency, as soon as that written authority was provided, the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy came in here at the earliest opportunity to take questions and to make sure that he answered those questions. That is not hiding away; that is transparency in action.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister says that he is transparent—transparently hopeless is what people right across the country will see.

We pointed to facts. He should listen to his own Scottish Information Commissioner. The Scottish National Party despises transparency. At every turn, it covers up failure instead of confronting it. There are no answers on what will happen to its shambolic deposit return scheme, no answers on the ferry fiasco, despite years of delays and millions of pounds of overspend, no answers for families who are bereaved by the scandal at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, and bullying investigations are kept secret.

I asked the previous First Minister to share the outcome of Fergus Ewing's bullying investigation and she said that it was legally impossible to do so. But Humza Yousaf has now suggested that he has had a change of heart. Why? Because the politician in question has the audacity to question the SNP leadership.

Can the First Minister tell me: does he believe in transparency every day, or just when he desperately needs it to try and intimidate his critics?

The First Minister: This is desperate, desperate stuff. As I said, when Anas Sarwar—somebody who has lots of style but no substance—comes to this chamber and demands that we take action. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: When he demands that we take action but has no facts to back it up, that is when you know how desperate Anas Sarwar really is.

Let me give him some of the facts that were, of course, missing from his question. Scotland has been a member of the Open Government Partnership since 2016. In 2022, last year, we handled more than 4,500 freedom of information requests and 86 per cent of responses—more than eight of out 10—came within 20 working days. We want to do more, and we should see whether we can improve that rate of response, where we can.

On DRS, it is incredible that it now seems that Anas Sarwar is taking the side of the Cabinet's man in Scotland. He is taking the side of the party that is determined to undermine devolution. Anas Sarwar—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: Anas Sarwar is so desperate to attack the SNP that he is siding with the party that opposed the creation of the Scottish Parliament in the first place.

When it comes to the question that he asked in relation to ministerial complaints, my view has not changed from what that of my predecessor was. She was absolutely right. We have an obligation in the Government to take legal advice where appropriate and to adhere to that legal advice on any issue, including complaints around former ministers. I will continue to take that responsible approach and I will also continue to make sure that we do everything that we can as a Government to be as open and as transparent as we possibly can.

Anas Sarwar: We now have a first: a no-style and no-substance First Minister and leader of the SNP.

In fact, we are taking the side of Scottish businesses and Scottish jobs. Perhaps the First Minister should listen to the consequences of what he is imposing on people. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Sarwar—I can hardly hear. I am sure that those who are gathered here to witness the session in action would also like to hear. Let us keep the noise down while members are on their feet, shall we?

Anas Sarwar: It is okay, Presiding Officer. The First Minister's strategy is going really well. Just keep doing what you are doing—it is working really well for you.

The SNP is taking Scots for a ride, and we do not even get the luxury of enjoying the camper van. FOI laws are flouted, dissent is suppressed

and problems are swept under the carpet. This is a dysfunctional, incompetent and sleaze-ridden Government, failing on the basics. And that has consequences: a national health service at breaking point and a cost of living crisis spiralling out of control.

The SNP is a party in chaos, distracted from the day job. Its finances are under police investigation, a former council leader is under police investigation, the previous chief executive was arrested, the previous treasurer was arrested, offices were raided and there were police tents in gardens.

I have two questions for the First Minister. First, he says that he is transparent, so will he tell us how many police investigations into the activities of his party and his Government are on-going? Secondly, when will he finally end the rotten culture of secrecy and incompetence that is at the heart of this SNP Government?

The First Minister: I tend to think it best for politicians to leave such verdicts to the people of Scotland. Of course, time and time again, they have chosen the SNP to lead the Scottish Government. I saw Anas Sarwar celebrating polls that, once again, put the Labour Party in second place. He was celebrating being a loser. That sums up Anas Sarwar and the Scottish Labour Party pretty well.

Mr Sarwar said that, when it comes to the DRS, he is on the side of business. I remind him that many of our business organisations want to the scheme to be progressed. No less than AG Barr—the producers of Scotland's national drink, Irn-Bru—Coca-Cola and many other business organisations want the scheme to go ahead, because they see the value of protecting our environment. That is what the DRS will do. Incredibly, just to take a pop at the SNP, Anas Sarwar sides with the Tories on that.

However, that is not the only issue on which he has sided with the Tories. If he wants to talk about business, we know that one of the biggest shocks to our economy has been caused by the hard Brexit that has been imposed upon us by the Conservative UK Government. Members of Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party have become born-again Brexiteers. The Labour Party is doing damage—and will do further damage—to our economy because of its hard Brexit stance. The only way for Scotland to escape the born-again Brexiteers, whether they be Tories or from the Labour Party, will be by having the full powers of an independent nation.

Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Contract (Consultants)

3. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister for what reason consultants have reportedly been hired to advise on the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry contract. (S6F-02152)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We are committed to engaging with our various stakeholders in the development of the next generation of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract. That includes engaging with our island communities. As I said at yesterday's meeting of the Parliament's Conveners Group, it is routine practice to use specialist advisers for complex, high-value projects such as this one, to ensure that we deliver a service that meets our needs and achieves value for money.

Our external advisers will assist with commercial and programme management of the project. They will provide a level of technical expertise to ensure that the contract reflects industry best practice to deliver a service that will meet both our current and future requirements. We will also seek the views of communities and other stakeholders to inform the approach that is taken.

Graham Simpson: The problem is that the Scottish Government has now spent £5.5 million on consultants to advise it on what to think about how to run the ferry network. We have had project Neptune, which set out a number of options, and Angus Campbell was then tasked with asking islanders what they think. What has been the outcome of that? The current contract with CalMac, which has already been extended, expires in 15 months' time. There is no time left to start the procurement process for the next round. The Government's approach has been all about dither, delay and incompetence. Will the First Minister tell us whether CalMac will be awarded another extension? Is he now considering a new operating model for running and procuring our ferries?

The First Minister: We have known for a long time that the Tories have not liked the Government's use of experts; they have made that clear over the years. However, it is so important that a contract for a project of this size brings in the technical expertise that is required.

I make no apologies at all for the fact that we are engaging with island communities. Graham Simpson was absolutely right to mention the work that is being undertaken by Angus Campbell, following a key recommendation in the project Neptune report. Mr Campbell has spent the past few months visiting and engaging with island communities and ferry users, and his report should be with ministers soon.

Although there is no specific obligation to inform Parliament of procurement competitions, we will, of course, update Parliament on the decisions that are taken, because we understand just how important this matter is.

We are looking to ensure that our island communities have the best possible service, and we are focused on ensuring that the current service is as resilient and reliable as possible. That is why we made sure that CalMac chartered the MV Alfred.

I will not pre-empt the outcome of the work that is currently taking place, but I restate unequivocally that we have no plans to privatise, nor indeed to split up, the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The problem with the Clyde and Hebrides ferry service is not the contract but the ferry fleet. The First Minister knows that the provision of the fleet is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. A consultants' report cannot cover up the Government's dismal failure to provide working ferries. Will the First Minister now apologise for his own, and his Government's, failure to provide ferries that are up to the job?

The First Minister: We have invested in our ferry service and our ferry fleet, and we continue to do so by investing in six ferries to add to the resilience of the fleet. In the meantime, however, we are not waiting for those ferries to be built. Where we can charter additional tonnage, we are doing so. CalMac has, rightly, spent a considerable amount of money in order to ensure that it has in place the MV Alfred, which is currently providing additional resilience on the Arran route—a very important route not only for the islanders but for Scotland.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): The island of Mull is currently at the sharp end of Scotland's ferry crisis, with many people simply unable to get on or off the island as a result of the Scottish National Party's catastrophic management of our ferry network. Residents are at their wits' end, especially given that the alternative route via the Corran ferry is out of service.

Island communities are rightly calling for a compensation scheme. Will the First Minister commit to that? What urgent action will he take to sort out the problems that islanders on Mull are currently suffering?

The First Minister: I will ensure that the Minister for Transport communicates with Donald Cameron directly on the actions that we are taking in relation to the issues that the community on Mull faces.

Of course, the issues around compensation have understandably and rightly been raised, many a time, with the Government. I have looked into the penalty deductions that are made in relation to failures on the network, and my view is that we should continue to use that money to reinvest in the ferry network. There is a legitimate goal around the use of those deductions, but I think that the best use of that money is to reinvest it back into the network.

To give just one example, I mentioned the MV Alfred, which has been chartered at a cost of £9 million. Between £1 million and £3 million of that is coming from performance deductions and the penalties that Donald Cameron mentioned, so it is right that that money is reinvested for the benefit of the resilience of the entire network.

Violence in Schools (Role of Social Media)

4. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the role of social media in encouraging violence towards pupils and teachers in schools. (S6F-02169)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Violence is never acceptable. The safety of pupils and staff in our schools is of paramount importance to the Government, and I am deeply concerned about the violent content involving bullying and violent attacks in schools and on public transport, and in other places where young people gather, that has been posted online.

Westminster's Online Safety Bill could be a means to ensure that social media companies take seriously their responsibility to contain violent content. On 9 May, I wrote to the United Kingdom Government to urge it to use the bill to tackle that very issue.

We have produced guidance for local authorities and schools to promote positive relationships and to manage behaviours, including through the de-escalation of violent behaviour. As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced yesterday, she will, in the coming weeks, convene a summit that will focus on tackling violence in schools.

Rona Mackay: The widespread use of apps such as TikTok and Instagram means that violence is broadcast beyond playground walls, with staff left vulnerable in ways that they have not been previously. As the First Minister said, however, the Scottish Government is limited in its powers with regard to online activity. Will the Scottish Government implore the UK Government to call on social media companies to improve their standards and sanctions when it comes to removing material that promotes violence?

The First Minister: I am happy to work as constructively as we can with the UK Government on that matter. I think that all of us in the chamber probably conclude, rightly, that social media companies can do a lot more when it comes to violent and hateful content, of which members in the chamber have, unfortunately, been the subject for many years.

Although the regulatory responsibility for social media lies with the United Kingdom Government, I am clear that providers have a responsibility to enforce their own policies on harmful online content. We will also reflect on what more we can do. Even though we do not have the regulatory powers to take direct action, we can perhaps engage with social media companies at a ministerial level to see what more pressure we can apply so that they live up to their own policies on harmful online content.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, the First Minister's Government finally accepted the call of the Scottish Conservatives for urgent action on violence and disruptive behaviour in schools, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills finally agreed that urgent action—not more talk—is needed to support Scotland's teachers and pupils. Therefore, will the First Minister make a commitment today that an action plan to tackle violence and disruption in schools will be in place for the start of the new school year in August?

The First Minister: Although this is, of course, an important issue and it is right that Stephen Kerr raises it, I regret that he has attempted to turn it into a political point. I have said clearly in my response that, although the powers in relation to online content lie with the UK Government, I am willing to work constructively with it.

I think that everyone here, regardless of our political persuasion and whether they are a parent or not, absolutely understands the hurt, harm and anxiety caused to young people and, indeed, staff. There is no hesitancy or reticence from the Scottish Government in relation to being as constructive and proactive as we can. That is why, on top of the guidance that we have already issued, we provided £2 million of funding to support violence prevention and other such activity within schools and communities.

As Stephen Kerr already knows, we are gathering evidence that will help us to better understand the extent of violence and poor behaviour at a national level across schools in Scotland. That started in February, and I will certainly reflect on what more we can do collectively before the school term starts.

Dementia Care

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports of world-leading dementia expert Craig Ritchie leaving the national health service, and his comments referring to problems with infrastructure and blockages in the system. (S6F-02164)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am grateful to all clinicians and researchers who make a valuable contribution to our national health service, and I very much recognise the expertise that Professor Ritchie has built up over his career. We share his ambition to improve interventions and support people with dementia, and I take his criticisms very seriously indeed. I have asked the health secretary to review and consider whether there is more that we need to do in these areas.

Long waits to access dementia diagnosis and healthcare are not acceptable. That is why we allocated £6 million of ring-fenced funding to dementia post-diagnostic support over the past two years, in addition to the estimated £2.2 billion that was spent on dementia across Scotland in 2022-23 by local partnerships, which represents a 14 per cent increase since 2014.

We will publish our new dementia strategy later this month, and later this year our first two-year delivery plan will be agreed with partners and people who have lived experience of dementia.

Claire Baker: I am pleased that the First Minister will take Craig Ritchie's comments seriously, because the new delayed strategy will be the fourth iteration. Many of the commitments in the past 12 years, such as those on post-diagnostic support, have seen slow delivery or have not been achieved at all, and contributions to the national conversation on the new strategy highlighted a gap between Scotland's commitment on dementia policy and people's experience of care. Can the First Minister advise how the new dementia strategy will address those persistent gaps between rhetoric and reality, alongside delivering any new commitments on the strategy?

Further, the First Minister said that the related strategy delivery plan will be announced by the end of the year. Can he give us a firm commitment on that, because we are still waiting on the original strategy, which is now late?

The First Minister: I will give a commitment that we will, as I said, publish our new dementia strategy later this month and that the first two-year delivery plan will be agreed with partners and people with lived experience this year. Obviously, I will not pre-empt the strategy that will come out, but I am more than happy for the Government to commit to ensuring that there is a full discussion or even a debate on that important strategy.

Claire Baker has rightly raised a number of issues from Professor Ritchie's comments that we need to make even more progress on, particularly in relation to research. I am pleased to be able to say that the chief scientist's office has funded the neuroprogressive and dementia network. More than 1,000 people were recruited to dementia trials in 2021-22. I want to see what more we can do in order to progress research in relation to dementia.

The second issue that Professor Ritchie was absolutely right to raise was diagnosis rates. Again, Claire Baker was right to challenge the Government on that. I have asked the health secretary to look at what more can be done to ensure that we have the data to hand to improve diagnosis rates as early as we possibly can for people with dementia.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Following the answers to Claire Baker's questions, I refer to the review that the First Minister raised. Can the review address the professor's comment that there are tests that can detect amyloid, which is a major contributor to dementia, and that there are drugs that can clear that, but the Government infrastructure is not in place to deliver either of those?

The First Minister: That is, of course, one of the key comments that Professor Ritchie made. We will absolutely look at that. That is where the research side is so important, of course. On top of that, we are keen to see what we can do to increase the availability of medicines. We know that there is not, unfortunately, a drug that can cure dementia, and we hope that science will continue to make progress in relation to the fight against dementia. However, I hope that, where there are effective treatments or treatments that can be trialled, there is more that we can do within our infrastructure to make them as widely available as they possibly can be.

Nature Restoration Fund (Impact on Arran)

6. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister what impact the Scottish Government's nature restoration fund is having on communities on Arran. (S6F-02173)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The nature restoration fund will provide £65 million over this parliamentary session to multiyear and multipartner projects to restore and regenerate nature and address climate change. To date, a total of £430,000 from the fund's competitive scheme has been awarded to three projects on Arran: the glen habitat restoration project, the Dougarie estate's green network project, and the support for the Community of Arran Seabed Trust

marine restoration project. All of those will bring benefits for nature and local communities.

North Ayrshire Council has also been directly allocated £356,000 since the fund's inception. We will shortly write to local authorities to confirm their allocations for 2023-24. Local authorities, of course, make decisions about local biodiversity priorities in relation to that funding.

Ross Greer: Last Friday, I had the privilege of attending the launch of RV Coast Explorer at Lamlash bay. I am proud that that vessel was partly funded by £200,000 from the nature restoration fund, which was established by the Scottish Greens.

Lamlash bay's no-take zone, which was demanded and delivered by the local community, has had astounding success. That is a brilliant example of a highly protected marine area. It has seen a huge recovery in the marine environment, which is great for nature and marine tourism, and it has boosted the local fishing industry. Species such as scallop and lobster in adjacent waters are now bigger and more plentiful. How will the sustained success of Lamlash bay's no-take zone be taken on board in progressing HPMA's elsewhere?

The First Minister: I absolutely agree with Ross Greer. Lamlash Bay is a perfect example of exactly what we are looking to achieve throughout Scotland's seas. That is an engaged local community that is reaping the benefits from the increased marine protection. Ross Greer articulated very well some of those benefits. It is great to see funding to the Community of Arran Seabed Trust from the nature restoration fund, which has helped to support the purchase of RV Coast Explorer.

There are lots of lessons for us to learn. We have had many a discussion and debate in the chamber on the issue of highly protected marine areas, and I suspect that we will have many more. However, I have made it very clear that we want to engage with communities. The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition, among others, will travel across our island communities and our coastal communities to engage with individuals who could be affected by highly protected marine areas. Let us get to a place where we work with the communities that want to see that further protection in their marine environment to ensure marine sustainability for the future.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries. I have several requests, and I am keen to get through them, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Cost of Living

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): The latest Office for National Statistics figures show that inflation has dipped slightly to 8.7 per cent, but food prices continue to accelerate at the fastest pace for 45 years. The United Kingdom cost of living crisis has been years in the making, with Tory austerity, welfare reforms and Brexit hammering household incomes. What is the Scottish Government doing within its limited powers and resources to shield people from the harm that has been created in large part by the actions of the Tories in Westminster? *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): It is almost a weekly occurrence that, whenever poverty is mentioned, we hear groans from members on the Conservative benches. The cost of living is still far too high for too many families, who are struggling with the increasingly unaffordable cost of food, the increase in energy bills and the cost of everyday essentials, after years and years of austerity, a hard Brexit that has been imposed on Scotland and completely and utterly catastrophic economic mismanagement by the Tory Government in London.

We will do everything that we can within our powers, such as delivering the game-changing Scottish child payment, tripling our fuel insecurity fund, providing free childcare for all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds, and providing free bus travel to 2 million people. However, we know that it is only with the full economic and fiscal powers of an independent nation that ministers can use all the levers that other Governments have to tackle inequalities.

To give an example, a reversal of just a few of the regressive welfare decisions that the UK Government has made could lift 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty. Members should be in no doubt that this cost of living crisis that has plunged so many people into poverty is a political choice by the Conservative Party, and the only way out of it is to achieve our independence.

Criminal Justice (Sentencing)

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Mum of two Jill Barclay was beaten and raped by a stranger. Rhys Bennett then set her on fire while she was still alive. The judge described the 23-year-old's crimes as "medieval in their barbarity", yet his prison sentence was reduced due to new under-25s sentencing guidelines. Will Humza Yousaf tell the people of Scotland whether he thinks that those guidelines should apply in every single case, no matter how wicked or barbaric the crime?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Those are not matters that are decisions for the First Minister; they are, rightly, left to the independent judiciary, as they always must be, even in the most heinous and despicable cases, such as the case of Jill Barclay.

Of course, all our thoughts are with Jill's family, who will have been affected by what was a despicable crime. Her family, friends and community will undoubtedly be reeling from the barbarity of that sickening and medieval act, as it was described by Russell Findlay. However, it can never be the case that politicians, let alone Government ministers, interfere in sentencing decisions that are made by the judiciary.

Sentencing guidelines are taken forward by the independent Scottish Sentencing Council. What I said in relation to a previous case that was raised with me as First Minister was that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, in her regular engagement with the Sentencing Council, has asked for more information around when those regular reviews of sentencing guidance will take place. I am sure that she will be happy to keep the member informed of those discussions.

NHS Tayside (Lower Pelvic Prolapse Surgery)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I have here a letter received by my constituent in July 2022 from the Scottish National Party Government. It told her that surgery for lower pelvic prolapse should be completed within one year by order of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Humza Yousaf. My constituent has now waited for her surgery for eight and a half years.

As a last resort, we spoke to the press about her deeply personal situation. That forced the hand of NHS Tayside, which will now pay for the private surgery. Why should it come to that? My constituent spent eight and a half years telling the most intimate details of her life to journalists. Those were Humza Yousaf's guarantees. I now have two further cases of women in Tayside who have been waiting years and years for that essential surgery. Does the First Minister know how many women are waiting for treatment for lower pelvic prolapse, and how long they have been waiting for? Is this another Tayside crisis, or are women across Scotland suffering in silence?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Michael Mara for raising that incredibly important issue. Lower pelvic prolapse affects many women up and down the country. Of course, we had challenges with our waiting times pre-pandemic, but there is no doubt that, by any objective measure, the pandemic, which has been the biggest shock that our NHS has ever faced in its

almost 75-year existence, has had a significant impact.

We are focused on trying to assist people who have been waiting the longest, so the focus has been on the two-year waits. The number of out-patients who have been waiting for more than two years has declined, dropped or reduced by more than 50 per cent since September and by more than 60 per cent since June last year. The number of those waiting for more than two years for in-patient day cases was down by 28 per cent in six months, and 18 out of 30 specialties had fewer than 10 patients waiting for more than two years—so we are making progress.

I am more than happy for Michael Marra to forward information about the specific cases that he has mentioned to me or the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care. We will seek to do anything that we can to assist.

Fuel Prices

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the latest update from the Competition and Markets Authority indicating that global factors are not solely to blame for high fuel prices, with the evidence indicating that fuel margins have increased across the retail market over the past four years, particularly for supermarkets. The First Minister will also be aware that I have previously raised in the chamber my concern that Morrisons, Tesco and BP have been ripping off my Greenock and Inverclyde constituents. Will the First Minister commit the Scottish Government to making representations to the United Kingdom Government and to the CMA when its full report is published in July to ensure that reforms are forthcoming in order to prevent fuel retailers from robbing my constituents?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I will make representations, as Stuart McMillan has asked me to do. I commend him for raising the issue consistently in the chamber on behalf of his constituents. There is no doubt that high fuel prices have contributed to the cost of living crisis for people and businesses across Scotland. The Scottish Government has raised the issue of inconsistent pricing between urban and rural areas, and in areas such as Inverclyde in particular, with the Competition and Markets Authority as a key issue for investigation. I am happy to re-emphasise those points to the CMA. I welcome its latest update and note that it is seeking more information from supermarkets on their role in the fuel market, and that it has indicated that its final report will cover the important issue of geographical variations in pricing. If there are any further representations

that we can make on the issue, I will make sure that we make them.

Police Time (Mental Health Issues)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Earlier this week, I met with the chief superintendent of Lanarkshire police. Of the many things that we discussed about the increasing pressure on the police force, the fact that, out of the more than 15,000 cases that the police attended last month, only 19 per cent involved criminal activity was a bit of a surprise. Many of the rest of the cases involved mental health issues. Is there a recognition that cutting many other support services is putting increased pressure on police time, especially when the police are having to cut their numbers on the streets?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Over the years, the Government has increased our spend on mental health considerably. We are increasing the number of staff who work in child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—as well as in psychological services. Notwithstanding that, Brian Whittle is right to raise the issue of the amount of police time that is taken in helping people who have mental health challenges and vulnerabilities. That is not great for the police service or the police and it is not the best for the individuals who are suffering from mental health challenges.

We have done a range of work through the distress brief intervention programme, for example, and the enhanced mental health pathway. I am happy to ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care writes to Brian Whittle to detail the interventions that are under way. Brian Whittle can be absolutely assured that the health secretary and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs are working closely on the matter.

Fornethy House Survivors

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Over 30 years, hundreds—maybe even thousands—of little girls who were sent by the state to Fornethy House residential school for care and nurturing were instead subjected to a catalogue of unimaginable mental, physical and, in some cases, sexual abuse. To date, none of the perpetrators of that abuse has been fully brought to justice.

Dozens of those little girls, who are now women, are in Parliament today to listen to my members' business debate on justice for the Fornethy survivors. They do not expect the First Minister to intervene in a police investigation, but they do want to be listened to, so they have asked me to ask the First Minister to personally meet them—not necessarily today, but soon—to listen to their

plight and give them the unequivocal assurance that what happened to those little girls will be properly acknowledged. That is surely the least that we can do.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Yes, I will commit to meeting the survivors; I have met some of them—some are constituents of mine and I have met them as a local MSP. I am afraid that I will not be able to meet them today, but I am certain that our offices can liaise to find a suitable time.

I commend Colin Smyth for bringing his members' business debate, which will take place after this question time. I hope that he will accept my apologies for being unable to stay for that, but the Deputy First Minister will respond on the Government's behalf.

As for Colin Smyth's request, he is right that that is the least that we and I can do. I am happy to meet the survivors and I invite him to assist in facilitating that meeting.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:51

Meeting suspended.

12:52

On resuming—

Fornethy House Survivors

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I encourage MSPs who are leaving the chamber and members of the public who are leaving the gallery to do so as quickly and quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-06729, in the name of Colin Smyth, on justice for Fornethy House survivors. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible. I also reiterate that, as the note that was circulated to members said, sub judice issues apply to the matters that are to be debated.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it considers as the inspirational women who have bravely come forward to highlight the plight of the reported hundreds of survivors of physical, mental and sexual abuse at Fornethy House Residential School, in Angus, when they attended to convalesce or for short breaks between 1960 and the 1990s; notes reports that over 200 women have revealed the appalling abuse that they suffered at Fornethy House when they were young girls; commends these women for what it sees as their determined and admirable campaign for justice; recognises the reported challenges that survivors of Fornethy House have experienced in qualifying for Scotland's Redress Scheme due to the eligibility criteria excluding those abused in short-term respite care; notes the reported difficulties that the survivors have had in obtaining personal records that were held by the owners of Fornethy House at the time, which were Glasgow Corporation and Strathclyde Regional Council; further notes the ongoing Police Scotland investigation, but regrets that, to date, none of the alleged perpetrators of the abuse have been brought to justice, and notes the view that these women deserve both justice and recognition for the appalling abuse that they suffered at Fornethy House Residential School.

12:53

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I will quote.

"I travelled in a black cab to Fornethy from Riddrie, where I lived at the time when I was a wee girl. I was taken in through the big arch door, and as soon as the door closed, that's when my nightmare began. Six weeks of hell I've carried with me all of my life."

Those are the words of my constituent Marion Reid from Carluke, who was sent to Fornethy House residential school in the summer of 1965, when she was eight years old. She was one of hundreds—maybe even thousands—of women who were sent by the state to Fornethy as wee girls. Many were the same age as my two daughters are now. They thought that they were

going to rest and recuperate, but instead they were abused physically, mentally and—in some cases—sexually.

Dozens of those brave survivors are in the public gallery today. They cannot speak in the chamber, so I want to share their story—a story that needs to be heard. I want to give a voice to those women's fight for justice. I want to help to ensure that what happened to those wee girls at Fornethy is finally properly acknowledged. I am grateful to the many MSPs from every party in Parliament who have signed the motion and are showing their support to those brave survivors.

For those who are unfamiliar with the story, it started when Fornethy House in Angus was gifted to Glasgow City Council, which was then Glasgow Corporation, in the 1960s, but the impact goes way beyond the day on which it closed its doors in June 1993. Under the agreement, Fornethy House was to be used to support disadvantaged girls, but rather than being supported and rather than being nurtured, those wee girls were subjected to a catalogue of unimaginable abuse that has stayed with them to this day.

Fiona was sent to Fornethy when she was seven, in 1970-71. She recalls:

"I remember girls being force fed, and if it made them sick they were then force fed their own vomit."

Rosina was sent to Fornethy three times from the age of eight in 1968. She said:

"There was a wee lassie there. She had what we now call eczema. When I think of that wee lassie and the pain she used to go through, I just want to cry. They scrubbed her 'til she was bleeding. She would cry, so they hit her for screaming.

If you wet the bed, you got a doing for that, and there were certain things you didn't get. I wasn't allowed a drink of milk. One time I was so desperate for a drink, when it came to brushing my teeth I rinsed my mouth out and tried to take a wee drink of water. I was seen doing it, I was hit in the back of the head, my teeth went into my top lip and it started to bleed. I was slapped for making a mess because I was bleeding into the sink. I was made to sit out in the hallway, not allowed to go to bed. I sat there petrified. You were a wee wean."

Survivor Elaine, who was sent to Fornethy in the 1970s, recalls:

"We were forced to write postcards home that said, 'Having a great time. Fornethy is fabulous.' It was written on a blackboard for us to write out."

Another survivor, Helen, said:

"I was crying. I wanted to go home. It was a nightmare. I was touched by an older woman in places I shouldn't have been. I tried to approach the head of Fornethy. I was told children should be seen and not heard."

I wish I could share every story, but hundreds of women have now spoken up. Yet, despite so many testimonies and so many devastating stories, not one of the perpetrators of those horrific

crimes has yet been fully brought to justice. I appreciate the complexities and challenges, and I welcome the fact that in recent days there has been some progress in bringing one case to court. I am conscious that there is still a live police investigation, but it has been live for years and time is running out.

Many of the people who should have been jailed have died, including Fornethy's first headmistress, Nellie Bremner, and its longest serving headmistress, Margaret Fletcher. They ruled Fornethy with, as one survivor said, "brutality and cruelty", and some of those perpetrators died years after their crimes were first reported to the police. They should have been brought to justice before now.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Does Colin Smyth agree that, as well as being denied natural justice through the courts of law, the Fornethy survivors have fallen between the two stools of our approach to historical abuse, in that the historical abuse inquiry did not cover respite care but was, rather, focused on residential schooling? As such, they have been denied justice from that quarter, as well.

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

Colin Smyth: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

Alex Cole Hamilton has made a very valid point. Time after time, blocks have been put in the way of the women, whether in relation to justice, for acknowledgment or to hear their story. My appeal to the police and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service is that, in the time that we have left, they should leave no stone unturned until those women get justice before it is too late, because they have had nothing but barriers put in their way when they should have had answers.

Before they were sent to Fornethy, the girls all had medicals, but they were never told why they were sent and, according to Glasgow City Council, no records of those girls' time at Fornethy now exist. I asked the council to meet me and the women to discuss why it refused. The council said that it would not be appropriate to have such a meeting. The records are likely to have been destroyed, we are told.

Despite the many acts, statutes, regulations and supervisory bodies, and despite it being described by the council in Glasgow at the time as a residential school, it seems that Fornethy escaped inspection. No one, it seems, properly established that the place where they were sending thousands of girls was safe. What a litany of failure.

The women need answers. Why were they sent there? Why was that allowed to happen? If the matter needs an independent inquiry, so be it.

The final issue that I want to raise is one that has never been raised with me by any of the women survivors; for them, this is about justice and about acknowledgment. However, it is a scandal that the Government's redress scheme appears to exclude Fornethy survivors; indeed, it claims that the abuse took place during what has been described as

"short-term respite or holiday care"

and that they were still in the care of their parents when they were sent to Fornethy. Both criteria exclude them from the scheme. However, Fornethy was a residential school, and the wee girls were sent there not by their parents but as a result of the council's intervention. When they were there, they were in the care of the council. It was state-sponsored abuse.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Colin Smyth on securing the debate. I congratulate, too, the people who join us in the gallery and all the survivors—and those who have not survived until now—for coming forward to make that point.

Does the member agree that to treat victims of such heinous crimes differently from other victims simply because of the period of time that they were in that horrendous environment is a stain both on this Parliament and the Scottish Government?

Colin Smyth: Martin Whitfield makes a valid point. The failure to explicitly include what happened in Fornethy in, for example, the redress scheme, sends a signal that that horrific serial abuse was somehow less serious than other forms of abuse that took place under the so-called care of the state, and that the state was somehow less responsible for it. If a change needs to be made in the redress regulations to right that wrong—as the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee has called for—Parliament should make that change.

I finish by paying tribute to the women who have come forward to share their stories. We meet many people in our role as MSPs, but I doubt that I will ever meet a braver group of women than the Fornethy survivors. It is not for me to tell anyone that they must come forward when they have been the victim of abuse—I cannot imagine how difficult that must be. All I can do is share what I have seen.

The women who have spoken out now know that they are not alone, and the love and care that they have been able to share with fellow survivors has given them such immense strength. It is now

our job to give them the answers, the justice and the acknowledgement that their bravery deserves. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Mr Smyth. I encourage people in the gallery not to participate. I understand the temptation very well and I certainly understand your desire to have your voices heard. However, we discourage participation, and that includes applause.

We now move to the open debate. I invite Rona Mackay to speak for around four minutes.

13:03

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the debate, which highlights the truly terrible experiences of women who were sent to Fornethy House residential school. I congratulate Colin Smyth on having secured the debate and on the work that he has undertaken to highlight the plight of those women and his extremely moving speech.

The women who are involved have demonstrated incredible courage in coming forward to put in the public domain the physical, emotional and sexual abuse that they suffered, and to make such a powerful case for justice. It is vital that those women be listened to by everyone who can act to address the serious and legitimate issues that they raise.

That is why the debate is important and why the petition that is currently being considered by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee is significant, too. The suffering that the women endured happened over a period of at least 30 years between the 1960s and the 1990s. Despite the fact that that suffering happened some years ago, it is vital that justice be delivered; indeed, that the suffering happened many years ago makes it all the more critical that justice be delivered. That should include any perpetrator being brought to justice. I note, as Colin Smyth did, that an arrest has been made in connection with the issues.

I also think that our country should recognise the suffering that the women endured. The Scottish child abuse inquiry has undertaken powerful and painful work to confront the truly awful suffering of so many children who were in the care of the state in the past.

It strikes me that the suffering of the Fornethy survivors would benefit from being confronted with the rigour that has been demonstrated by the Scottish child abuse inquiry. I understand that some of the women have met the Scottish Government to set out their concerns, and I welcome the constructive dialogue that has already taken place with the Government in a

meeting between some of the women and the former Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, who was and is passionate in his determination to see justice for survivors of those terrible crimes.

In a letter to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in February this year, the former Deputy First Minister set out actions that were being taken by the Scottish Government to address many of the issues that are raised in Colin Smyth's motion. The letter stated that the Scottish Government believed that the eligibility criteria of the redress scheme could include Fornethy survivors, and the Government gave the assurance that it would consider further whether that was the case. I believe that that indicates a willingness to be as helpful as possible to the affected women, and I hope that, in closing, the minister will be able to give us an update on the Government's view on that question.

I know that survivors have had great difficulty in accessing records relating to the time that they spent in Fornethy. Having access to original documentary information would, without doubt, strengthen applications for redress, so I take this opportunity to ask Glasgow City Council to intensify its work to identify whether any information is still held by the council, as the successor to the Glasgow Corporation and Strathclyde Regional Council, that might help any individual in their quest for justice.

The physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children is a difficult subject for any society to confront, but that difficulty is nothing compared to the suffering of the children, and we have an obligation to air and confront the issues and to do all that we can to remedy their suffering. Important work is being undertaken in Scotland today to do that, and I hope that the debate helps to ensure that that work addresses the experiences of women who suffered at Fornethy House, because the Fornethy women deserve justice. Indeed, that is the least that they deserve.

13:06

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I pay a warm tribute to Colin Smyth for his moving speech, and I warmly welcome the people who are in the public gallery. I know that it is not easy to listen to members recount your stories so publicly, but it is very important that we do so in order that the world can hear the wrongs that happened to you.

There are few things in the Parliament that unite us as politicians of various political colours and with various views of the world. However, the work that we have done over the past few years to address some of the wrongs of the past has been among the most important work that we have ever

done—it is certainly the work that I am most proud of participating in over the past seven years as a member of the Parliament.

I am going to talk specifically about the redress scheme in my speech. It is an issue that is close to my heart. I worked on that legislation as my party's spokesperson on education at the time and as a member of the relevant committee. I worked closely with Government ministers and members from right across the political spectrum to get the redress scheme into as good a place as possible, but, as we have heard today, it is clearly still not there. I will talk a little bit about that.

I do not want to rehash the horrific stories of what happened at Fornethy House. They do not need to be repeated by me. However, I make the point that what was supposed to be a place for recovery, care and convalescence for many young people turned into harrowing stories of abuse, suffering and sorrow. Such stories live with people for their entire life. I simply cannot imagine the mental and physical effects of that, but I am hugely moved and touched to hear the horrific stories of what happened.

We think and hope that such things do not happen in this day and age, but they happened far too often to far too many people in years gone by. We owe a huge amount of gratitude to the survivors, campaigners and activists—whom we speak of and hear from so often in the Parliament—for the courage that it has taken for them to come forward and fight for justice in whichever way that they can achieve it. Justice can be achieved in many ways—through apologies, compensation, support or simply an acknowledgement from their Parliament and Government that wrong has happened and that we are sorry for that.

As I said, I worked on the redress scheme, and I was disappointed by some of its elements when the bill was passed. It was clear from the outset that redress would not be available for everyone, and it was clear that the scheme had shortcomings.

I am deeply disappointed and angered by the fact that so many organisations that were responsible for abuse during that period did not even participate in the scheme. Shame on them for hiding from the truths of their own pasts.

I do not have a lot of time left and I want to be positive in my closing comments. I want the Government to respond to the very specific calls from the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, the survivors in the gallery and members across the chamber and to say how the redress scheme, given the limitations on its operation, can be used to offer some form of justice to people who were abused in short-term

care. I understand that the nature of the scheme is such that it was not set up to cover people in that position, but it offers a tried-and-tested mechanism for offering some form of justice. I know that the scheme has had teething problems, but it is improving.

We also need to offer a public apology, which needs to come straight from the heart of Government. We need to tell those ladies in the gallery not just that we are sorry but that we are going to do something. They have heard a lot of warm words from people over the years, and they will have met a lot of nice politicians who will have shaken their hands and said how sorry they were. The Government needs to tell us what action it will take and how the mechanisms that are currently in place will be used to offer some form of justice, whether through the justice system, apologies, financial compensation or support for mental or physical health.

Whatever we do, we must say exactly what Colin Smyth said to those people: you are not alone, the Parliament is with you and it will support you. If we can say it, the Government can say it. That is what I want to hear.

13:11

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to add my voice to those of the other members who have spoken in tribute to the Fornethy survivors—those in the gallery and those who cannot be with us today—as well as those whom we have lost over the years.

As a representative of the north-east of Scotland, where Fornethy House is located, I have had the privilege to meet and speak to some of the survivors. Like Jamie Greene, I will not seek to relay their testimony, which Colin Smyth gave a very powerful account of. The fortitude and tenacity of those women in fighting for not just themselves but so many others is deeply moving. Their stories are harrowing, and we will carry them with us after we have gone home tonight.

I have raised the issue of the redress scheme with the former Deputy First Minister, John Swinney—I did so at the Education, Children and Young People Committee's meeting on 12 January, when I pressed him on the eligibility question that members have raised. He told me that it was possible for Fornethy survivors to be successful in applying under the scheme, but he went on to explain that there were some challenges and difficulties relating to individual cases, due to privacy issues. The way in which the Government represented the situation to me was that it was difficult to talk about how many of those women might have been successful or, indeed,

whether any of them had been successful. The Government must think about how it can communicate appropriately to the Fornethy survivors that the redress scheme is open to them, that they can make use of it and that, through it, they can have a small portion of justice.

The system that we have put in place has created a hierarchy of abuse. In the Government's view and in the view of Parliament, when it passed the Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Bill, which was prior to my time in Parliament, that might have been unavoidable. However, there is no doubt that the Fornethy women feel that their exclusion from the redress scheme has created a different tier of justice for them.

Jamie Greene: I share that concern—it was one that I had when the Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Bill was passed. We wanted to create a simplified process but, in doing so, we created a hierarchy. The scheme was designed to offer direct access without complex legal assistance, but we have heard that many people who go through the redress scheme still have to speak to lawyers. Lawyers are taking fees and percentages of awards under the compensation scheme, which goes entirely against the grain of what the scheme was designed to do. Surely the Government should also address that area of concern.

Michael Marra: I share those concerns. There are questions about the practical operation of the scheme and about who is included or excluded, but there is also the genuine emotional harm that is done by the hierarchy that has been created, in which one form of abuse is seen as lesser than or different from another.

I know that the Government faces a difficult challenge in balancing the responsibility of the state in connection with historical abuse. I echo Colin Smyth's observations and those of my colleague Martin Whitfield about the time bar and the question of whether a period of six weeks should qualify for redress. To quote one survivor:

"To a child, six weeks feels like a year."

The abuse that took place in those weeks is no different from any other. Those words also have a double meaning, because they speak to the horror endured by those young women for what might seem to us like a short summer holiday but for them felt like a large part of their life. That horror has stayed with them as a result.

I close by echoing Rona Mackay's comments about Glasgow City Council. I hope that we can send a very strong message from the Parliament and from the Government that the council must engage fully, openly and to the best of its ability with survivors and with the MSPs who are

pursuing the issue. There should be full disclosure and we should have a full account of what happened.

13:16

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I, too, congratulate Colin Smyth on securing the debate and welcome the survivors, many of whom I have come to know well in recent months, to the gallery.

Fornethy is not in my constituency and, to the best of my knowledge, none of its survivors are my constituents. However, 18 months ago, I was walking past the Parliament when I saw a small group of survivors huddled under the awning. They brought me over to tell me their stories, which hurt me to my heart and made me want to go to war for those women.

I speak today on behalf of the hundreds of women who are survivors of the horrendous abuse that took place there. The accounts of the abuse that they suffered as children at the hands of those who were ostensibly there to care for them are truly harrowing and utterly disgusting, but it is important that we hear some of those accounts, so I will delineate some of them in my remarks.

Children as young as eight or nine—largely from Protestant families, as the women have pointed out—were taken to a remote area with the promise of a summer holiday and respite for their parents. Right out of the trap, things were not as they should have been. The constant cruelty of those running the house turned what should have been a pleasant summer getaway into the worst ordeal imaginable.

When the time came to write home to their parents, the children were forced to copy word for word from a blackboard, giving false accounts that suggested an idyllic and tranquil experience, whereas the reality was day after day of chores and brutality. If they dared to deviate from the text on the blackboard, they would be screamed at and their letters would be torn up in front of their faces or sometimes even fed to them. That practice of letter writing shows the chilling organisation and forethought that went into the abuse.

The abuse at Fornethy did not come to light at the time of the great revelations about historical and sexual child abuse in this country, in part because the women did not at first understand the nature of their victimhood. They were there for only six weeks at a time, and they came from different communities and therefore did not often have contact with the other girls after they left Fornethy.

Another reason why it took so long to understand the nature of their abuse is that they

might routinely have been drugged at bed time. Some women remember being given a biscuit or a particular drink for supper, which some now believe contained a sedative. Some women still remember waking from unnatural slumber to find themselves in rooms filled with pipe smoke where they were being sexually assaulted by tweed-clad men. That bears the hallmarks of highly organised paedophilia on an industrial scale.

The women's stories are burned into me and keep me awake at night. Their trauma has impacted every aspect of their lives and relationships. What is worse is that, as we have heard, the women are now being forced to endure a failure of justice. Many of those who abused them have since died without justice being served.

The women have fallen between the stools of our national effort to confront historical abuse. They are outside the ambit of the inquiry into historical sexual abuse and the redress scheme because, as we have heard, abuse in respite care is not covered. They are not in this for compensation, although they certainly deserve it; they seek only recognition, belief and justice.

Some of the survivors are sitting in the gallery, and they do so at a high price. Each time they recount the abuse that they suffered, they are forced to relive it. I thank them for coming, and I say to them: we hear you, we believe you, we are on your side and we will stand with you in your fight for justice. You have dealt with this for far too long alone—well, you are not alone any more.

On the last Monday in June, Colin Smyth, I and other members will take many of the survivors back to Fornethy. We will do so with trained mental health counsellors and, I hope, with the nation's media, so that we can help them all along the road to national recognition, to justice and finally, perhaps, to peace.

13:20

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Colin Smyth for bringing to the chamber a debate in which we once again tackle the horrendous topic of historical sexual abuse.

It is a topic that, when I came into this place, I did not expect to know about as much as I do. I started with a sexual abuse case that constituents brought to me, and I tried to take them on a journey to get some sort of redress. However, here we are, still talking about this. I know some of the Fornethy survivors very well, and it is really great to see them here in the chamber, but as Alex Cole-Hamilton has said, every time we discuss these things, we are scratching at an open wound.

It is fair to say that, in the seven years that I have been here, progress has been made. I

remember when the Forensic Medical Services (Victims of Sexual Offences) (Scotland) Bill came to the Health and Sport Committee. Colin Smyth and Alex Cole-Hamilton were members of that committee, too, and we heard in private from survivors of childhood abuse. We know the trauma that we felt, listening to those stories, and we were hearing them at second hand. How on earth do people deal with these things at first hand?

As for the redress scheme, which has been talked about, I pushed the then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, to expand it, because it is very limited. We continually heard that it was about parental responsibility in care homes and that parental responsibility had to be an element; however, my constituent was abused in school, and I kept going back to the education bill which says, “in loco parentis”—that means that parental responsibility is temporarily handed over to teachers.

Moreover, if we are talking about the six weeks’ respite, surely to goodness that “in loco parentis” provision must be absolutely cast iron and locked in. The ability to access that should not even be an argument.

I have talked about this before, but I think that, although the redress scheme represents progress, it breaks United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child law, because of the way in which it is limited. That said, I think that that is something that will be tackled somewhere down the line.

I should also point out that, before the redress scheme, people were able to apply for redress through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, and those who got it were still able to take a civil case to court. If they won, the money that had been given through the CICA would be repaid. That provision has been taken away in the redress scheme.

Therefore, although the Parliament has made significant progress in tackling the abhorrent subject of historical sexual abuse, I think that there is still an awful long way to go. To me, abuse is abuse, no matter the setting, and we need to consider how legislation can be expanded to ensure that those who have suffered this horrendous crime are recognised so that they can somehow start down the road to recovery and healing.

Once again, I commend the Fornethy survivors for their resourcefulness in the way that they have campaigned and, as other members in the chamber have done, I assure them that they are not alone. You have the support of this place.

13:24

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): I want to begin by thanking Colin Smyth for lodging this important motion. Survivors of Fornethy are in the public gallery; I welcome their attendance and recognise their bravery.

The abhorrent abuse that children suffered while resident in Fornethy House is shocking. Today, we have heard some of the testimony through the voices of members. The survivors have shown incredible bravery in sharing their stories as they seek justice for the abuse that they endured as children. No child should ever have to go through what those women have. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to meet the Fornethy survivors group, I have arranged to do so on 7 June. The First Minister has confirmed that he will also meet with the group in due course. I very much want to hear first-hand about their experiences and to offer my support.

Since taking up my current post, I have been made aware of the range of issues that surround Fornethy House, and the survivors have my personal commitment that those matters will be explored further and acted on. I will set out the work that will be undertaken to ensure that matters relating to Fornethy House are fully explored.

Sadly, we know that for decades some children in residential care in Scotland were failed by those who were entrusted to look after them. That is why Scotland took steps to face up to those failings of the past by establishing Scotland’s redress scheme. The scheme is designed to be swifter and less adversarial than court action. Although nothing can ever make up for the suffering that survivors have endured, as others have said, the scheme is making a real difference to many survivors, as it goes some way to providing acknowledgement and recognition of the harm that was caused.

Survivors are at the heart of the scheme. It is built on three principles: dignity, respect and compassion. Those principles are set out in the legislation, and they remain as relevant today as they did when the scheme was designed. The scheme has helped a number of people, with £25 million of payments made directly to survivors or their families.

Although the abuse of children in any setting or circumstance is wrong, as other members have said, there requires to be eligibility criteria for Scotland’s redress scheme. The scheme is designed primarily for vulnerable children who were in long-term care and who were often isolated with limited or no contact with their families. The scheme requires that the care setting and the reason for the stay are taken into

consideration when making an assessment on eligibility.

As others have done, it is important to say that Fornethy survivors are not automatically precluded from applying for redress but, as Michael Marra said, that has not always been an easy process. The circumstances in which individuals came to be at Fornethy House vary, and therefore it has not so far been possible to determine eligibility for the group as a whole.

In his letter to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee dated 6 February 2023, my predecessor committed to further testing the existing eligibility criteria and guidance for the redress scheme in relation to Fornethy. I fully support his position, and put on record my commitment to exploring that matter as quickly as possible and to keep members updated on progress.

Brian Whittle: In light of what the Deputy First Minister has just said, I want to ask whether the Government would be prepared to review the impact of the redress scheme against what it was intended to do?

Shona Robison: First and foremost, we need to focus on the matters in relation to Fornethy to try to find a way to make progress. I do not want to prejudge what that will lead to, but that is my focus at the moment.

We recognise that accessing records and providing evidence of historical abuse is a challenge that many survivors face when applying for redress. That has been an important issue for the survivors of Fornethy. It is important that the scheme is robust and credible to ensure that survivors, providers and others can have confidence in its processes and outcomes.

Redress Scotland is the independent decision maker and takes into account the individual facts and circumstances of each application when making its decision. Funding of up to £2.4 million per annum is provided specifically to support applicants with things such as records searches, as well as practical and emotional support. That support is available to all applicants.

I understand that the limited records in respect of Fornethy House are a particular challenge. My officials have commenced inquiries with Glasgow City Council to explore the limited records and establish the circumstances in which children were placed in Fornethy House. I have directed my officials to instruct an independent person to support those inquiries, and Glasgow City Council has confirmed that that individual will be permitted access to the relevant archives.

Although I cannot direct Glasgow City Council, I have written to the council leader to express my

expectation that those inquiries will be supported by Glasgow City Council.

Jamie Greene: I thank the cabinet secretary for that helpful progress on the issue. Is there not a wider point on the redress scheme, or any other scheme that the Government sets up, that we have to put trust and faith in the survivors who come forward? It is very traumatising for them. We are not talking about thousands of people applying for millions of pounds. In some cases, the eligibility bands are very small, and the compensation levels are relatively low in redress schemes. Can the people who run the scheme just put faith and trust in what they hear from survivors?

Shona Robison: I hear what Jamie Greene says, and I have enormous sympathy for it. We are trying to be solution focused in finding a way forward. I will continue to consider the possible routes forward.

On another matter, I note that the motion refers to a criminal investigation. Members will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on a live police investigation, but Police Scotland has committed to working with the Crown Office to keep the relevant parties updated on progress, which is important.

I recognise Parliament's very deep interest in the matter, and I will of course provide the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee with an update on all these matters when they are concluded.

I also note Jamie Greene's comments about other potential ways of recognising the harm done, and I undertake to consider those very carefully.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The cabinet secretary rightly talks about the process of criminal justice, and there is finally a process under way, which I hope will start to shed light on what happened at Fornethy. One reason why the survivors have been denied justice for so long is that we still do not know the full extent of what happened there, for how long and by whom. That is why I lend my voice to Colin Smyth's call for a public inquiry. Because of the nature of the state involvement—the referrals by social work and the Glasgow Corporation, and the complete absence of documentation around that—would the cabinet secretary support such an inquiry?

Shona Robison: I want to consider all routes to try to help the survivors to get the recognition and justice that they seek. The importance of finding records is why I have helped to push that forward in relation to Glasgow City Council. We will see what records can be found and accessed.

The only point that I would make about a public inquiry is that, as Alex Cole-Hamilton will know, it would take a long time, and there is no guarantee

that people will get the answers that they are looking for at the end of it. However, we should keep all options on the table.

I conclude by again recognising the bravery of the women who have worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the issues surrounding Fornethy House in their quest for answers. I hope that the level of interest that Parliament has in the issue, together with my commitment to the work I have outlined today, means that those who are here today leave the Parliament with confidence that the matters that they have raised are being taken very seriously indeed and will be addressed as far as is humanly possible.

13:34

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Just Transition

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. Our next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio this afternoon is net zero and just transition. *[Interruption.]* I thought that my voice was not as loud as normal. I thank Murdo Fraser for gesticulating.

As ever, I would appreciate brief questions and succinct answers to match, in order to get in as many questions as possible.

Transport Options (Rural Areas)

1. **Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve transport options in rural areas. (S6O-02276)

The Minister for Transport (Kevin Stewart): Our strategic transport projects review includes recommendations that are focused on rural areas, including connecting towns and villages, improving active travel on trunk roads and investing in demand-responsive transport to improve connectivity.

However, we are already taking action. The Go-Hi project has improved accessibility to integrated transport services in the Highlands. The community bus fund and the toolkit of powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 will enable local authorities to pursue options that best meet their needs, including the distinct challenges that rural areas face, and this year's record active travel funding will support new projects for rural communities.

Roz McCall: Bus services are a vital lifeline for local communities, especially in rural areas. In my region, a constituent with poor mobility used to take the 27A bus from Dunfermline to Kirkcaldy to collect her prescription. That service has been cancelled, which makes it even more difficult for her to get her much-needed medicine.

Due to the Scottish Government's decision not to extend the network support grant plus scheme, fares have risen by an average of 15 per cent across east Scotland, and it is projected that local services in Fife will be cut by a further 10 per cent. Will the Scottish Government publish its fair fares review before the summer recess in 2023, or will my rural constituents continue to suffer additional cuts to routes and increases in costs?

Kevin Stewart: The network support grant plus was a package that we put in place to help bus operators during the Covid pandemic and which had a real impact on services. It was designed not to be a permanent fixture but to deal with that period of emergency.

We will continue to work in partnership with bus operators and local authorities to create the best possible services. The network support grant will continue to provide support to the bus industry in 2023-24. It is paid per kilometre travelled, which targets support at the longer and less commercially viable routes in rural and island communities.

We will publish our fair fares review in the near future. As Roz McCall and others will understand, it is a hefty piece of work that we want to get right for all the people of Scotland.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The minister will be aware that the former Deputy First Minister agreed with Orkney Islands Council to establish a task force to look at replacement of the ferries that operate on Orkney's lifeline internal routes. Since the election of the new First Minister, proposed meetings of the task force have not taken place. I am not aware of alternative dates having been set, so I will be grateful if the minister will advise when the task force is due to meet next, and if he will give an assurance that the topic will remain on the radar of the Cabinet, given that the former Deputy First Minister is no longer in post.

Kevin Stewart: The task force will be chaired by the new Deputy First Minister, Shona Robison. I will update Liam McArthur when a date is in place for the first meeting. We recognise the importance of the work of that task force. I intend to go to Orkney in the very near future. As Liam McArthur is aware, I have had a couple of meetings with the council there in recent times. I hope that the co-operation and collaboration that we have in place will continue.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Scotland's rural communities have great ideas on how to improve our national rail network. At the moment, ScotRail services pass through Newburgh, but have not stopped there since the station closed in 1955. A simple low-cost modular station could reconnect Newburgh to the rail network. What discussions has the minister had about the opportunities that modular stations provide? Will the minister agree to meet me and the Newburgh Train Station Campaign group in the months to come?

Kevin Stewart: In the short time in which I have been in post, I have not had any discussions about modular stations, but I understand that Transport Scotland officials are already engaged with

SEStran—South East of Scotland Transport Partnership—on its appraisal of the Newburgh area and have offered a meeting. It should be noted that modular stations are not suitable for all locations but, as always, I am happy to have further discussions with Mr Ruskell and his constituents on those matters.

Energy Performance Certificate Ratings (Rural Areas)

2. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to a recent report by Changeworks, which found that homes in rural areas have a lower energy performance certificate rating than the rest of Scotland. (S6O-02277)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): I thank Changeworks for its work in that area and for bringing forward that important report.

The average energy performance certificate rating of rural properties is lower than that of those in urban areas because of the typically more expensive fuels that are used or available, how those are reflected in the current EPC metric, and the historically lower energy efficiency standards.

We propose that all housing in Scotland meet the equivalent of EPC rating C by 2033 and that we revise EPC metrics. We offer support to improve the energy efficiency of rural homes, including a funding uplift to our home energy Scotland grant and loan scheme, and targeted fuel poverty support.

Liz Smith: The minister knows that improving energy efficiency in rural and off-grid homes is absolutely critical for reducing energy bills and meeting net zero targets, but as the Changeworks report makes very clear, the Scottish National Party's heat-pump approach does not suit many of the older properties in the rural economy. What is the SNP doing to encourage investment in alternative heating solutions, such as biofuel liquefied natural gas?

Patrick Harvie: We are working on policy on biofuels in line with the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee's recommendations, which see something of a role but recognise that there will be limits to the role of bioenergy in the heating system.

Meanwhile, as I said in my first answer, we provide an uplift of the grant and loan schemes for rural areas. In particular, we need to ensure that we invest in skills and capacity in the industry. To give just one example, we have invested in a mobile training centre for heat-pump installation, which is hosted by South Lanarkshire College, but is available to any college in Scotland for training in rural areas on site. That will help to ensure that

local communities have access to skilled professionals who are able to assess and install heat pumps in all types of buildings.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Last April, the Scottish Government estimated that more than 874,000 households were in fuel poverty in Scotland, but its insulation and energy efficiency scheme has now closed to applications until October. At the current rate of progress, it would take 165 years to insulate every fuel-poor household in Scotland, so can the Scottish Government explain what has gone wrong?

Patrick Harvie: Something has gone very right, in that we are replacing that scheme with a much-improved successor. While that transition happens, new referrals will be referred to the provider under the terms of the successor scheme, rather than the less generous terms of the previous scheme.

Beatrice Wishart and other constituency and regional members who represent rural and island communities have repeatedly expressed their concerns, but the Scottish Government's heat in buildings programme is the most ambitious of such programmes in any part of these islands and is looking to achieve investment in a sustainable and equitable system that insulates people from fuel poverty and is comparable to the best achievements in other countries in Europe in previous decades.

Low-carbon and Renewables Sector

3. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the role that it anticipates that the low-carbon and renewables sector will play in the transition to net zero, including on any relevant discussions that took place at the recent All-Energy conference in Glasgow. (S6O-02278)

The Minister for Energy (Gillian Martin): The low-carbon and renewables sector plays an essential role in delivering Scotland's net zero ambitions. The draft energy strategy and just transition plan set out a vision for an energy system that delivers affordable, resilient and clean energy supplies.

The First Minister, myself, and three other Government ministers attended the All-Energy conference. We had constructive discussions with a range of energy companies and other stakeholders. The First Minister particularly re-emphasised this Government's commitment to the Scottish Cluster, and the importance of an early and positive decision from the United Kingdom Government on carbon capture, utilisation and storage in Scotland.

Jackie Dunbar: In the First Minister's speech to the All-Energy conference, he spoke about the

flaws in the current transmission network charging system. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government about fixing the methodology that is used, which, as it currently stands, is a potential barrier to supporting our renewables sector?

Gillian Martin: That assessment comes up in practically every single meeting that I have with every single stakeholder. The Scottish Government has repeatedly called for a change to the current system of transmission network use of system charges. My officials are in regular contact with Ofgem on that matter. I am pleased that Ofgem has reconvened the TNUOS charges task force, which was delayed to allow it to focus on security of supply over the winter.

The fact of the matter remains that a new approach, rather than small modifications to methodologies, is needed. We will continue to raise that with Ofgem and our counterparts in the UK Government to push for a fairer solution that recognises the renewable capabilities of Scotland. We need to do everything that we can do to maximise Scotland's potential to power the nation using low-emissions technology by harnessing our substantial resources in a way that creates economic prosperity for communities and businesses and, in the end, supplies our households with the cleaner and cheaper power that they so desperately need and want.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Three members are seeking to ask supplementary questions. I intend to take all three.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government's transition of North Sea workers to offshore wind roles has delivered only 3,100 positions in Scotland. I have discovered that the Government does not even break that data down to understand where the jobs are located. It therefore cannot even say whether a single worker in the north-east is part of the transition. When does the Government intend to start collating and interrogating data properly, and thus provide a more realistic and rigorous assessment of its failure to deliver a just transition?

Gillian Martin: I am familiar with Mr Kerr's asks on that. I think that I just issued a parliamentary answer to his written question on the subject.

As things stand at the moment, we do not have that granular data. However, methods are afoot in Government to collate and produce the data in the way that has been requested. That work is ongoing.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I put on my record my apologies for cutting it fine with my arrival today.

Given the fantastic opportunities that were highlighted at the All-Energy conference and the need to tackle both the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis, what discussions does the minister have planned with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to support local authorities to deliver council and community co-operative led heat and power schemes, given the huge benefits that that could deliver to our constituents?

Gillian Martin: That came up in discussion with the onshore wind strategy leadership group yesterday. We have to engage the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on how we can support communities in relation to shared ownership, in particular. We are doing a number of pieces of work in that area and we are taking advice from the strategic leadership group that I mentioned. We were actively working on that at its quarterly meeting yesterday.

I do not think that we can do this without the help of COSLA and our local government partners. I am therefore really keen to have that conversation with our colleagues in COSLA quite soon. However, I want to wait for advice that will come from the group that I mentioned so that I can make those conversations more constructive and put in place a secure plan for how to maximise the opportunities that we have in communities. We can also learn lessons from the communities that have already made that leap to make the plan more efficient.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): The just transition to net zero will require significant levels of investment, including public and private sector investment, if it is to deliver its ambitions. I was encouraged by my discussions with investors when I spoke at All-Energy's conference the other week. What work is the Scottish Government doing to lever in capital investment for infrastructure and business growth opportunities to deliver the net zero transition?

Gillian Martin: Pretty much every stream of work that is being done in respect of energy will involve a mix of public sector and Government support and will also lever in capital from private investors. The Government needs to signal that private investors will be putting their money into the right areas; we are working closely with Scottish Enterprise on that. Ivan McKee will know how important that body is in signalling where the Government's goals are on private sector investment and where we can achieve confidence in certain areas.

If Ivan McKee wishes to write to me on that point, I could break that down into the individual pieces of information that he requires.

Green Jobs Fund (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)

4. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what it anticipates the impact of the green jobs fund will be on the Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley constituency. (S6O-02279)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): The green jobs fund aims to create green employment, drive economic growth, and support businesses to transition to a low-carbon economy through capital investment in equipment and premises, and research and development.

Discussions on projects in Ayrshire that could be supported by the fund are under way. There is the potential to create hundreds of new jobs in the area. As future green jobs fund awards are made, we will continue to update Parliament on the progress of the fund and the expected green jobs resulting from it.

Willie Coffey: I advise the cabinet secretary that, with its partners and employers, East Ayrshire has launched a net zero accelerator programme to focus on gaining knowledge on how best to move to net zero and to gain the required skills and accreditation. Does she agree that it is vital that every part of Scotland both participates in and benefits from the transition to net zero—in particular, through vehicles such as the green jobs fund? Will she give my constituents an assurance that the Government will assist in any way that it can to build such capacity locally, as we strive to make that important transition in every community in Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: Willie Coffey makes an excellent point. The scale of the climate and nature crisis, and the pace at which our society needs to move to make the change commensurate with that challenge, means that progress must absolutely be built from communities, for communities and within communities. Only then can the transformational change that is required in the coming years and decades be delivered at the scale required and be sustainable, too. I give my commitment to Willie Coffey and his constituents that the Scottish Government is dedicated to working with them as we take that journey.

Hydrogen Innovation Scheme

5. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the net zero secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding how the £7 million of grants allocated through the hydrogen innovation scheme will support Scotland's low-carbon economy. (S6O-02280)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): I regularly engage with ministerial colleagues on maximising the economic opportunities presented by the global transition to net zero, including our drive to reach 5GW of installed hydrogen production capacity by 2030.

We have backed up that ambition by providing grants totalling over £7 million, which have been offered to 32 Scottish projects through the hydrogen innovation scheme. Those will advance innovative solutions to scaling up hydrogen production, storage and distribution.

As I highlighted to industry stakeholders at a meeting of the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce earlier this week, that funding—together with our just transition fund and the energy transition fund—demonstrates our commitment to supporting Scotland towards achieving a fair, prosperous and speedy transition.

David Torrance: H100 Fife is a first-of-its-kind demonstration project that is leading the way on decarbonising home heating. It will provide evidence for future low-carbon policy decisions and a clear pathway towards net zero heating for Scotland. Does the cabinet secretary agree that hydrogen power offers a promising opportunity as we look to transition from fossil fuels and decarbonising home heating?

Màiri McAllan: I agree with David Torrance's point. We know that hydrogen power will form a key part of our journey to net zero. Complementing electricity, it will play a role in industrial decarbonisation, transport and heating homes and other buildings.

The SGN H100 Fife neighbourhood trial will feed into that work, as will other large village and town trials in the United Kingdom. The H100 Fife project is currently under construction, and it aims to fit 100 per cent hydrogen boilers in 300 homes in Leven. I understand that the project is scheduled to go live in 2024 and will operate until March 2027. The Scottish Government has gladly provided £6.9 million-worth of grant funding to the project.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I know that the cabinet secretary agrees with me that we have a fantastic opportunity to be world leading in the green hydrogen economy, but we are behind the curve: behind Germany, Holland, Belgium, the middle east and the USA.

What will the Scottish Government do to address the red tape that business has reported to me in respect of accessing the pump-primed funding for early-stage hydrogen companies that the cabinet secretary mentioned to ensure that, in turn, we release further money from private investment to fully realise our hydrogen potential?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I ask the cabinet secretary to respond, I remind all members that they are required to be here for the start of proceedings should they wish to contribute to those proceedings. If they wish to contribute, therefore, they should apologise before they make their contribution.

Màiri McAllan: We absolutely recognise Scotland's potential in hydrogen and we are committed to doing everything that we possibly can to maximise its realisation. That includes our "Hydrogen Action Plan", but we are not just planning—the plan is supported by £100 million of capital funding, which is designed to accelerate and maximise the production of renewable hydrogen in Scotland for use in Scotland.

In addition, analysis suggests that there is also a very large hydrogen export opportunity for Scotland, with some estimates stating that there could be between 70,000 and more than 300,000 jobs protected or created, and that the impact of those export scenarios on gross value added could range from £5 billion to £25 billion per annum by 2045.

The Scottish Government is doing everything that we can to realise those opportunities. We very much need the UK Government to do its part and to act with the speed that we are demonstrating in order to realise that potential fully.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Proposed Scottish Carbon Credits

7. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans for Scottish carbon credits, including how it ensures benefits for local communities. (S6O-02282)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): The Scottish Government is committed to establishing a values-led high-integrity market for responsible private investment in our natural capital, as set out in "Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation". That commitment includes the voluntary carbon markets, as backed by the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee, and is supported by our interim principles for responsible investment in natural capital.

Those principles set out that investment should deliver integrated land use; provide public, private and community benefit; demonstrate engagement and collaboration; be ethical and values led, be of high environmental integrity; and support diverse and productive land ownership. Those are Scottish ministers' expectations of those who would invest in our natural capital.

Richard Leonard: I thank the cabinet secretary for that reply, but is it not the case that, far from protecting community interests in achieving net zero, the Scottish National Party-Green Government has embarked on an exercise in privatising our nature and opening up carbon credits to speculators and giant corporations to asset strip, cash in and make all the gains, and so widen the wealth inequality gap even further? They include Fleetcor, which sells fuel cards to the road haulage industry; the oil giant Shell; defence companies such as Thales Group; and banks such as Barclays.

How is that green or sustainable, or even in the national interest? How is that values led? Is that what equality, opportunity and community looks like under this SNP-Green Government?

Màiri McAllan: It is quite the opposite of the narration from Richard Leonard. It is about the Scottish Government recognising that our natural capital is an exceptionally valuable asset to our people and to our environment. It is also about our recognising that there are many interventions that we need to take in our natural environment that will help us to rise to meet the challenge of the climate and nature emergency, and that will have other co-benefits, including good green jobs in rural areas.

However, the public purse can never, and will never, fund those interventions alone. We are therefore dedicating ourselves—as Miss Martin set out—to leveraging necessary private investment, but we are doing so in a pioneering, values-led, high-integrity way that is verifiable and that benefits the people in this country. That sits alongside the development of an ambitious land reform bill and continued investment in the Scottish land fund, which is helping communities throughout the country to buy land and assets in their local areas and put them to local use.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Pension and hedge funds are engaged in the carbon market, similar to the way in which they are involved in the deposit return scheme, where the Scottish National Party and Greens decided to award a multimillion pound waste collection contract to an American hedge fund. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that it is SNP-Green policy to develop new initiatives in order to benefit multinational hedge funds?

Màiri McAllan: No, that is not this Government's motivation. As I have just narrated in response to Richard Leonard, our motivation involves seeking to harness the opportunities that we have in abundance in Scotland in a way that helps us to rise to the climate and nature emergency, but equally in a way that empowers our people to benefit from the schemes and the

developments that will happen in the communities around them.

I refer Maurice Golden to the principles for responsible investment in natural capital. They are pioneering principles that are being referred to by other organisations in countries that are trying now to do likewise, and they state very clearly ministers' expectations on ethical and values-led investment, high environmental integrity and public, private and community benefit. I would be more than happy to furnish Maurice Golden with evidence of how they are now being utilised by those who are investing in Scotland.

Scottish Zero Emission Bus Challenge Fund

8. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the Scottish zero emission bus challenge fund is supporting change in the bus sector, in light of Scotland's net zero ambitions. (S6O-02283)

The Minister for Transport (Kevin Stewart): Last week, while visiting Alexander Dennis in Larbert, I launched the second and final phase of the challenge fund. The Scottish Government is offering up to £58 million to transform the market for zero-emission buses, on top of the previous investment of more than £113 million in zero-emission buses.

It is clear that the market is now at a pivotal point, and the money that I am offering the sector could make the zero-emission bus market self-sustaining, enabling bus and coach operators of all types and sizes to achieve zero-emissions over the coming years.

Fulton MacGregor: Bus transport is crucial to many of our communities, and services such as the recently reintroduced Citylink 902 service provide a vital link in my constituency to city centres. Initiatives such as ScotZEB and the transformational under-22 bus pass will be crucial to ensuring that Scotland's bus sector is at the heart of the modal shift that we need to see away from cars as we strive for net zero. What level of support has the Scottish Government already provided via ScotZEB, and how many buses has that provided?

Kevin Stewart: I should note the campaigning efforts of Fulton MacGregor and Neil Gray on the Citylink 902 service.

The Government awarded £62 million through the first phase of ScotZEB, helping operators acquire 276 battery electric buses and the associated charging infrastructure. That is over and above the £52 million of capital investment that we have put in previously, plus a resource commitment worth up to £20 million that we

provided through our previous fund to support 272 battery electric buses.

We are helping the bus sector to decarbonise, and we are encouraging more people to choose to take the bus and to take fewer journeys by car. Alongside that, we have seen more than 62 million free bus journeys made by young people across Scotland since the introduction of our young persons free bus travel scheme. That is all good news for the people of Scotland.

Medium-term Financial Strategy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the medium-term financial strategy. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:30

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): Today, I am publishing the sixth medium-term financial strategy and giving my first fiscal statement as Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance.

It is very clear that sound public finances are key to ensuring that we can tackle poverty, build a fair, green and growing economy and improve our public services for the needs of future generations. However, I recognise that our current financial situation is among the most challenging since devolution. Scotland has faced a succession of economic shocks as a result of the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine and, of course, soaring inflation. All of those are driving significant pressures on the economy, society and the public finances.

To some extent, those are global challenges, but the impact of those challenges is felt more keenly in the United Kingdom as a result of the UK Government's damaging decisions—not least a decade of austerity, Brexit and the disastrous autumn mini-budget, which sent borrowing costs to a 20-year high and led to the Bank of England having to intervene with a £65 billion package to stop pension funds collapsing.

Despite the increasingly challenging context, we have successfully balanced the Scottish budget every year while taking clear and decisive action to protect the most vulnerable. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has noted that

“the tax and benefit system in Scotland is considerably more progressive than in the rest of Great Britain.”

In this statement, I will set out our approach to meeting the challenges ahead. I turn first to the outlook for the Scottish economy and public finances. I extend my warmest thanks to Professor Graeme Roy and the commissioners of the Scottish Fiscal Commission for providing the forecasts that accompany the publication. The use of entirely independently generated forecasts on the economy and the Government's funding outlook is one of the great strengths of the Scottish fiscal landscape. Where independent forecasts are not available, we are transparent and open about the assumptions that we have made.

Although the Scottish economy has proved to be more resilient than expected, the economic outlook remains extremely challenging. Despite the SFC and Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts projecting that inflation will fall sharply to 2.9 per cent by the end of 2023, inflation will still remain high, at 6.1 per cent on average throughout 2023. I welcome the announcement yesterday that inflation is now falling, but low inflation cannot reverse the increasing pressure on households. Indeed, real disposable income per person will have fallen cumulatively by 4.1 per cent from 2021-22 to 2023-24. Those are record falls in living standards, which are not set to recover to pre-pandemic levels until around 2026-27.

Although resource funding is projected to grow in real terms between 2023-24 and 2027-28, we still face a real-terms reduction in the resource block grant in 2024-25. At the same time, resource spending is projected to grow. That means that our resource spending requirements could outstrip our funding by £1 billion in 2024-25, rising to £1.9 billion in 2027-28.

In addition to inflation, the key drivers for that pressure relate to social security, the public sector pay bill and health and social care. Those also affect the current budget year. Since the 2023-24 budget was set, we have agreed pay settlements for teachers, firefighters and national health service staff, which, of course, recognise the impact that the cost of living crisis is having on our valued public sector workers. That will require us to carefully manage our limited resources, with any changes clarified via the autumn and spring budget revisions.

The pressures are more severe for capital spending, with the price of infrastructure projects having risen by 14.1 per cent this year, according to the Office for National Statistics. Combined with the UK Government's failure to inflation proof our capital budget, we face a real-terms cut every year up to 2027-28. That challenge is particularly acute in 2024-25, when funding will reduce by 3.7 per cent in real terms.

On the current trajectory, we expect the divergence between capital funding and expenditure to grow to about £900 million by 2025-26. That is unsustainable, and we will need to reset both our capital and resource spending in the 2024-25 budget, to which I will return.

The MTFS sets out three pillars that underpin our approach to managing the public finances over the medium term. The first pillar is a laser-like focus on ensuring that spending is focused on achieving three critical missions. I will not back away from making tough choices relating to the decisions that I can control, but I will point out

where the levers that are available to me are insufficient.

I call again on the UK Government to increase capital funding in line with inflation and to provide additional funding to cover reasonable pay settlements for our public sector workers. However, I cannot rely on the UK Government to take action, so I am fully committed to prioritising our resources towards realising this Government's strategic missions.

Our first mission is to tackle poverty, and I am proud of our record in that regard. Our expenditure on social security benefits is expected to grow from 10 per cent of our resource budget in 2022-23 to nearly 15 per cent in 2027-28. In fact, in 2027-28, we will be investing £1.3 billion more in social security than we will receive through the block grant adjustment. That money will support families with their living costs, help older people to heat their homes in winter and enable disabled people to live full and independent lives.

I will ensure the continuation of public sector reform in order to achieve effective, person-centred and fiscally sustainable public services. In order to prioritise the programmes that will have the greatest impact on delivery of our three missions, such as early learning and childcare, we will need to deprioritise programmes that make a less meaningful contribution to our central missions. Today, I commit to refreshing both our resource and capital multiyear spending envelopes as part of the 2024-25 budget, through which I will set out the Government's plans to put our public finances on a more sustainable path.

Our policy choices and priorities will be clearly set out for all to see. If others disagree with them, they can, of course, bring forward alternative spending plans as part of the budget process.

Choices over tax policy and the strength of the Scottish economy are key to our ability to invest in public services. That is why generating economic growth by supporting businesses to invest and create jobs is the second pillar of our strategy. The Scottish Government has limited powers with which to pursue that objective—our borrowing powers are constrained and have been further eroded through this period of high inflation.

We also lack the powers to tackle Scotland's historically slower population growth relative to the rest of the UK, such as powers over migration policy. We are trying to mitigate that as best we can through the creation of the talent attraction and migration service.

Even with limited powers, we are already making Scotland wealthier. Since 2007, while gross domestic product per capita has grown by only 5 per cent in the rest of the UK, it has grown by 9 per cent in Scotland. As we deliver our

national strategy for economic transformation, we will prioritise the policies and actions with the greatest potential to transform Scotland's economy. For example, we need to help parents to access more and better-paid work. Childcare provision has a vital role to play in that regard, particularly when integrated with other local services. Ensuring that we find the fiscal headroom to expand our childcare offer will be a key part of our approach.

That brings me to our third and final pillar: maintaining and developing our

“strategic approach to tax policy”.

The most recent forecasts show that tax devolution will add an extra £574 million to the Scottish budget in 2023-24, increasing to almost £1.7 billion by 2027-28. However, the tax policy choices of the Scottish Government are limited by the current devolution settlement. Revenue for the Scottish budget is heavily reliant on Scottish income tax, which is only partially devolved, so I currently do not hold all the levers necessary to make the Scottish tax system work in the most effective way.

However, there are choices for the Scottish Government around who and what to tax, and by how much. Scotland already has the most progressive tax system in the UK. Ensuring that the burden of taxation is placed on those who have the broadest shoulders will continue to be the cornerstone of our approach. I commit to publishing alongside the next MTFS an updated tax strategy, which will build on the principles that we set out in the “Framework for Tax: 2021”. In order to support that work, I will chair an external tax advisory group to ensure that our future tax strategy is informed by a broad range of views.

Finally, I recognise that this Parliament is at its best when we work together. Therefore, given the scale of the challenge, I wish to take the opportunity to invite colleagues from across the chamber to work with me in identifying how we can advance the three pillars of the strategy. These are incredibly challenging times, not helped by the limited levers at my disposal or the actions of the UK Government. However, I am committed to taking the tough decisions that are required to deliver focused, ambitious and affordable measures that protect our environment, promote business growth and improve wellbeing for the people of Scotland through the reduction of poverty.

The MTFS sets out how we will manage our public finances over the medium term in order to ensure that we deliver on the key priorities for Scotland's people. In doing so, we will continue to make the very clear and compelling case for Scotland to have the key fiscal levers that other

countries have in order to enable us to meet fiscal challenges now and in the future. I look forward to taking members' questions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for prior sight of her statement. Just a cursory look at the documents that accompany her statement is further proof, if any was needed, of the precarious situation that is facing the Scottish economy, most especially the significant gap between projected expenditure and income. It is yet more proof of the Scottish National Party's utter failure to address the really big issues that have been flagged up by economists and forecasters for the whole of the past decade. All we get is an excuse that it is the problems of Westminster, which is simply not true. Measured against what Kate Forbes said in the same statement last year, the SNP has been failing to deliver on the imbalances in our labour market. It has failed to address Scotland's persistently low productivity, to ensure that Scotland is far more competitive than is currently the case, and, worst of all, it has failed to boost economic growth.

I will ask the cabinet secretary three questions. Will she finally acknowledge the widespread concern of the Scottish business community that Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the UK, with the serious detrimental effect that that has had on innovation, jobs and growth? Secondly, she has said that the Scottish Government is commissioning a new tax group to look at future strategy. Given the urgency of the situation, what will the Scottish Government do to address the serious warnings that are contained in the Scottish Fiscal Commission's sustainability report that we do not, and will not, have the necessary revenue to fund the Scottish Government's projected expenditure? Thirdly, with regard to the proposed new tourist tax, which was flagged in the media this morning, what message does the cabinet secretary think that that sends to the hospitality, tourism and retail sectors when they are still reeling from the SNP's failure to provide the same business rates relief that is available in the rest of the UK and is vital to Scotland's economic recovery?

Shona Robison: I will try to address those questions in turn. First, I do not know whether Liz Smith has seen the Scottish Tourism Authority's comments in support of the introduction of a visitor levy. Ultimately, it is a choice for local government

as to whether to use the levy, and each council will make that judgment. There is a pattern from the Scottish Conservatives: any and every lever, whether a policy in the Parliament or a lever that empowers local government, is opposed by them. In the current financial environment, that is incredible. I say to Liz Smith that, yes, the situation is challenging—I set out clearly in the MTFs the reasons for that challenge, many of which relate to inflation, which is the result of decisions and actions that were taken by her party's UK Government.

I described the pillars that will underpin the action that we will take. We will absolutely focus on public spending that meets the needs of our ambitions to reduce poverty and grow the economy, and we will ensure that our tax policy is fair and sustainable, which is why I will establish the tax group that Liz Smith referred to.

I do not accept the characterisation that Liz Smith gave. The SFC has said that 52 per cent of taxpayers in Scotland will pay less tax than they would in the rest of the UK—that is the SFC's analysis.

We must make sure that business taxation is fair. Liz Smith referred to non-domestic rates and hospitality but, as Tom Arthur said in the chamber yesterday, that point does not recognise the extensive package that responds to that sector's number 1 call, which was to freeze the poundage. The small business bonus scheme is also the most generous such scheme anywhere in these islands.

In the week when the Tory UK Government has said that it wants to bear down on legal migration to this country, it is a bit strange that Liz Smith cites population growth. We want to have powers over migration so that we can attract people to live and work in Scotland and pay their taxes here. That is why we want such levers but, in the meantime, my colleague Neil Gray is taking forward the talent attraction and migration scheme, because we want to do what we can within the powers that we have.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I point out to everyone that we have about 20 minutes for questions and we have already used up nearly six minutes.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The most relevant part of the statement was the recognition that we are set to experience a record fall in living standards in Scotland. Average real disposable income is to fall by 4.1 per cent, and far too many people are seeing their lives diminished—they reach the end of the pay cheque before the end of the month. In that context, it is disappointing that there is almost nothing in the document about a strategic approach to growing

wages and helping the vast majority of the population with household income.

There is no answer to the central question in our public finances, which is about the £1.9 billion gap between the tax that we collect and the policy commitments that the Government has made. The cabinet secretary said that she will not back away from tough choices for the decisions that she can control, but she is not telling us about any of them in the strategy that is in front of us today, and an invitation has been given for other people to come up with those ideas. Part of the Government's job is to set out how that gap will be addressed. Businesses and public services have to plan ahead and make decisions for the long term. How are they supposed to do that when the Government will not tell them how its plans will change?

By the looks of the document, the new First Minister's much-talked-about tax policies are at least another year down the line. Given the gap that we see, that is astonishing. Labour looks forward to the tax consultation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Marra, could we get to your questions, please?

Michael Marra: I shall do that, Presiding Officer. Who will be in the room and who will ask the questions?

It is little wonder that 58 per cent of Scots feel that things in Scotland are headed in the wrong direction. Does the cabinet secretary agree with them?

Shona Robison: I recognise the impact on living standards that Michael Marra outlined; the main driver of that is the rampant inflation that has resulted from UK Tory economic mismanagement.

As for focusing on the economy and growing wages, that is exactly what NSET is about—it talks about a 10-year programme to grow the economy, grow wages and grow the sectors in Scotland that are most likely and have the biggest opportunity to grow. All of that has been set out.

Michael Marra asked me why I am not setting out the budget today, but, of course, this is not a budget; this is a medium-term financial strategy. The plans, the policies and what we will spend on what will be set out fully in advance of the 2024-25 budget. In advance of that, we will make the decisions around that targeting. The tax policy, of course, has to be set as part of the budget process, not during the MTFs.

Finally, I am happy to work with Michael Marra and his colleagues if they want to bring forward ideas. This is not about passing the buck on to anyone else. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: The responsibility lies with us to bring forward a balanced budget that sets out how we will meet the ambitions of our key missions, one of which is about tackling poverty. *[Interruption.]* When you look at the spend on social security here in Scotland, which is, of course, one of the drivers, of the financial pressures—*[Interruption.]*—I would hope that Michael Marra will not disagree—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members! Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat.

I do not want all this chit chat. Also, we need to pick up the pace, with all respect, because we have 11 minutes or thereby and 10 more members are seeking to ask a question. I do not know whether you have anything to add to that answer, cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: No, that is fine.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I make a plea for succinct questions and answers from now on; otherwise, I will have to drop members from being able to ask any question, which I really do not want to do.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It is clear that cuts are coming. There is a £1 billion hole in resource spending next year and £2 billion the year after, but the cabinet secretary has refused, twice now, to treat the members in this chamber and the general public like adults and tell us where those tough decisions will be taken and where those cuts will come from. The situation is, in large part, caused by sub-optimal GDP growth and low productivity. The Scottish Government has just cut £46 million from our world-class universities and colleges. *[Interruption.]* They are generators of growth. Can the cabinet secretary understand the anger that is felt at them being deprioritised, and now badged as making “a less meaningful contribution” to the Government’s central missions?

Shona Robison: It has been made clear time and again that the reason for the £46 million that Alex Cole-Hamilton raises—which was unfortunate; of course no one wants to reduce funding to any area of public spending—was to help to fund the teachers’ pay deal. We heard over and over again in the chamber of the need to settle the teachers’ pay deal, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said at the time that there would be implications, because that money had to be found from somewhere. We then set out where that money had to be found from. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: Unfortunately, that is the reality of having to find money in-year because of pay deals that have been settled and because

those pay deals have been driven by inflation. We do not, of course, resent giving pay deals to public sector workers in a cost of living crisis, but the money has to come from somewhere.

We will set out our spending plans in detail in the forthcoming budget, because that is where the spending plans are set out and where the tax policy will be set out in order to pay for those spending plans. In making those decisions, we will make sure that we have a laser focus on targeting resources to those who need it most. I would have hoped that that would garner some support across the chamber.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Scotland clearly has some very wealthy people, so I very much welcome the updated tax strategy that the cabinet secretary is promising. Can she say any more about the external tax advisory group? For example, would the Scottish Trades Union Congress be part of that?

Shona Robison: We will set out in the next few weeks who will be involved in that group, but we clearly want a group that has a range of views on the best way forward for tax. It will include expertise from the tax profession but also from the varying interests in Scottish civic life on how we should go forward with our tax policy. I look forward to working with the group over the summer.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): As can be seen from the strategy, average earnings are growing more slowly in Scotland than in the rest of the UK and they are now less than 92 per cent of the UK average. Does the cabinet secretary not understand that Scotland’s being the highest-taxed part of the UK is making that situation worse?

Shona Robison: I do not accept that. As I said, 52 per cent of Scottish taxpayers will pay slightly less income tax in 2023-24 than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK.

We have prioritised a fair and progressive approach to taxation that balances the need to raise revenue with the impact on households and the economy. If the Scottish Conservatives want a different set of tax proposals—that is, if they want to cut tax as Liz Truss wanted to do in her budget—they have to accept the impact on Scotland’s public finances. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, we need to hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Quite often, Tory members come to the chamber asking for more money to be spent on Scottish public services. They cannot on one hand do that and on the other hand want to cut taxes—that just does not stack up. We will continue to have a fair and progressive tax system

that balances the needs of households with the needs of public finances and the economy.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): As has been noted, the Scottish Government has to balance its budget every year, which leads to challenges with demand-led budgets, such as social security, in year. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of its ability to manage demand-led budgets, and what specific fiscal levers would the cabinet secretary ideally want to be able to use to make that job easier?

Shona Robison: The analysis of the funding position, which is set out in the MTFs, clearly shows that the volatility to which the budget is subject is greater than the levers—which Michelle Thomson mentioned—that we have available to manage it. The limits on our borrowing in reserved powers are clearly inadequate to deal with the changes in tax and social security forecasts that we need to manage. Moreover, those limits are fixed and the value is eroding over time, not least due to inflation.

The upcoming review of the fiscal framework really has to address that issue and needs to give us the tools that we must have to manage the volatility in demand-led areas such as social security and the budget more widely.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): ONS data is very clear. In recent years, job growth and wage growth have been slower in Scotland than in not just all other UK nations but key comparator regions such as the north-west and south-west of England. Does the cabinet secretary have an explanation for that? Given the centrality of growth in per capita income tax receipts in the fiscal framework, why was there no mention of that in her statement whatsoever?

Shona Robison: Recent evidence suggests that economic performance is improving. The latest forecast of the net position for income tax in 2023-24 has improved, rising from £325 million at the time of the Scottish budget to £411 million in the latest forecast. That improvement is due to a number of factors but, most importantly, to significant shifts in the underlying forecast of relative earnings in comparison to the rest of the UK.

Provisional in-year pay-as-you-earn tax data for the first 11 months of 2022-23 suggests that Scottish PAYE income tax receipts have outperformed the rest of the UK, and the SFC forecasts that nominal earnings in Scotland will go through a period of higher growth relative to the growth of earnings that the OBR has forecast for the rest of the UK over the next five years, supporting our tax base. Surely, that is something that Daniel Johnson would welcome.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Last year, a number of Tory MSPs in the chamber were calling on the Scottish Government to replicate Kwasi Kwarteng's catastrophic plans for tax cuts for the rich, following the UK Government's disastrous mini-budget, which ended up crashing the economy to the tune of—we are told by some commentators—£74 billion, Scotland's share of which is around £6 billion. There was not a word of comment from the Tories about that £6 billion that was lost to the economy. Can the Deputy First Minister advise what the likely impact would have been had those tax cuts been implemented by a Tory Administration, and what the effect of the Tory spending cuts for Scotland would have been?

Shona Robison: Keith Brown is absolutely right. If we had matched the Tory calls on tax policy over the past year, we would have been worse off by up to £500 million. Cutting taxes for the wealthiest in society when many vulnerable households are facing hardship would have made no sense from an economic or, indeed, a moral standpoint. It is for the Tories to explain how their defining mission of slashing taxes and running down our public services is an attractive proposition for this country.

Instead, we have continued to take a responsible approach to our tax policy, making it work to support revenues for public services. Our approach carefully balances the policy's impact on households and the economy with the need to raise revenue to support our vital public services, including our NHS.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We know that, since 2014, the Scottish economy has grown, on average, at around one half the rate of the UK economy. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the additional tax revenues that would have been generated for it if we had at least matched UK average growth during the period since then?

Shona Robison: As I set out in an earlier answer, tax performance is improving, as is economic performance. Murdo Fraser wants to criticise the Scottish Government—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat for a second. Members, the question has been asked and we need to hear the cabinet secretary's response. If members have something else to say, they must not say it from a sedentary position.

Shona Robison: I say to Murdo Fraser that recent GDP growth in Scotland is better than in the rest of the UK. That might not be something that he wants to hear—he is shaking his head because he does not like to hear anything positive about the Scottish economy. This is a fundamental

point: Murdo Fraser comes to the chamber to ask us questions about what we are doing to grow the Scottish economy, but he then refuses to support us in getting the fiscal levers that we need to help us in our mission to grow the Scottish economy.

In the MTFs statement that I have just made, one of the key pillars that I set out is growing the Scottish economy by using the NSET and the levers that we have at our disposal and by investing in childcare and other measures, because we know that that will help to grow the tax base, which will help the Scottish public revenues.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I welcome the comments in the strategy on public sector reform and the DFM's offer to work with others in addressing the challenges that we face. I will certainly be delighted to take up that offer, even if, apparently, the Opposition parties will not.

The spend on non-front-line costs across the public sector is significant, running into billions. The spend on core Scottish Government costs alone is now in excess of £700 million, with significant increases in recent years. What assumptions has the Government made about the value of resources that will be freed up and deployed to front-line services as a result of the public sector and Government reform work that the DFM is taking forward?

Shona Robison: I welcome Ivan McKee's offer. I want to work with members from across the chamber and to look at any ideas that members have to support this work.

A programme of reform will support all aspects of public services to change within the overall envelope and move to a position of greater sustainability. That means that reform must be more than transferring resource to the front line of our public services, and it is about transformation in both the back office and front-line functions.

Our programme of reform includes a laser-like focus on securing the sustainability of public services. There is no particular predetermined savings target, because we want public bodies to do what they can to be more efficient; to look at exhausting and testing all options for efficiency savings; and to focus on making those savings as soon as possible. It is a vital area, and it is one that I will take forward on behalf of the whole Government to drive progress as quickly as we can.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): We are in a dire financial situation and our options are limited. However, I am glad that the Scottish Government acknowledges that it cannot just cut its way out of the situation. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that this is the time to be bold with tax policy to ensure that the wealthiest are paying

their fair share, for example through a new income tax band for people who earn between £75,000 and £125,000?

Shona Robison: Ross Greer will appreciate that we are in the early stage of looking towards the 2024-25 budget and the tax policy that will underpin that budget. I have agreed to chair a group over the summer to hear a wider range of views on the direction of travel.

When it comes to progressive taxation, we have strong foundations to build on. Progressive taxation has made a huge difference to the Scottish budget. Without it, we would not have had hundreds of millions of pounds to spend on public services. Going forward, we will make sure that we balance the needs of taxpayers and household incomes against the needs of our public services.

The social contract is very important to taxpayers in Scotland. It means that they get public services that are way, way ahead of what is offered elsewhere in the UK. Those services include free tertiary education, free prescriptions and, of course, a childcare offer that is much better than that anywhere else in the UK. I think that we should be proud of that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to the members whom I was not able to call. I indicated at an early point that that would happen if the questions and answers remained at the same length. Obviously, I must protect the time for the next item of business.

There will now be a short pause to allow the front-bench teams to change position, should they so wish.

Agriculture Policy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-09146, in the name of Finlay Carson, on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, on future agriculture policy in Scotland.

I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible. We are very tight for time, so I will be enforcing the time limits pretty robustly.

15:07

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am pleased to open this afternoon's debate on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. The committee is holding the debate as part of its pre-legislative scrutiny of the Scottish Government's proposals for future agriculture policy. The purpose of that work is to inform the committee's consideration of the Scottish Government's proposed agriculture bill, which the committee expects to be introduced sometime later this year.

It is vital that we set the right direction for Scottish agriculture for the years ahead. We need to have a strong agriculture sector that can provide us with a secure and sustainable food supply, that maintains our high standards of food production and that helps us to tackle the twin emergencies of climate change and biodiversity loss, and, in doing so, ensures that our rural communities are viable and supported.

To achieve those aims, any new agriculture policy needs to provide our farmers, crofters and other food producers with the support, investment and—this is equally important—the clear direction that are needed in order for us to make a just transition towards a more sustainable future.

The Scottish Government launched its consultation on its proposals for a new agriculture bill in August last year. Those proposals centre on a new farm payment framework to replace the common agricultural policy following the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. Payments under the new framework will be subject to greater conditionality with regard to nature restoration and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

In February, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands shared with the committee a route map for agricultural reform that sets out a high-level timescale for the transition towards the future agriculture support framework. Although that information is, of course, welcome, a common thread running through the evidence that

the committee has heard so far has been the concern that food producers and other agriculture stakeholders have voiced about the lack of information and detail from the Scottish Government about what a new agriculture policy intends to achieve and how it will achieve it.

The committee would therefore welcome any further information from the cabinet secretary about the Government's proposed future agriculture policy and more clarity on the timescale for the introduction of the agriculture bill to Parliament.

The committee began its pre-legislative scrutiny in February and has heard evidence from a considerable number of individuals and organisations representing farmers and crofters, land managers and many other players in Scotland's food supply chain. I take the opportunity to thank everyone who gave evidence to support the committee's work. The committee took a thematic approach to gathering evidence about what a future farm payment system should look like. We held evidence sessions on climate change mitigation and adaptation, nature restoration, biodiversity loss and resilience within the food production and supply chain.

We also heard from a broad range of groups and organisations that have been involved in developing, and will be at the heart of implementing, a new agriculture policy. Those included the farmer-led climate change groups that reported in 2021 and the agricultural reform implementation oversight board. Key industry bodies engaged with the committee, including NFU Scotland, Quality Meat Scotland and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board. We also heard from organisations focused on the role of agriculture in addressing climate change, including NatureScot, RSPB Scotland, the Climate Change Committee and Farming for 1.5°.

All witnesses, without exception, recognised the urgent need to reduce emissions from agriculture in order to meet our challenging net zero goals and to tackle the worrying decline in biodiversity. The capacity for future payment schemes based on conditionality for emissions reduction was explored. Although there was broad agreement that a payment scheme is the best vehicle to achieve that, there were concerns about the potential impact that some of the suggested measures—particularly the reduction in livestock numbers to meet methane reduction targets—might have on agriculture.

NFU Scotland and Quality Meat Scotland, as well as the farmer-led groups, were concerned about the loss of the critical mass of livestock numbers, which might lead to a decline in Scotland's food production supply chain as it

became less economically sustainable. NFUS stated:

“The critical mass is key to maintaining our processing capacity and our ability to produce high-quality food, which is going to be the bedrock and the mainstay of Scotland’s economy going forward.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 22 March 2023; c 18.]

Quality Meat Scotland also warned:

“The big problem that we face is the loss of critical mass in the red meat sector. If we lose animals and primary producers—farmers—we will not have enough animals to make the rest of the supply chain viable.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 26 April 2023; c 2.]

That would have a negative knock-on effect and would significantly undermine the sustainability of farming and rural communities, particularly in less-favoured areas, which have considerable limitations in relation to alternative forms of farming.

Failing to consider and adequately scrutinise the unintended consequences of future agriculture policies—including the impact of conditionality—could jeopardise the primary aim of a future policy, which is to grow more of our own high-quality food, more sustainably, in Scotland.

There was real support for a sectoral approach to emissions reductions based on land use. In particular, Farming for 1.5° suggested that some sectors and areas of production must focus on baseline biodiversity and emissions targets, while others should focus on nature restoration and the sequestration of carbon. It was suggested that a future farm payment system should incentivise farmers to meet baseline targets while also rewarding those who have already made progress towards sequestration and biodiversity restoration.

It was suggested that area-based payments should be subject to conditionality to support biodiversity restoration, with farmers and crofters receiving payments based on outcomes and—crucially—on practices that will lead to desirable and positive outcomes. There was also support for whole-farm plans and for professional development and training for farmers and land managers.

NatureScot pointed out that farmers could adopt more regenerative agricultural systems in highly productive areas rather than having to set aside land for tree planting in order to promote biodiversity. Controversially, the Climate Change Committee advocates a reduction in livestock numbers and the expansion of tree planting on agricultural land, although that approach was not supported by many other witnesses.

The committee will continue to scrutinise the Government’s proposal for future agriculture policy and ensure that it delivers for Scottish agriculture and rural communities. I hope that the evidence

that we have heard, and that we will hear today and in future sessions, will be taken seriously by the Government and will be reflected in new policy development.

I look forward to members’ contributions to the debate. I am sure that my committee colleagues will find it useful to hear the views of other members from all parties on the proposals for a future agriculture policy and with regard to what we need from an agriculture bill.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the need for Scotland to develop its own agriculture policy and support post-EU exit; notes the Scottish Government’s Vision for Agriculture, which was published in March 2022, and its intention to introduce an agriculture bill in the next parliamentary year, and welcomes the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee’s evidence taking in order to fully understand the broad range of policy areas that are fundamental to a successful future agriculture policy and to ensure that the agriculture sector is a thriving part of the economy, which helps to tackle climate change, protects biodiversity and, most importantly, puts food on plates.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mairi Gougeon. You have up to eight minutes, cabinet secretary.

15:15

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I welcome another opportunity to set out the Scottish Government’s approach to future agriculture policy for Scotland. I thank the committee for bringing the debate to the chamber and for the work that it has undertaken through its pre-legislative scrutiny. I give the assurance that I will, of course, take that evidence seriously and will give it due consideration as we move forward. I am glad to see from the committee’s motion that it supports our approach, and I will gladly support the motion.

Our vision for agriculture is a positive one. We published our vision for agriculture in March last year, setting out how we will transform support for farming and food production in Scotland as well as our aim to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

That vision has farmers, crofters and land managers at its core, as the stewards of our countryside, and it values their contribution to feeding our nation. However, we all accept that how they continue to do that and are supported to do that needs to change in future. The vision therefore recognises that land management will change to address climate change and biodiversity loss, and that there are challenges as well as opportunities in that for farmers and crofters.

Many are already leading the way, and they deserve to be acknowledged for farming to produce food sustainably in ways that actively

benefit both nature and climate. Our vision makes clear that we will continue to support farmers and crofters directly so that they can capitalise on support and so that the transition is just. It also makes clear that our nation has a duty to support our producers, promoting sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices and ensuring that our world-leading climate and nature targets are realised.

This is a journey, and it is not solely about the destination. How we get to that destination is critical, and we must bring along with us everyone who wants to be involved in agriculture in the future. The Government and I remain committed to working with and listening to our industry and all who have at heart the interests of a vibrant and successful rural Scotland, to achieve the objectives in our vision. Co-design is at the centre of all that we do.

Finlay Carson: The cabinet secretary talked about the destination, but does she appreciate how important it is to farmers who are already putting actions in place to tackle climate change and biodiversity that they know what that destination is? A clear indication of the destination is as important as how we get there.

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, it is. I agree with that, which is why we have provided as much information as possible. We have tried to set out that clarity by publishing the route map and giving an indication of that future direction by the list of measures that we have published. I will come on to that.

As committee members will know, we are already well on our way to delivering a different support system. We began the national test programme last year, commencing track 1 in April. More and more farmers and crofters are now undertaking carbon audits and soil analysis. Nearly 1,000 of those have been claimed for in the first quarter of 2023.

We have consulted on proposals for a new agriculture bill, which, as the committee motion highlights, I intend to introduce during the next parliamentary year.

The agri-environment climate scheme continues to invest in projects that protect the environment and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Six hundred and eighty rural businesses shared more than £14 million in the 2022 round.

In February, I announced a new payment scheme to improve the health and welfare of sheep and cattle. In March, I announced a new pilot fund to support small producers to become more resilient as part of our commitment to growing local supply chains.

It is right that we prepare for change and adapt our approach. However, at a time of insecurity and uncertainty, during which farmers, food producers and suppliers all face huge inflationary costs, as do households, it is just as important to ensure that support reaches them timeously and efficiently.

I am proud that the Scottish National Party Government has achieved that and that we reached the target of providing 70 per cent of our expenditure by the end of December last year—three months ahead of previous performance.

Every year, we provide £420 million in support through basic payments and greening payments. We also continue to provide additional support to those farming in less favourable areas, who are, arguably, in most need the support. Of course, our approach of continuing direct support now and in the future is in stark contrast to what is being developed in England. It is worth saying again and again that, no matter what happens in Westminster, this SNP Government in Scotland will maintain direct payments and support for our nation's food producers. What will change is that we will expect farmers and crofters to do more to deliver sustainable and regenerative farming and to maximise sustainable food production in ways that actively benefit both nature and climate.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the different climate in Scotland, which I will put to one side, can the cabinet secretary set out, in practical terms, what conditions she will put on farmers in order for them to get their tier 1 payments? What is she looking for?

Mairi Gougeon: In our route map, we have set out that, in 2025, we will introduce that conditionality. Of course, the list of measures that we published alongside the route map give that sort of indication, but we will make more announcements on that in due course.

As I have just mentioned in my previous responses to the points that Mr Mundell and Mr Carson made, the journey that we are on is laid out in the route map for reform, which I published on 10 February.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that, in addressing the point that Oliver Mundell has just made, there is a need to provide a long-term line of sight about what the stability and pattern of direct payments might be, because they will be critical to underpinning investment? Does she believe that she has adequate information available to her in order to provide, at this stage, any further clarity on that line of sight?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I can give you some of the time back.

Mairi Gougeon: Thank you very much, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Unfortunately, we do not have the clarity and there is no certainty beyond 2025 as to what budget we will receive from the UK Government. Right now, we get that budget only on an annual basis.

Our route map sets out timescales, provides clarity and confidence on key dates and expectations, and provides information on proposals and how we will help farmers and crofters to prepare for that change. Critically, the route map delivers on one of my key pledges: that there will be no cliff edges in support for our farmers and crofters. The route map also provides transparency of the timeframes moving forward.

The work of ARIOB to take the route map forward continues, and the next meeting will be in just over a week's time. I am delighted that Martin Kennedy, president of NFU Scotland, continues to co-chair that board with me.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: No—I need to make some progress.

No matter what we do in terms of designing, developing and implementing a new support and policy framework, we will do so with no guarantees, as I have already mentioned, and, indeed, with no real indication of whether the UK Government will provide funding to help us deliver our reform.

Scotland has already been short-changed following Brexit, and that has impacted on what we fund currently, although we have ensured that every penny and pound that is ring fenced for rural funding is being spent there. However, unlike independent countries that are members of the EU and therefore have funding security through the CAP framework, we are reliant on annual allocations from the UK Government, and we have no indication of what will be provided beyond 2025.

However, I will continue to press Westminster for our fair share, with multi-annual funding and complete autonomy over what we spend and how we do that. I will continue to press for the funding for our farmers, crofters and land managers, who need to manage change and shift how and what they do.

In drawing to a close, I reiterate that our farmers and crofters are already making that change happen. The farmers and crofters that I meet are willing to adapt and do things differently. Many of them are already doing so, and that has also been reflected in the committee's evidence.

However, we must also ensure that the transition that we undergo is a just one that takes with us everyone who wants to stay in or move into farming and food production. That is my goal. We have that ambition, optimism and enthusiasm, as well as the talent and skills that we need in Scotland to become that global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. I welcome the support of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and its members to do just that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton to speak for up to seven minutes.

15:24

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am delighted to be discussing agriculture again, just one week after our debate on sustainable food supply. It is important that we have the opportunity to speak and I am glad that my convener, Finlay Carson, raised the significant issues that we discussed at the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

When the First Minister, Humza Yousaf, set out his priorities when he took office, I expressed my frustration—shared by thousands of farmers and crofters across the country—at the lack of acknowledgment of agriculture in his opening speech and the paper that he published. He may live in Dundee and represent Glasgow Pollock, but he said that he wanted to be the First Minister for all of Scotland. He fell down at the very first hurdle in that speech. He has not represented a fifth of the population that he said that he would represent. *[Interruption.]* Last week was perhaps an indication that the penny has finally dropped and that the SNP ignores those communities at its peril. The warm words are cold comfort for those charged with sustaining Scotland's food security.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the member taken an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton: I want to use my time today to talk about the value of farming communities to Scotland's economy, environment and food security. *[Interruption.]* I will use some of the evidence that was taken during the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny of the proposed agriculture bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Hamilton, please resume your seat for a second. We have now had a build-up of low-level noise and grumbling from a sedentary position. If somebody wants to make an intervention, they can make one, and it will be up to the member whether they take it. I am not going to tolerate conversations across the chamber or heckling from a sedentary position in the way that we have seen over the

past few minutes. Can we conduct the debate with respect?

Rachael Hamilton: Today's motion ends with a reference to agriculture's role in putting "food on plates". For every debate and every committee evidence session that we have, and for every round table and every meeting on future agricultural policy that we participate in, we must not lose sight of that fundamental function of farming.

I am concerned that we will not get detail on the conditionality before we get to the first stage of passing legislation. The lack of clarity is worrying, as is evident in some of the briefings that were given to us for today, such as those from Scottish Land & Estates, the NFUS and the WWF.

Nobody would deny the important role that agriculture can play in Scotland's drive towards net zero, nor can we question the value of food production to our economy. As the general manager of the NFUS said in evidence to our committee, enabling our farmers to produce food for our plates must come first. I hope that the SNP Government will recognise that. Placing strict conditions on more than half of the support available to farmers and crofters would send the message that their doing their jobs in producing top-quality, home-grown food for millions of people across the country and abroad is no longer good enough.

A Galloway farmer pointed out that that conditionality suits the committees of the clean-fingered climate brigade and the forestry lobby, who are paid not to farm. It suits the new breed of green-washing lairds, who will take advantage of the proposed tier 2 funding and be paid to dispense with the inconvenient risks of farming and the economic activity that goes with it. For us on the Conservative benches, that is simply not good enough. We need to reward farmers for using the right land for the right purpose. We heard that time and again during committee evidence sessions.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Does Rachael Hamilton accept that the Scottish Government has committed to helping farmers produce food rather than environmental land management schemes, which fell off a cliff and lost farmers by the droves?

Rachael Hamilton: It is quite ironic that Jim Fairlie is asking me a question when he is in coalition with the Green Party and has a Green partner in Ariane Burgess, who wants to push farmers from livestock farming to tree planting. What the SNP's partners are doing has been described as tantamount to financial blackmail.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: In a second.

A commitment to continuing to deliver 80 per cent of direct support would be a welcome step in order to sustain jobs and livelihoods in the countryside and supported by the industry and its representatives. The NFUS has been clear about that.

John Swinney: In the Government's vision for agriculture, there is an explanation of the tiered support arrangement that is proposed and that has been consulted on. Does Rachael Hamilton support that or not?

Rachael Hamilton: I remind Mr Swinney that we are looking at the issue from the point of view of pre-legislative scrutiny. There has been huge criticism. For example, Scottish Land & Estates has said that it is complicated and complex and that we do not know the conditionality—

Jim Fairlie: Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: No—because I am answering John Swinney. Scottish Land & Estates does not know the details of the tiers that are currently proposed for the four-tier system.

We have Green members who want to remove support for farmers who are doing their jobs and being productive but also doing the things that they do right now, which are meeting environmental objectives. We must ensure that we are not—I cannot find the right word; I mean that we must ensure that we are supporting farmers and not looking at a way of punishing them for what they do really well. I am labouring my point, but I say to Mr Swinney that the tier system could have the unintended consequence of doing that if we do not get it right.

In March, the committee heard evidence from Jim Walker that farmers across the world are being supported to increase their efficiency and reduce their emissions. Australia is producing carbon-neutral beef. Just across the water from us, Ireland is moving in the same direction. Plans to do that in Scotland have been laid on a platter before the Scottish Government in the form of the suckler beef climate scheme, yet the proposals on that were mothballed while farmers were left in the dark over their future. Ignoring that plan and failing to come up with any other solution suggests to me, and many others in the farming community, that future farming policy is simply not a priority for the Government.

How long do I have left, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you another half a minute.

Rachael Hamilton: Thank you. An important point was raised in one of the members' briefings for the debate. It is quite awkward for the Scottish Government, but there is a shortage in its capacity on rural affairs. There is no junior minister in the cabinet secretary's department, there is a lack of resources, and all that is clearly hampering productivity in that department. Perhaps Kate Forbes had a crystal ball that told her not to take the path to perdition.

Farmers are being left out of the loop, they are crying out for clarity on the Government's plans for agriculture and they ended up rolling tractors on the Parliament's lawns in protest.

15:32

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, am grateful to the committee for bringing the debate on its pre-legislative scrutiny to the chamber.

The proposed agriculture bill and the new support scheme must enable the industry to achieve net zero targets, reduce emissions and produce food. Although the road map has been welcomed, it lacks detail. Evidence given to the committee has demonstrated that we have already lost out on crucial years in which we could have made headway. Farming and crofting cannot change quickly, so each delay means less innovation.

On speaking to many food and drink suppliers at an event that I was lucky enough to sponsor here at Holyrood, it struck me that the industry is already ahead of the Government on working towards 2030 net zero targets. It has used its own initiative and its own technology. What it needs—and what it is asking for—are more details on the bill and the new support scheme. It also needs more comprehensive tools to assist it in going further. Many are frustrated by the lack of Government support towards achieving our net zero ambitions. The Government must reward good practice and incentivise others to follow.

A realistic audit needs to be carried out, to ensure that farming is credited with its carbon sequestration as well as its emissions. If not, we will see green lairds buying up even more of our land, and planting trees in the wrong places, while doing nothing at all to address their current emissions. Not a penny of public money should go to people who would sell carbon credits to enable polluting behaviour elsewhere.

We must also recognise that our methods of farming, including producing grass-fed animals, are much more environmentally friendly than those of mass producers in other countries. Therefore it is senseless to discourage our farmers from rearing livestock only to simply import more

environmentally damaging meat from elsewhere. Transporting food over even greater distances simply adds to the carbon that has already been created. Global warming does not recognise borders, so we should not be cutting our emissions by simply raising them elsewhere.

We need to ensure that those who produce our food receive a fair wage for doing so. Our agricultural and food sector workers are often poorly paid. The people who produce our food are often those who rely on handouts and food banks, which is simply wrong. Yet, to date, little has been done to protect and strengthen the rights of workers in the agricultural sector.

Everyone wants affordable food, but those who produce it need to be paid fairly. Subsidies help, but they should not be used to line the pockets of middle men who squeeze producers' profits. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated our reliance on imports and how global issues have an impact on us, which highlights the need for food and energy security. For agriculture, we also need security with regard to animal feed and fertiliser. All those things are crucial to our survival.

We also need to balance farming support with sector need. In the past, Scotland has had a greater share of European Union funding for farming. We need to ensure that that is replicated in the future, and that, in turn, we distribute funding in a fashion that recognises that upland and island areas require more support.

It is simply wrong that those with larger, more profitable farms receive the greatest support. Farming should also work hand in hand with nature. We all want to see a more ambitious approach towards nature restoration. However, concerns have been raised about how that has been targeted and how, in the past, it disproportionately favoured large enterprises. There is concern that smaller-scale farmers and crofters will lose out again because they cannot identify as many features on their land, even though their production methods are already much more nature friendly.

The Government needs to put forward approaches that benefit nature restoration in all sectors and on all sizes of farm. The rural economy is dependent on farming and crofting; smallholdings are often disregarded, but they are actually the backbone of many communities. It baffles me that, time and time again, this Government does not seem to recognise that our rural areas are of high value to our economy. Without key infrastructure investment to ensure that Government policies are effective and, most importantly, that they work, it is putting the whole of Scotland at risk.

Sometimes I am frustrated that the Government cannot see that in a joined-up way—that it is helping rural areas on the one hand while damaging them on the other.

We cannot address these issues in isolation. We need Government policy that produces a rural strategy in which the agriculture bill and support systems play their part—a strategy that works for all of Scotland.

15:37

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This will be hard for some to take, but Mike Rumbles was right. It is controversial, I know, but he was. The Scottish Government's climate change plan requires the equivalent of a 31 per cent reduction in agricultural emissions by 2032, in comparison with 2018 levels. That is no mean feat because, in the previous 29 years, emissions in the sector decreased by only 13 per cent. We need to cut emissions more than four times as quickly as we have done so far, so the clock is ticking, yet farmers, I am afraid, have been hamstrung by the lack of necessary detail about the future agricultural support that will help them to deliver those reductions—

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way on that point?

Willie Rennie: I am getting to the punchline—no.

My former colleague Mike Rumbles warned, repeatedly, about that. He warned that the uncertainty after Brexit would be damaging, and he badgered the Government at the time, repeatedly, to get on with the job. Eventually, ministers agreed and set up a working group, but even then the system was bedevilled by a lack of prompt decision making. That is why the cabinet secretary is feeling the pressure today.

John Swinney: Will Mr Rennie give way?

Willie Rennie: Yes, briefly.

John Swinney: I actually agreed with quite a bit of the analysis from Mike Rumbles that Mr Rennie talked about regarding the impact of Brexit. Had we not left the European Union, Scotland would have had access to seven years of certainty in agricultural programmes.

I know that Mr Rennie and I occupy different constitutional positions, but he must accept the fact that, after Brexit, there is not as much certainty from the UK Government about future funding flows as there was during our membership of the European Union.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that I cannot give you any of that time back, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Mr Swinney makes a fair point: we need to get more certainty from the UK Government, not just about the length of time involved but about what happens if the funding in England changes, and how that would impact on Scotland.

However, there is impatience, because the Scottish Government could provide more detail about the budget that it does know about, which would help people to plan better for their future. I accept the longer-term point, but more detail is required about the immediate future.

There is impatience also because it takes time to learn new skills and develop new practice. New equipment is expensive, as we all know, and those difficulties are compounded by high fuel costs, low farm-gate prices, tight profit margins, volatile weather wiping out valuable crops overnight and lambs being slaughtered by out-of-control dogs.

However, the farmers I speak to are up for change. They want to play their part in tackling climate change and enhancing biodiversity, as well as supplying good-quality produce. We cannot meet our targets without them. We need farmers to play their part, because they have the skills that we simply do not. Young people must see a future in making a living off the land, and it would be devastating if we were to see an exodus of those we entrust to nurture our future landscape. We need to ensure that we do not take them for granted.

To be fair, it is good that the Scottish Government has committed to continue direct payments, that there will be no cliff edge, that there will be increased conditionality in relation to direct payments from 2025 and that there is a national testing programme. However, damage is being done because of the uncertainty about what precisely comes next. As the current environmental schemes come to an end, there is concern among those I speak to that there could be inaction due to the lack of new schemes. There is uncertainty around the new schemes, despite the fact that, under tier 2, there will be payments for good climate and biodiversity measures on the farm. That message has to be amplified. The cabinet secretary needs to make it clear that good climate and biodiversity work that is done today will receive a financial return under the new scheme.

It is the uncertainty about the proportions that are to be spent on each tier that is most damaging. Uncertainty can lead to indecision, which can lead to inaction.

NFU Scotland wants 80 per cent of the £680 million of agricultural support to be allocated to tier 1 and tier 2 direct payments. It would not be the status quo, as there will be increased

environmental conditionality. However, the RSPB and other environmental groups want a higher proportion of that financial support to be directed to tiers 3 and 4, with their emphasis on competitive, targeted support. The RSPB has not explicitly set a percentage, but the bar chart in its briefing for this debate seems to indicate a figure of 30 per cent as opposed to the figure from the NFUS of 80 per cent. That is quite a gap.

If I were the cabinet secretary, I would want to model the two options and those in between. I would want to know what those different percentages would mean for the financial viability of farms as well as our ability to meet our obligations around climate emissions and biodiversity. We need to see the detail because we need farms to survive, but we also need to meet the climate change obligations that I set out earlier. I hope that the cabinet secretary will provide that kind of detail, so that we can fully understand the financial impact of those issues and, despite what Mr Swinney said about the uncertainty over UK financing, the Scottish Government might be able to give farmers more confidence and certainty, so that they can plan for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. We have no time in hand, so any interventions will need to be accommodated in members' allocated time. That is not an invitation to members to shout out their interventions from a sedentary position if their intervention is not taken.

15:44

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I will not be taking interventions.

This time last week, when we gathered in the chamber to discuss the need for a sustainable food supply in Scotland, I used my speaking time to call for a collaborative approach to the future of agriculture in Scotland. I intend to try that approach again, and I very much welcome Willie Rennie's approach to the debate.

Every member recognises that Scotland is a world-class and world-renowned food-producing nation. Our global reputation is justifiably enviable, and the focus of the Scottish Government on enhancing that reputation and growing our food and drink sector is welcome and on-going.

My Perthshire South and Kinross-shire constituency has an excellent range of producers, and it is right that I am speaking about those businesses today. There can be no doubt that those folk, who produce world-class food, need to be at the forefront of our minds as we consider our new policy because, without farmers, there will be no just transition.

Members might have seen the creation of mulch overnight on Twitter. Normally, that is to be celebrated, but not if that mulch is a product that comes from long-established blueberry bushes that have been ripped up and shredded because the farmer can no longer afford to harvest or grow them. I believe that, in my neighbouring constituency, Scotland's first blueberry farmer gave away his crop last year because of non-viability and cheap imports, and has ceased to grow that wonderful and nutritious health-benefiting fruit.

Importing those fruits from Peru seems counterintuitive from an environmental perspective. That is a sad indictment of the power of supermarkets with a toothless adjudicator and a lack of labour that has befallen one sector but all too sadly affects many others, too. We have to protect our food producers.

Over the past few weeks, there has been a step in the right direction, with the message getting through to Rishi Sunak's Government. I very much welcome the fact that he has written to farmers to assure them that the UK will take their view into account in any future trade deals, and the fact that, at the food to fork summit, he made a welcome pledge on a collaborative approach with agricultural sectors. However, I again remind him that our cabinet secretary with responsibility for agriculture should have been on the guest list to discuss those matters. It would also have made sense if the UK Government had made that commitment on trade prior to opening the doors to unfettered market access for the exporting red meat powerhouses of Australia and New Zealand. That remains an undoubted threat to the future of many of our farmers and related businesses.

I am sure that we must also agree that our future agriculture policy needs all the funding worthy of agriculture's celebrated reputation. Despite numerous representations to the UK Government from the Scottish Government and stakeholders such as the NFUS, there is still no agreed multiyear funding to allow farmers to future proof their businesses. Ninety-seven per cent of all agri funding comes from the UK Government as a legacy of EU payments. The proportionality of those payments must stay at the current levels and not be Barnettised, and there must be at least a five-year commitment. Without that guarantee, any policy that we produce in the Parliament, no matter how good or bad, will be of no value to the farming and food-producing industry, which we must do all that we can to protect and grow, because, without that support, we will lose far more food producers, such as our blueberry growers in Perthshire and Aberdeenshire.

Our new Scottish agri bill is undoubtedly being asked to do a lot of heavy lifting, in relation not

only to food production but to addressing environmental and biodiversity challenges. Farmers do not in any way shrink from that challenge; in fact, they will grab those challenges with both hands if we support them to do so.

I believe that Mairi Gougeon got the message spot on by identifying that there is no conflict between food production and climate and biodiversity obligations. In reality, they are intertwined. Eighty-five per cent of Scotland's agricultural land is considered to be less favoured areas. It is best to use that land for the grazing of cows and the rearing of lambs, which are essential not only to our food security but in protecting soils, habitats and species, with a keen focus on reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions. Farmers agree, and they will actively pursue regenerative farming practices because, in reality, they always have done, particularly in the upland and semi-upland areas. All farmers want to farm responsibly, and they will do so provided that what they do does not ultimately drive them out of business.

The future of rural communities is absolutely dependent on the F-word: funding. I very much hope that there is a spirit of collaboration in the air. I call on Tory and Labour members to work with the Government—it is clear that the Lib Dems are going to do that. It is not good enough to politicise or bypass the collegiate and productive process that will make the policy work. We need to get this right, and it would be extremely helpful if Tory members got the message about funding across to UK ministers. Multiyear funding has to be guaranteed.

Refusing to send invitations to the Scottish ministers for Downing Street's farm to fork summit was a mistake. However, I know that the cabinet secretary has written a letter that highlights that there must be co-operation. The letter states that Scotland has only a fraction of the powers, levers and funding that we need and that, with the UK Government holding many of the levers that could help to sort many of the issues such as immigration funding and others that impact the agricultural sector, we need meaningful engagement with UK ministers on that. The letter says:

"It is extremely important and incumbent on us to work together constructively to support the food and drink sector ably."

I am quite sure that everybody would agree with that.

The perfect starting point would be the relevant ministers coming to our Rural Affairs and Islands Committee at the earliest possible opportunity to show that they are willing to play their part in the process. This is not about a competition between Governments or constitutional ideas; it is about the

here and now, and ensuring a successful agriculture policy in Scotland as a matter of urgency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members who have made an intervention and still wish to speak in the debate that they will need to re-press their buttons.

15:50

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Another week, another debate on agricultural policy. I mean no disrespect to the committee, which I know is trying hard to be proactive in place of a lethargic and unenthusiastic Government, but in my view, we have been debating rather than doing for far too long.

If this Government put half as much time and energy into striking a partnership agreement with our farmers as it puts into maintaining the Bute house agreement, our rural communities would already know where they stand.

Our farmers need and deserve clarity as well as the whole-hearted support of this SNP Government. It is time to get off the fence, get behind food production and back the people with the expertise and understanding when it comes to protecting our landscapes and our environment.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: Will the member take an intervention?

Oliver Mundell: I will give way to the cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon: In that case, does the member welcome the commitment from this Scottish Government to maintain the direct support for our food producers to ensure that it continues in Scotland, unlike down south, where his colleagues have removed that vital support for their farming industry?

Oliver Mundell: I do welcome that, but not when it comes with unknown conditions, which I will come to later, and not when it comes from a Government that is happy to raid the agriculture budget in Scotland when it suits it and is willing to be partners with a party that wants to carpet our country in trees and push our farmers off their land.

It is time for this Government to get off the fence and get behind food production. Today is the perfect opportunity to back the NFUS's call, tell us that 80 per cent of the funding in future will go to tier 1 and tier 2, and tell us what it will expect from farmers in order for them to get their payments.

We get interventions with all these smart points and attacks on the UK Government and on Brexit, but when it comes to matters that are within the Scottish Government's control, we get silence, sloping shoulders and abdication of responsibility. It is just not right.

Rather than having our agricultural policy dictated by fringe groups that have never set foot outside the central belt, this Government should take on board the wise counsel of farmers. Unlike the Scottish Greens, our farmers understand that we cannot have sustainability while exporting our emissions and importing poorer-quality produce from the other side of the world.

When I previously mentioned avocados, I was told that that was stereotypical, but like southern hemisphere wine, there is no doubt that they travel some distance in order to sustain hard-working Scottish Government ministers.

We need to get behind home-grown and home-reared produce. We need to make it a priority to ensure that there remains room for farming in all parts of our country, particularly in our uplands, which, as I have said previously, are under real threat from both forestry and industrial-scale wind farms, which often see peat and important watercourses disturbed.

Rather than asking our upland farmers to make way for intensive commercial forestry, we should be championing their role in managing the landscapes and natural environment, as well as the important part that they play in sustaining our rural communities. Indeed, if we were serious about tackling climate change, we would be making it easier for such farmers to access grants to plant low-density native trees and hedgerows on their farms—some might say, “The right tree in the right place”.

Rather than chasing after cash cows and quick fixes, this Government should be pushing back against the demonisation of our farmers. It should be calling out the many myths that are bandied about and ask itself why, in a country such as ours, we want to turn our back on this important sector.

Red meat is not evil—it is produced to exceptionally high standards, and it is something that those who claim to be “stronger for Scotland” should be proud of. Dairy is not evil—it provides many families with nutritious and affordable food.

Farmers, far from being the climate change problem, are part of the solution. Although they might be an easy scapegoat, in my experience, farmers are often full of ideas when it comes to tackling climate change and biodiversity issues. They just need to be freed up and supported to do so. That matters in the context of this debate, because without the continuation of direct support,

we simply would not have agricultural activity on a meaningful scale in many parts of our country.

We must remember that as new schemes take shape because we cannot afford to make it too difficult for farmers to meet eligibility criteria. There are real concerns among the farmers in my constituency that conditionality will be placed on future tier 1 payments. What will farmers be asked to do in return for payment? Will it be worth their claiming at all? There is a growing suspicion that the cabinet secretary and the Government may be looking to put onerous and unworkable burdens on our farmers in order to sell the concept of continued direct payments to non-governmental organisations and the professional climate lobby—and, of course, some of the cabinet secretary's Government colleagues.

As a parliamentarian, I am anxious about being asked to pass a framework bill that does not spell out exactly what our farmers will be asked to do in order to get their hands on their money. In summing up, perhaps the cabinet secretary could give us some practical examples of what she envisages. I also put directly to the cabinet secretary the NFUS's call that a minimum of 80 per cent of future funding should go into tier 1 and 2 payments. Is that the Scottish Government's plan: yes or no? That seems a straightforward ask and it will be a chance for the SNP to prove its critics wrong, and to demonstrate that farmers matter more than Lorna Slater or Patrick Harvie.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Mr Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: I know that I would rather have food on my table every day than the presence of the Scottish Greens floating around the Scottish Government Cabinet table.

15:56

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Inevitably, the phrase “pre-legislative scrutiny” always becomes a slight contradiction in terms. As expected, and in line with the Scottish Government's plans, there is not yet legislation for the committee to scrutinise in detail. However, as others—and not just from my party—have pointed out, it would be difficult to legislate in detail at this distance without a clearer indication from the UK Government about the financial envelope in which the Scottish Government would be expected to work.

Given the enormity of the legislation that is coming, it is right that the committee looks at the issues that are facing rural Scotland. As others have said, agriculture policy in the future will need to balance requirements in order to ensure that agriculture is a profitable activity that it is carried out in a way that meets our aims for biodiversity

and carbon reduction, strengthens rural communities and ensures that there is food security and good public health. Of course, there is an environmental context to the legislation, and a consensus among most—which certainly includes the farmers that I know—about the need to tackle both biodiversity loss and the threats to habitat that have in the past been associated with more intensive forms of farming.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the member for giving way and I apologise for not taking his intervention. Given that the member has said that there is widespread consensus, why does he feel that it is necessary for the Government to dictate to farmers what they will have to do in order to access payments?

Alasdair Allan: I am sorry—I do not think that the Conservatives can, on the one hand, say that the legislative process is slow and, on the other, say that there is too much legislation. I think that that is a difficult point for the member to make, but well done to him for trying nonetheless.

Around a quarter of Scotland's total greenhouse gas emissions come from our agriculture sector. However, at the same time, it is also one of the sectors that is most affected by climate change. Flooding, drought, extreme weather and increased pest and disease risks are all conditions that crofters and farmers face and will have to adapt to in the coming years and decades. As usual, I will focus first on some of the issues of that kind and others that face my island community specifically, as well as agriculture in less favoured areas more generally. In those areas, agriculture is far from intensive, and the most immediate threat, which others have alluded to, is that agricultural activity falls below a certain level, which makes whole agricultural communities and local economies difficult to sustain.

There may well be a global re-examination of the levels of meat consumption. However, when we look at the 85 per cent of Scotland's land mass that is classified as a less favoured area, we need to recognise that much of that land has very limited capacity, in economic terms, to be used for anything other than grazing livestock. Indeed, livestock help to create biodiversity and, particularly on the west coast, can be used as part of conservation efforts.

That is not to say that we should not encourage diversification, but we need to accept facts—not least the fact that grazed landscapes, at least in the context of non-intensive forms of agriculture, are necessary habitats for some of our rarest bird species.

Crofting and upland farming hold out models for such non-intensive activity and yet, as any hill farmer or crofter will point out, they are not where

the balance of agricultural payments currently lies. If anything, the crofting landscape faces underutilisation rather than overexploitation. That is partly because half of crofters gain as little as £1,400 a year in agricultural subsidies under the present support regime. I hope that the Government will address that.

Rachael Hamilton: I really appreciate Alasdair Allan's commitment to livestock farming, particularly for crofters, but the conditionality may prove detrimental to crofters. If they farm livestock and cannot provide evidence that they are increasing biodiversity and the rest of it, they will be out of pocket because of the conditionality.

Alasdair Allan: My point is that many forms of livestock agriculture can demonstrate that they are working with the environment but do not presently get rewarded for that.

Some of the questions that have been asked in the crofting counties are difficult to separate from the need for crofting law reform. To take but one example of that, the point is regularly put to me that the right of veto for a single shareholder in a common grazings can sometimes make it difficult for a community to invest in agri-environmental schemes or any other collective form of activity.

Am I running out of time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have another minute.

Alasdair Allan: Thank you, Presiding Officer. Controversial as it will inevitably be, a crofting law reform bill will be helpful and is needed to resolve some questions. I hope that it will also be part of the solution to deal with the increase in speculation on croft tenancies.

Last month, an offer was made on a croft tenancy—not a purchase of a croft but just the right to become the tenant. The tenancy, which was in Harris, was marketed for more than £200,000, which is beyond the financial reach of virtually anybody who is a crofter on Harris. We are in the perverse situation where crofts are underutilised but overcommodified, and I look forward to measures to deal with that.

To look at the wider picture and at the funding landscape, which we began by looking at, we need clarity from the UK Government about the financial envelope within which Scotland can act, and I look forward to seeing that.

16:02

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I say at the start that I am not going to take any interventions, because of the time constraints.

When Labour was elected to power in 1945, a section of its manifesto was entitled, "Agriculture and the People's Food". In a rallying cry to the electorate to win the peace and to face the future, it declared:

"Our good farm lands are part of the wealth of the nation and that wealth should not be wasted."

And so it went on to promise:

"our food supplies will have to be planned. Never again should they be left at the mercy of the city financier or speculator."

Well, I have to report to the people who elected us that, three quarters of a century later, it looks like we are going to have to fight that same battle all over again, because what we are witnessing, at the behest of this SNP-Green Government in the name of carbon credit schemes, is farmland being sold off once again to city finance houses, spivs and speculators.

A new form of extractive capitalism has dawned. It takes the shape of corporations such as Oxygen Conservation, Highlands Rewilding, BrewDog, Aviva and Standard Life, all joining what this Government freely admits is a class of landowners and landlords set up through trusts, through limited companies and—a growing number—through offshore interests. That there is no regulation of these carbon offset schemes means that there is nothing to stop better-yielding farmland being taken out of production. It is simply left to the invisible hand of the market—and a rigged market at that.

Carbon offset tree planting is being used to tranquilise the conscience of the wealthy; it is being used to pardon the world's richest corporations for carrying on with their greenhouse gas emitting activities, when they should be reducing or ending those activities altogether. It is a racket, and of course, because this is Scotland, they are buying up estates alongside some of the stolen lands of our antiquarian Scots noble families.

There is a great deal of secrecy, when it comes to the farm payment system, about who benefits and who pays but, just a few years ago, through a freedom of information request, it was revealed that among the chief appropriators of public money for farming and forestry in Scotland were some rather familiar names: the Duke of Buccleuch, the Viscount Cowdray, Lord Morton and the Earls of Moray, of Rosebery and of Seafield, who all do extremely well out of the Scottish farm payment system, as well as out of the Scottish class system.

So much so that the RSPB has recently calculated that the top 1 per cent of farm owners in Scotland accumulate 10 per cent of all farming support and that the top 20 per cent hoover up

almost two thirds—62 per cent—of Scottish Government farming support. Put simply, too much public money is going into the private pockets of Scotland's already wealthy corporations and estate owners, and not nearly enough is going to give a helping hand to our tenant farmers, our smallholders, our crofters and our farm workers.

So, when the cabinet secretary, in her ministerial foreword to the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture, writes that

"Scotland's farmers, crofters and land-managers are vital to our ambition to make our nation fairer and greener",

of course they are, but what about the 67,000 farm workers? Aren't they part of the vision? Aren't their futures critical if Scotland is to be not only greener but fairer, too?

Of course, the retention of the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board is welcomed by the farm workers union Unite, but it is to this Government's shame that the level of earnings is not even set at the real living wage and that, as a result, there lingers such extensive in-work poverty in our countryside.

Land, capital and labour are all critical factors of production, generating rent, surplus profits and wages, but I say to the Government today: you need to stop rewarding the first two factors at the expense of the third. I say that the rich are only so rich because the poor are so poor.

So, let me finish with some suggestions. We need to consider the front loading of farm payments: the removal of minimum acreage requirements for funding on the one hand, and the introduction of caps on payments—maximum subsidies—on the other. We must have the courage to understand that, because millions and millions of pounds of public money is being spent, we do have the leverage needed—of course we do—to bring about a just transition; that we can bring about the radical reform of land ownership that we need; that it is within the powers of this Parliament to reform, to redirect and to redistribute agricultural support, and to make it conditional that farm labourers, including migrant workers, get a real living wage, work shorter hours and are rewarded with secure and useful work, and let us reclaim the earth as a common treasury.

16:09

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The poet Wendell Berry once wrote:

"The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. ... Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life."

The topic that we are discussing today is about so many things: our land, our communities, our

food, our culture, our heritage, our security, our climate—in short, our past, present and future. In the lead-up to this important debate, I spoke to a number of farmers from across Scotland and asked them about their concerns, their hopes and the challenges that they face. I also asked them for their thoughts on future agricultural policy and, throughout my contribution today, I will share their words with the chamber.

The picture that those farmers painted was diverse. They kindly shared with me what they needed to thrive and grow; they also told me what they thought the Scottish Government should do to provide the fertile soil in which their prospects and hopes could be realised. What was clear in every conversation that I had was that with Brexit, the pandemic and, now, rising inflation and energy costs, this period has seen some of the most challenging times that the sector has ever faced.

Of the catalogue of failures that have impacted our rural economy, it was Brexit that came up the most—by far—in my conversations with farmers. Cameron Ewen, who is a farmer in my constituency, told me:

“Can we wind the clock back? It’s the biggest mistake the country’s ever made.”

Without independence, we cannot reverse Brexit. However, I note that the Scottish Government is working with our agricultural sector to help it through the damage that Brexit is doing. Our farmers and crofters are resilient if they are supported, and we are determined to support them in the coming years as we transition from the European Union’s CAP payment system to a support framework that realises the vision for Scotland to be a global leader in sustainable agriculture.

Farmer John Brims told me that he would like to see more attention paid to the future financial sustainability of our agri-food sector, in line with what the European Union set out to do. He is right—Scotland’s farmers are the backbone of our nation, producing the food and drink that ends up on our plates. The resilience of our food chains relies on the stability of our agricultural sector.

We in the chamber could perhaps use any influence that we have to pressure the UK Government to provide that future funding certainty. Among all the chaos that the Tory UK Government has brought to the agricultural sector, it can surely, at the bare minimum, provide that certainty as penance.

Food production, nature and climate concerns, and animal welfare are not conflicting priorities, and all can be done to reach a collective aim. Farmers know that more than most; as custodians of our natural heritage for centuries, they know the land intimately—that much is crystal clear in the

conversations that I had this week, which is why I want to see a future agricultural policy that empowers farmers, boosts the Scottish brand and helps ensure food security.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Adam: Sorry—not this time.

The new animal health and welfare payment is one example of what the Scottish Government is doing to fulfil our collective vision for agriculture. Through that payment, we will reward farmers who take an active role in improving the health and welfare of the animals that they keep.

Farmer Cameron Ewen told me:

“Most farmers are doing what’s required anyway. I do regular soil analysis. I have a health scheme for livestock. I have no problem at all meeting the requirements. As long as it’s simple and easy to do, as long as it’s not a ‘consultant’s charter’, I and other farmers will have no problem at all in meeting the requirements.”

That appeal for simplicity was common to every conversation that I had this week, and it is vital that we provide farmers with that simplicity, not just to avoid unnecessarily burdening them with further costs and bureaucracy, but to foster good mental health and create an environment that entices the next generation of farmers to take up the mantle.

I am a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, where we have been taking a great deal of evidence from a wide range of stakeholders on the issues that agriculture faces, and a general consensus exists that mental health is a major issue. There are many depressed farmers, and anxiety and loneliness are widespread. The farmers to whom I spoke cited financial uncertainty as the major cause of poor mental health; very sadly, it has in some cases led to farmers taking their own lives. Our future agricultural policy in Scotland should take heed of that issue, and I ask the Scottish Government to please give it due consideration.

We must also do more to encourage young farmers to enter the sector. According to NFUS, the average age of farm staff is approaching 60 and that average age is rising at an alarming rate worldwide. How do we solve that? Farmer John Brims told me:

“For younger farmers to come in, they have to see it as an industry with a future. Whatever is enacted mustn’t close the door on our food production. We have a moral duty to maintain our productive base and not whittle it away or put it at risk. That base could be needed by other countries in future who will be affected by climate change.”

A desire to provide and to be a good neighbour: that perfectly sums up our farmers. I look forward to scrutiny of the proposed agriculture bill when it is comes to committee, and I hope that we can all

work together to ensure that it is enabling and not burdensome so that, ultimately, we can support providers to feed our nation in a sustainable and environmentally sensitive way.

16:15

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the many expert witnesses who contributed to our Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's comprehensive process of evidence gathering on agricultural policy.

Everyone in the debate will recognise that we are having it at a time when we are deep in a climate and nature emergency. That is the context in which we must consider everything that we do in the Parliament.

We now have a very rare opportunity to set a new course, by designing a payment framework that will align agricultural activity with our national response to the climate and nature crises. We must get the incentives right in order to make what is right for the planet right for farm businesses and livelihoods, too.

I have a number of examples to give; as Karen Adam has done, I have spoken to some farmers. An organic sheep farmer in rural Perthshire told me that they are dedicating a third of their land to nature recovery. Their aim is to allow small numbers of cattle, pigs and ponies to range freely over the area, thereby creating a mosaic of dynamic habitats through the animals' natural behaviour. However, in order to claim the basic payment, they are obliged to keep internal fences, which are barriers to wildlife. The payment criteria run directly counter to their aim to increase biodiversity—an aim that should be encouraged and not blocked by such funding incentives.

A crofter in Sutherland told me that, because of the requirement in their payment region to keep livestock, they could not get basic payment support to create the Highland's first plant-protein croft. The criteria run counter to what we need to do to tackle the climate emergency. The UK Climate Change Committee, which came to speak to the committee, made it clear that, although there is plenty of room to continue small-scale crofting with small numbers of sheep, livestock numbers must decrease overall in upland grazing areas if Scotland is to have any hope of meeting its climate change targets. Therefore, farmers and crofters who want to reduce stock must be supported to do so.

Jim Fairlie: Does Ariane Burgess have the same concern that I do about the fact that the Climate Change Committee used the word "probably" in its assessment of whether grass is sequestering enough carbon?

Ariane Burgess: I think that Jim Fairlie is introducing a subject that is quite complex and that we, as a committee, need to revisit. I will leave it at that.

Professor Tim Benton from Chatham House told our committee that the "market does not reward" farmers for being sustainable, so the payment framework must take on that role.

The organic sheep farmer in Perthshire whom I mentioned put it well. They said:

"At this time of biodiversity and climate crisis, we feel it is vital that owners of 'less favoured area' land should be offered a funded option to prioritise nature restoration in their land management."

With that in mind, we should explore a new upland transition scheme that is open to all who currently receive headage payments. The scheme should provide those farmers and crofters with the same amount of income, but it should come with new requirements that bring about emissions cuts and allow areas of land to fully regenerate, whether through peatland restoration or by allowing tall vegetation and trees to thrive and provide habitat for wildlife.

I repeat: it is crucial that we get the incentives right to increase the resilience of food production in Scotland in the face of the climate and nature emergencies. The committee's evidence session on resilience and climate change raised some critical points.

Presiding Officer, can I check how much time I have left?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): You have two minutes remaining.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you.

The first point is that land management must take a landscape-scale approach. Many of the key changes will not be made at individual farm level; they will be made at catchment or landscape scale. How will that be co-ordinated? As eminent soil scientist Professor Pete Smith stated at the committee,

"The regional land use partnerships will play a vital role ... and we have to adequately finance those to allow farmers to collectivise and get together to make plans at a regional or catchment scale, so that we can get a good co-ordinated change that allows a just transition for the farmers and delivers public goods."—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 19 April 2023; c 20.]

I add that that applies not just to farmers but to all landowners in the area, as well as communities.

It is clear that agriculture policy should be informed by the regional land use frameworks, which will soon be published. We also need to have policies and funding that will support different actions in different areas, given Scotland's very diverse regions. For example, Pete Smith

suggested that, on the east coast, policies should support a reduction in the amount of land that is used to produce animal feed, so that we can make the most of those areas of land, which are

“some of the most productive land for producing fruit and veg anywhere in the world”.—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 19 April 2023; c 29.]

Finally, the proposed tier structure must target funding better by strengthening conditionality and putting more of the budget into the higher tiers to reward farmers for providing public goods such as carbon sequestration, good water quality, good air quality and biodiverse habitats.

The stakes are high, and we cannot delay. The policy and payments that we design now must be fit for the future, as we help to make Scotland a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

16:21

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): In preparing for this debate, I looked with care at the *Official Reports* of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee’s evidence taking on its exercise in pre-legislative scrutiny. It takes a long time to read them, because the committee took extensive evidence. I compliment the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee on the exercise that it has gone through in gathering that information.

That evidence demonstrates a fundamental point that my friend and colleague Karen Adam made, which is that there is a diverse range of views on how to proceed on the matter. I think that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee has done Parliament a service by mapping out the range of different and distinctive views that exists, so that we can resolve on a way forward. That range of evidence illustrates the scale of the challenge that faces the cabinet secretary, and it demonstrates that the careful work that the Scottish Government has undertaken for some time has been necessary in order for it to try to build a greater degree of consensus than would ordinarily be the case in such deliberations. Some strikingly different views exist on how to proceed, which Parliament and the Government will have to consider.

The Rural Affairs and Islands Committee has contributed meaningfully to the process, and the Government has responded to that by taking the necessary time and care to ensure that we have consensus. That has left us in a position in which there is broad consensus that we want to take an approach that ensures that we have confidence in our food supply and know that we have a sustainable agriculture sector, that adequate measures are being taken to tackle climate change and that the farming industry is involved and engaged—as much of it already is—in

addressing biodiversity loss in our rural environment. Those are three absolutely fundamental priorities.

The exercise that the Government has gone through has got us to a strong position. I appreciate that people would like us to be further on, but I will come on to say why I think that that is a bit challenging. It has got us to a position in which we have the substance of a really strong agriculture bill for the Parliament to consider.

That has been added to by two fundamental commitments that the cabinet secretary has given to Parliament today. First, she has committed to there being a just transition. There has to be a transition—everybody accepts that. Some people would like the transition to be more acute than others would like, but everyone accepts that there has to be a transition. The fact that the cabinet secretary has committed to a just transition is a welcome assurance to people who might be concerned.

I will take a brief intervention from Mr Whittle.

Brian Whittle: Does John Swinney agree that while we have been discussing the issue, our food producers and farmers have just been getting on with it, and that we should listen to them more?

John Swinney: What has the committee been doing? What has the Government been doing? They have been listening to those people for ages. Why do we not celebrate the fact that folk are getting on with it, rather than using it as a way of attacking the Government, which is the most pedestrian of parliamentary tactics?

Rachael Hamilton: Will John Swinney give way?

John Swinney: No, I will not.

The second key commitment that has been given by the cabinet secretary is that there will be no cliff edges, which is a crucial assurance that the process will be managed. This Government is listening with care to rural Scotland and wants to understand how the dichotomies and difficulties can be resolved. The Government should not be attacked for that and nor should the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

Finlay Carson: I appreciate John Swinney’s words regarding the work that the committee has done so far. Does he agree with me that there is some concern that, in a few months’ time, we might have to agree to a bill without knowing what the conditionality on most of the payments will be? That is a real concern for many of our farmers.

John Swinney: I understand that there is uncertainty about that—of course there is—but there is also a lot of other uncertainty. I have been rehearsing this point with my friend Mr Rennie

during the course of the debate. Before Brexit, we had seven years of certainty about agricultural support and investment. At the moment, we have annual commitments only up to 2025. Mr Carson cannot tell me what stance the UK Government will take on the application of the UK Internal Market Act 2020. *[Interruption.]* I say to Mr Carson that I am addressing his points.

Mr Carson cannot tell me what the UK Government will do with the UK Internal Market Act 2020 in the design of the agricultural support regime, nor can he tell me what the UK Government will do with the Subsidy Control Act 2022. The cabinet secretary will have to wrestle with those uncertainties. I point out that both those pieces of legislation were resisted by this Parliament because we recognised them as being incursions into our powers to decide on an agricultural system that will suit Scotland.

I think that Mr Rennie summed that up. He should perhaps be drafted in to write the occasional sentence or two, because he came up with a really good point today that sums it all up for me. He said that farms need to survive, but we need to take the climate action and biodiversity action that are necessary. That is the \$64 million question that we are wrestling with. The evidence that has been taken by the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and the careful listening by the Scottish Government and its cabinet secretary will serve us well as we take the difficult steps to reconcile what might in some cases seem to be irreconcilable, in order that we achieve sustainable agriculture, which is what I want for my constituents in Perthshire North.

16:27

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am part of a family farming partnership and there should be no doubt that I gain subsidies in relation to that.

In my 40 years in farming, I have learned that farmers are incredibly resilient and will respond to Government directions, as they have done. Today's debate was a chance for the Government finally to set out more detailed plans for Scottish farming. Has it done so? Why will it not do so? Does the Government understand the problem? Will it get off the fence?

Today has shed no light on that. I think that the Government is stuck on the fence and does not understand how to get off it. For example, we still do not know how much funding will be made available or whether the Scottish Government will ring fence it. We do not know whether all farms will be able to apply for all the new agricultural schemes or what conditions those schemes will

set. Our farmers will be rightly disappointed and frustrated about this Government's continued lack of clarity.

The Government seems to me to be a bit like the cow that I have chased on many occasions up the race and into the crush. It knows that it has to get there, but it will fight me every step of the way. It will kick, bellyache, move backwards and forwards and make one hell of a mess, but it gets to the crush in the end.

Farmers have been waiting for this policy to be declared since 2016. Let us not forget that it was this Government—with the aid of the Liberal Democrats, Mr Rennie—that allowed the policy to stretch out to 2024. If we had had our way, the mini agriculture bill in 2020, which Mike Rumbles supported, would have allowed the policy to be put forward in 2022. However, that was stopped by Fergus Ewing, who wanted, at that stage, to have more "stability and simplicity"—I believe that most farmers believed that to mean more dithering and delay. That bill kicked the can of farming subsidies down the road, and it has been kicked further ever since.

John Swinney: Does Edward Mountain not understand that the plea for stability, which the Government responded to positively, was made by the industry?

Edward Mountain: John Swinney is right. Stability was wanted by the industry—

John Swinney: Yes, I am right.

Edward Mountain: What the industry did not want was to forever go forward—

John Swinney can wave his hand as much as he likes. I can see him doing it.

The industry wanted a clear direction, which we do not have.

Unlike the Government, farmers do not work from day to day. They invest for the future. They look five to 10 years in front, which is not what the Government has done. Let us be honest. Since 2011, the beef herd has dropped from 471,300 animals through a 12 per cent decrease to 430,400 animals. That decrease means that the Scottish beef industry is virtually unsustainable. We have seen the knock-on effect in the loss of abattoirs.

What are we looking forward to? As has been said in the debate, there are multiple demands on land—for the production of food, for trees, for agri-environment schemes, for rewilding and for access. We cannot do it all. We need to concentrate on the most important thing: food security.

My message is clear. Good agricultural land should not be taken out of food production. Trees

are all very well in the right place, but we have not yet found a way of eating them. Nor, just by growing trees on the best agricultural land, should we export our carbon footprint.

We need a system that promotes food production yet delivers environmental benefits. We do not need a bureaucratic system that gets more civil servants, prevents food production and penalises farmers for small errors. We certainly do not want an information technology system designed by Richard Lochhead that costs £180 million and does not work. Neither do we need a system that precludes farmers from all environmental schemes. We do not need a system that has not been financially modelled to make sure that we understand where the money is going and whether it is going to achieve what we want it to achieve. We need a system that ensures that Scottish food—good, wholesome Scottish food—gets on to Scottish plates.

Farmers need more than the warm words that they have heard from the Government. They need a lot of detail and substance—and they need that in the bill, not in follow-up legislation.

My message to the cabinet secretary is therefore very clear: please do not be like Fergus Ewing, continuing to dither and delay. You must now be uncomfortable about sitting on the fence. Get over it and come up with a policy. Farmers are waiting. The industry is holding its breath. While you ponder and dither, the problem is that our industry suffers

The Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:33

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is clear that we need to make changes to support our agricultural sector. Our current direct payments system is deeply unequal. The top 20 per cent of claimants receive 62 per cent of the direct payments budget, while the bottom 40 per cent receive just 5 per cent.

We have heard today how the current direct payments system rewards intensive farming, often incentivising the least environmentally friendly land management choices. In effect, the current system penalises those who are working hardest to serve the public good. Our new payments system must incentivise high nature value farming and end area-based payments that reward ownership at the expense of the public good.

The system must also provide as much certainty as possible for our food producers, because farming requires plans that are made years ahead, and our nature targets require the same forward thinking, neither of which is possible without

clearer, longer-term strategies to meet those goals.

In 2019, more than three quarters of the farming payment budget was paid exclusively on the amount of farmable land owned. That is a regressive system, which rewards land hoarding and often acts as a payment for the farmers who need it least. However, instead of ensuring that those large landholdings are being held and managed for the public good, with responsible whole-farm plans that demonstrate sustainable practices, we have payments that reward practices that are detrimental in the long term.

We need our agricultural strategies to encompass the principles of land justice, in order to diversify our land ownership and tenancy and allow more people to live and work on our land, because the barrier for entry into agriculture is currently too high for too many, and land monopolies lead only to agricultural production monopolies, which harm us all.

Just last week, we spoke in this chamber about food insecurity, not just as a nation but as individuals, because more people than ever are forced to rely on food banks. However, we cannot begin to tackle long-term food insecurity without a system that recognises the natural symbiosis between sustainable farming and nature management.

Extreme weather costs farmers—and, by extension, the public—hundreds of millions each year, and farmers are often the first to be affected by the loss of soil quality and water scarcity, which go on to affect us all.

The empty shelves in supermarkets show us not just the food that we cannot buy but the food that our farmers cannot supply under our current system. It should not be the responsibility of farmers to slash prices in order to inflate supermarket profit margins, and nor should the public be expected to pay ever-increasing food prices, while supermarket share prices soar. Both farmers and consumers need a fairer approach to pricing and distribution.

For any Government that is hoping to get by on the status quo, I am afraid that the message is clear: we need Government intervention, we need a national industrial strategy and—yes—we need price controls.

In conclusion, we have heard today about the deep flaws in our current payment system, the lack of a long-term strategy to meet biodiversity and emission goals, and the regressive rewards for concentrated patterns of land ownership. However, despite those challenges, we know that many farmers and crofters are going above and beyond to meet environmental targets and provide our food, and that the public are more interested

than ever in eating local to support our producers and protect our planet. Let us use the power of this Parliament to support local and nutritious food production, fair pay for workers, fair prices for consumers and a universal right to food for us all.

16:38

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives and I add my thanks to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and its clerks for the great work that they have done on the topic and in bringing the debate to the chamber. In general, I think that it has been a really good debate. Perhaps because it is a debate from a cross-party committee, there has been a bit more consensual discussion than usual.

I was struck by the last line in the committee's motion, which says that the Scottish Government wants

“to ensure that the agriculture sector is a thriving part of the economy, which helps to tackle climate change, protects biodiversity and, most importantly, puts food on plates.”

That one sentence asks our food producers to take on so much responsibility for such huge issues. The Government wants them to feed us and tackle the climate and biodiversity crises—arguably two of the most important issues that face us today. In asking them to directly deal with those issues simultaneously, the Scottish Government is tying food producers' hands.

There is a push to cut beef and sheep numbers, citing livestock greenhouse gas production. However, the noisy minority fails to identify that, although the global figure is high—predominantly from the factory-farming techniques in the US, the far east and South America—our cattle and sheep are predominantly grass fed. Surely that is the ultimate circular economy? We have a high level of animal husbandry and we should, in fact, be holding our farmers up to the world as exemplars of how to produce the highest-quality food in a sustainable and ethical manner. Instead, they are being vilified by those who understand little and who want to push their beliefs on to the rest of society. It seems that, in all that virtue signalling, they have forgotten that we need to feed our nation. We need to ensure food security, and that is a circle that the nay-sayers simply cannot square. As has been highlighted, the unintended consequences of an attack on our red meat sector would be to jeopardise sustainability across the food chain.

Many policies will play into the new agriculture policy. We have discussed food security very recently, as well as the climate and biodiversity crisis. We have also recognised the important role that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022

could play, but the approach to a good food nation has dragged on for years and it is currently a shell of what it should be. We have also discussed public food procurement; again, that is a measure that I have raised many times and that could have been dealt with years ago. I know that the cabinet secretary is also supportive of that direction of travel, which I have to say is more frustrating to me, considering that very little has happened over the intervening years. Then there is the land reform bill, which could significantly cut across food production; given the 3,000 hectare limit that is suggested, it would impact more than 800 farms. We need to have a joined-up approach if we are going to develop legislation that supports our food producers to deliver on the Scottish Government's demands of them.

A little bit of thinking outside the box is perhaps required, so I will put a little idea on the table for consideration. Rachael Hamilton spoke in her opening speech of a threat to our farmland, especially with regard to tier 2 proposals and greenwashing. In Scotland, we do not have a shortage of land; however, there is increasing pressure on fertile farming land from the likes of onshore wind farms and—as Edward Mountain mentioned—land being bought up by companies to plant trees to offset carbon and the likes. There seems to be a presumption that permission for those schemes will be granted.

Jim Fairlie: I am curious to know what threat there is to livestock production from a wind farm.

Brian Whittle: I am suggesting that, too often, there is a presumption towards granting permission for that, no matter the value of the land to agriculture. The wind farms throw in so many applications in the planning phase and they are starting to take over agricultural land. *[Interruption.]* If I could just continue. What if we designated our most productive land as land where permission is likely to be denied for those uses, and incentivised and supported our food producers to keep producing? What if we designated land for the development of onshore wind where permission is likely? Currently, it takes around 13 years from making an application for a wind farm to building one, which does not help our biodiversity and climate crisis.

We know where we want to develop the Caledonian rainforest. We know where our national parks will be. We discuss spatial planning for our seas. Should we consider an element of spatial planning on our land? After all, we do that in urban areas. I know that I am flying a kite here, but it is perhaps time to be a bit more radical when we consider land use and land reform in the context of food security and the environment. Producing sustainable food and protecting the environment are not mutually exclusive.

As many speakers in the debate said—and as Oliver Mundell highlighted so eloquently in his contribution—those who work the land are the experts in both those areas. They simply need a legislative framework that enables them to innovate, and support from the Scottish Government to encourage delivery. Farmers plant trees and they get no reward. Farmers invest in lowering their greenhouse gases and get vilified nonetheless. Farmers are moving to living hedgerows and biodiversity in their planting, and away from damaging chemicals, yet are hamstrung by the Scottish Government's ideology on gene editing, which would support their efforts.

In conclusion, we need an agriculture bill that supports our food producers. It is entirely possible to produce legislation that realises all our goals. It is time to ditch ideology and start developing a framework of interconnected policies that align and do not work against each other—would that not be a breakthrough?

16:45

Mairi Gougeon: As ever, I am grateful to members for their contributions to the debate, because the continued success of our agriculture sector clearly matters to us all. That has been reflected across the chamber in the debate that we have had this afternoon.

We all recognise the essential role that the sector has in driving the rural economy, contributing to Scotland's food security and enabling the realisation of our world-leading climate and nature restoration outcomes. As I set out in my introductory remarks, this Government has a positive vision for the future, which has our food producers at its core, recognises the duty that is owed to them by our nation and supports them to produce high-quality food while delivering for the climate and nature restoration.

The agriculture reform route map that I published sets out key steps towards a coherent future framework. Alongside that route map, as I mentioned, I published an agriculture reform list of measures, and we will continue to test options through our national test programme.

Rachael Hamilton: The Scottish Government is taking the mickey. Andrew Moir, who is on the arable climate change group, told our committee that the national test programme funding of £250 was just worthless. He has been investing in technology and reducing his fertiliser output for years at a cost of thousands of pounds. What does the cabinet secretary have to say to him?

Mairi Gougeon: I know Andrew Moir well. He is one of my constituents and I have been out to visit him on his farm. I welcome all the work that he is

undertaking and driving forward, which is why he is a valuable member of our ARIOB.

The national test programme is vitally important, because it is about helping our businesses to get the baseline information. We already have carbon audits and soil testing. We have set out measures for animal health and welfare, and we are looking to expand that programme as we move forward.

All of that, and the list of measures that we have, is built on the actions that were identified by the farmer-led group processes, as well as academic research. All of that is underpinned by the principle that farmers and crofters should do what is right for their businesses.

I will introduce a new Scottish agriculture bill this year, which will provide the powers and the four-tier framework to deliver on our vision for agriculture. It will be a robust, adaptive and coherent framework that has been developed with our partners to deliver on our vision. I said earlier that this is a journey, and we are absolutely committed to making this journey with the industry and to listening, learning, adapting and improving as necessary in order to deliver on our vision.

I will touch on a number of important matters that were raised in the debate. One such matter, which came through quite strongly and was mentioned by a number of members, is the importance of our livestock industry. We know what the Climate Change Committee spelled out in relation what it thinks needs to happen to livestock numbers for us to meet our net zero targets. I want to be absolutely clear that the Scottish Government is not considering a cull of livestock in order to cut emissions. It is not our policy to actively reduce livestock numbers. We know that we produce livestock well in Scotland, and there will continue to be a role for that in the future.

That brings me to the important points that Rhoda Grant made in her opening speech in relation to how well we produce livestock in Scotland and the fact that we do not want emissions to be offshored. I absolutely agree that that does not make any sense to us. As I say, we produce livestock well in Scotland and we will continue to do that.

I also want to emphasise that Scottish produce, which includes meat and dairy, plays a hugely important part in our lives, culturally and in terms of nutrition. I fully support our meat and dairy sectors, and I am determined to ensure that our agriculture sector is rightly portrayed in a positive light.

That brings me to another important point about our livestock industry and how important our livestock is in general. Alasdair Allan raised points on the importance of livestock for biodiversity, and

he is absolutely right. On a visit to Islay, I saw where livestock were being actively managed for rough habitat. I have also been out on visits to see them in forestry and among trees, and I have heard about their importance for hazel trees, in particular. It is important, therefore, that we come to the realisation, and that we all acknowledge, that it is not a case of either/or: we need livestock to help us with the challenges that we face in relation to nature.

Finlay Carson: Will the member give way?

Mairi Gougeon: Not at the moment, because I need to make some progress.

Our vision for agriculture and our agriculture reform programme route map make clear our commitment to enabling the producers of high-quality food to deliver on our shared outcomes for biodiversity recovery and climate adaptation and mitigation. That is why we will continue to actively support those sectors in the future.

That brings me on to some other points. It is frustrating to see that work continually undermined. We had another good debate in relation to agriculture and our food security last week, in which we touched on vitally important points about trade. I do not want to see our sectors undermined, but, unfortunately, that is exactly what has happened in the trade deals with Australia and New Zealand that have been signed up to so far. Those deals completely undermine our own production in this country and allow unlimited imports, which does not help to support our sectors.

Another point that was raised throughout the debate relates to funding and budgets. There is no clarity, and there is no getting around the fact that our work and our planning is compromised by financial uncertainty. We remain in a position whereby Brexit means that we no longer have long-term certainty about funding. We used to be a part of a seven-year funding period, but we no longer have certainty for that period of time.

That is, I am afraid, where I take real issue with Edward Mountain's claims about day-to-day operation. HM Treasury has provided yearly allocations for the current UK parliamentary session, and we do not have any funding commitment from 2025. We do not have that certainty—the only certainty that we have is a £93 million shortfall in our budget to 2025, because the UK Government has failed to honour its funding commitments, with no clarity beyond that.

John Swinney made a good contribution and made some important points highlighting the constraints of the Subsidy Control Act 2022, which can hamper our policy choices in the future. Unusually, the act included agriculture in its scope, leaving us with less flexibility—

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon:—than we had as a member of the EU.

In closing, change is a constant, and our farmers and crofters have always demonstrated creativity and resilience in that regard—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary—I will have to stop you at this point.

Mairi Gougeon: Okay. I look forward to working with members of the committee as we move forward and introduce our agriculture bill.

The Presiding Officer: I call Beatrice Wishart to wind up the debate on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

16:52

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): As deputy convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to close the debate on the committee's important scrutiny of future agriculture policy in Scotland.

First, I echo the convener in thanking all those individuals and organisations who have offered evidence to the committee over the past few months. I also thank the members who are in the chamber, and the cabinet secretary, for their contributions to the debate. Members' views and the views of their constituents will help to inform the committee's continued scrutiny of future agriculture policy and of the upcoming agriculture bill.

There was a substantial level of agreement among the witnesses who gave evidence to the committee that change is needed in our agriculture policy. Using more conditionality in the payment scheme could encourage more sustainable farming practices in reducing emissions and increasing biodiversity, while better ensuring that those who are working on less favoured land get the investment that they need.

As a representative of an island constituency, I am hopeful of the potential for an agriculture policy to support farmers and crofters who are working on some of the least favoured areas, but I am concerned about the risks that are posed to their livelihood if they are not supported. Despite the publication of the Scottish Government's vision for agriculture, the outline proposals in its consultation and the high-level route map for the transition to a new policy, there remains a concerning lack of detail on what a future agricultural policy will entail and what the agriculture bill will provide for.

That is the view of the Scottish Crofting Federation, which told the committee that

“there are still some omissions that are particularly relevant to crofting. That includes detail on how common grazings will fit in and detail around payment structures, particularly on support to less favoured areas and on successors to the less favoured area support scheme.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 22 February 2023; c 2.]

That concern about a lack of detail was also voiced by many other witnesses right across the spectrum of views heard by the committee. Therefore, I ask the Scottish Government to ensure that it undertakes more engagement with food producers to understand and address their concerns in the agriculture bill. It would be appreciated if further information is published and shared with the committee as soon as possible.

It is important that agriculture policy reflects and supports the role of crofters as land managers of less favourable land. Claire Simonetta, of the farmer-led group for hill and upland farming, stated that

“hill and upland farming and crofting deliver multiple public benefits from disadvantaged land. Although those businesses are disadvantaged in an agricultural sense, and therefore rely more on income support, they are advantaged in terms of what they can deliver for public outcomes.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 1 March 2023; c 26.]

Although livestock is the greatest source of emissions from agriculture, it must be recognised that there are few alternatives to livestock grazing available for crofters and other managers of disadvantaged land to undertake agriculture in their areas. NFU Scotland told the committee that a future policy must

“focus on payments that will incentivise and encourage farmers and crofters to drive productivity, drive efficiency and deliver for biodiversity and the climate”.—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 22 March 2023; c 5.]

I therefore share the view of other members of the committee that a future agriculture policy needs to ensure that the whole food production supply chain is supported in Scotland.

Ensuring that we support viable crofting would also ensure that biodiversity is supported. We heard from the Scottish Crofting Federation that many crofting areas are closely related to high-nature-value farming areas. That includes common livestock grazing, which can be beneficial to both nature restoration and carbon sequestration in the soil. For that reason, Scottish Environment LINK and Farming for 1.5° wished to encourage the Scottish Government to consider the concept of high-nature-value farming systems and reward crofters and farmers who are already promoting biodiversity on their holdings through a new payment system.

Before I close, I want to highlight several points that were made by other members who spoke in

the debate. Rhoda Grant suggested that industry was way ahead of the Government in its thinking and highlighted that the rural economy is dependent on crofting and farming. Willie Rennie, Karen Adam and others stressed the need for certainty. Jim Fairlie emphasised the F-word—funding, and I agree that multiyear funding needs to be guaranteed. Other members talked about food security and health and giving whole-hearted support to our farmers and crofters, many of whom are already doing what has been asked of them in the interests of a just transition.

A strong agriculture sector is vital for the economy of our islands and for Scotland as a whole. The committee looks forward to continuing its engagement with crofters, farmers and other stakeholders in its pre-legislative scrutiny, and to consideration of the agriculture bill when it is introduced.

I once again thank members for their contributions to the committee’s debate.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on future agriculture policy in Scotland.

Motion without Notice

16:58

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

The Minister for Cabinet and Parliamentary Business (George Adam): I am glad that I got here in time, Presiding Officer.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.58 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business.

The question is, that motion S6M-09146, in the name of Finlay Carson, on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, on future agriculture policy in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the need for Scotland to develop its own agriculture policy and support post-EU exit; notes the Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture, which was published in March 2022, and its intention to introduce an agriculture bill in the next parliamentary year, and welcomes the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's evidence taking in order to fully understand the broad range of policy areas that are fundamental to a successful future agriculture policy and to ensure that the agriculture sector is a thriving part of the economy, which helps to tackle climate change, protects biodiversity and, most importantly, puts food on plates.

Meeting closed at 16:59.

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