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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 15 June 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.

Question 1 was not lodged.

Highly Protected Marine Areas (Community Engagement)

2. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement the rural affairs secretary has had with the fishing industry in communities that may be impacted by its proposals for highly protected marine areas. (S6O-02382)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): My colleague Mairi Gougeon regularly meets Scotland's fishing industry to discuss a wide range of issues that are of interest to it. Of course, one of those issues is highly protected marine areas. Just last month, she was in Aberdeen for the Scottish Skipper Expo and, more recently, she visited Shetland to meet fishers there.

As my colleague with portfolio responsibility for this area, Mairi McAllan, has said, the Government is committed to listening to the views of people living and working in our coastal and island communities, including fishers, as we consider our next steps.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: We all want healthy, thriving seas—that view is shared by politicians right across the chamber and by coastal communities right across Scotland. However, the Scottish Government's blanket approach to HPMA risks decimating those communities. The unpopular, ill-thought-out proposals will cost people their jobs and livelihoods and will make our communities less viable and less sustainable. It has been warned that they could cause a second clearances.

The plans need scrapping, not amending, and we need the Scottish Government to start to listen to the sector and impacted local communities. Will the minister or the cabinet secretary meet the representatives from Scotland's coastal communities who are outside the Parliament building today to listen to their concerns?

The Presiding Officer: Before the minister responds, I stress that we must have concise questions and responses.

Lorna Slater: I thank the member for his commitment to healthy seas and sustainable island, rural and coastal communities—that is absolutely something that we can all agree on.

The current trends in nature degradation pose a significant risk to Scotland's economic prosperity. The long-term prosperity of coastal and island communities depends on healthy seas and thriving marine ecosystems. The consultation on HPMA is at a very early stage in the sense that we do not have any specific details on where they might be located, and we will work closely with communities to shape the creation of those HPMA. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: I ask members to resist any temptation to contribute from a sedentary position during questions and responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The consultation is an in-depth one, ranging from local communities to the Royal Navy. Does the minister agree that, although the views of fishing communities are important, Scotland's waters belong to all 5.4 million people who live here? Does she agree that the opinions of people who are deeply concerned about environmental degradation caused by scallop dredging, for example, must also be considered when taking steps to protect marine biodiversity and reduce the impact of climate change and that the areas selected as highly protected marine areas should surely be those that have been damaged most by human activity?

Lorna Slater: I agree that the views of fishers are very important in this debate, as are the views of other users of our seas. Their livelihoods depend on a healthy marine environment, so it is only right that we listen to what fishers have to say on the issue.

It is true that Scotland's seas and marine ecosystems are a national asset and that their health matters to us all. We want to have as many voices as possible in this debate, which is why we have chosen to consult early on our proposals. We will be speaking directly to island and coastal communities over the summer, and we look forward to hearing the wide range of views that they hold.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Fishers know better than anyone that protecting the marine environment is key to safeguarding stocks and their industry, but is it not the case that the Scottish Government has dropped the ball in relation to marine protected areas and that ministers should be reviewing MPAs, assessing the evidence of their impact to see whether

changes are needed and, if required, strengthening them, rather than imposing arbitrary targets for HPMAAs?

Lorna Slater: We know from studies that removing human activities can have benefits for both the marine environment and the people who rely on it. We know, from evidence elsewhere in the world, that the benefits of partially protecting marine areas are improved by fully protecting them—there are some studies to that effect.

We will continue to work for and with communities in Scotland to understand how best to enhance marine protection so that we can have thriving and sustainable communities.

Paramedic, Nursing and Midwifery Student Bursary

3. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many paramedic students have accessed the paramedic, nursing and midwifery student bursary since its introduction in July 2021. (S6O-02383)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): In the 2021-22 academic year, we extended the eligibility criteria for the nursing and midwifery student bursary to incorporate paramedic science students studying in Scotland, and we renamed it the paramedic, nursing and midwifery student bursary. In the 2021-22 academic year, 670 paramedic science students received the paramedic, nursing and midwifery student bursary. In the 2022-23 academic year, 975 paramedic science students submitted applications for the bursary.

Gordon MacDonald: With a record number of student paramedics accessing the bursary, can the cabinet secretary provide clarity on how he envisages the increase will impact paramedic numbers and, importantly, response times?

Michael Matheson: The bursary is an important part of the Scottish Government's response in taking forward work to boost our paramedic numbers and making sure that we recruit more people into the service. We consider how demand will be met within the Scottish Ambulance Service through the demand and capacity programme, which is operated by the service and considers what resources are needed now and will be needed in the future. As part of that work, a record number of additional staff—1,388—have joined the service since 2020. A further 307 staff will be recruited in this financial year in order to help the service to maintain its response to patients across the country.

Ukrainian Children Leaving MS Victoria (Education)

4. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to provide continuity in education for children leaving the MS Victoria in the coming weeks. (S6O-02384)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government works with local authorities and other partners to ensure that all displaced Ukrainians have the support that they need, including access to education. That includes working intensively with the City of Edinburgh Council and the education officers who are on board the MS Victoria, Monday to Friday, to support transitions to schools or other education settings locally or in other local authority areas. Local authorities are best placed to identify and support the educational needs of children who arrive in their area. That includes involving parents in the planning process, seeking their views and providing appropriate support during the transition process.

Jeremy Balfour: The families who are living on the MS Victoria have been through unimaginable turmoil and disruption. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that any child who is already enrolled in a City of Edinburgh Council school will be provided with accommodation within the city in order to enable a safe and secure transition to their next academic year and avoid yet more disruption?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is an important time for those who are on MS Victoria. There is an obligation on the Scottish Government and on all local authorities to ensure that we do everything that we can to respond to the requests of people who are on board MS Victoria. However, the member will be well aware of the housing pressures in Edinburgh. Therefore, it is exceptionally difficult to ensure that anyone who wants to stay in Edinburgh, particularly in a certain school catchment area, can do so. That is why it is important to ensure that we have not just an Edinburgh solution but a Scotland-wide solution, which is why a number of local authorities will be working with the City of Edinburgh Council to support families who might need to move outside the Edinburgh area.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Recently, I wrote to the leader of Glasgow City Council about the education of children from MS Ambition when they relocated. In response, I was told that they would likely be required to relocate to other local authority areas. Can the Scottish Government outline what support is in place for those children to maintain friendships and connections as they move to other schools? What support will there be to ensure that local authorities work together to minimise disruption?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is very important to ensure that we do everything that we can to provide support when people need to leave either the Ambition or the Victoria. Although the use of ships is a temporary solution, there are communities on board those ships that are important to people. That is why the matching teams on the Ambition and the Victoria are doing everything that they can to respond to personal requests. We are also doing what we can when families move to another local authority area to support them in that process and to ensure that they are aware of what is happening in their new council area and in the school catchment area. We are supporting people through that process to ensure that, where possible, attachments with other families can be kept and, if not, that support is provided to ensure that people who leave the ships can form a successful and vibrant community.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): What support is the Scottish Government providing for displaced Ukrainian students who have settled in Scotland to ensure that they are given as much financial stability as possible during an incredibly traumatic time?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the Scottish Government introduced a change to our student support regulations that extended access to financial support for Ukrainian students. Ukrainian students who wish to embark on a further or higher education course in Scotland are now eligible for tuition and living cost support on the same terms as any other Scotland-domiciled student, provided that they are undertaking an eligible course and have submitted an application to the homes for Ukraine scheme, the Ukraine family scheme or the Ukraine extension scheme.

EventScotland and Creative Scotland (Funding)

5. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it plans to take to ensure a fair application of funds from EventScotland and Creative Scotland to every part of Scotland. (S6O-02385)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Creative Scotland funding reaches individuals, organisations and projects across the whole country, in each of the 32 local authority areas, through its regular and project funding streams, with particular flexibility being provided through its place partnership programme.

EventScotland provides funding to a diverse portfolio of arts, cultural and sporting events and festivals that deliver strong social and economic benefits across Scotland. Its national events

programme has been designed specifically to support events outwith the local authority areas of Edinburgh and Glasgow to ensure representation across Scotland's local authorities.

Willie Rennie: Between Creative Scotland and EventScotland, the city of Edinburgh received £52 per person, but Fife received less than £4 per head. There is a big city bias when it comes to Creative Scotland and EventScotland, and the situation in relation to Glasgow is almost as bad.

I am planning a creative and events summit in Fife to attract more funds to Fife. Will the minister join me at that event in an effort to attract more funds to the kingdom?

Angus Robertson: I agree with Willie Rennie that it is a good thing for communities, localities and regions to work together to promote and develop their local culture and arts sector. He will appreciate that there are very good reasons why our national arts organisation and funding body, Creative Scotland, operates at arm's length from Government.

I strongly encourage Willie Rennie and the culture sector in Fife to continue working with Creative Scotland and, wherever it is appropriate for me to do so, I will support local initiatives to ensure that culture and arts reach their full potential throughout Scotland, including Fife.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that Creative Scotland is cutting funding to organisations in the Highlands and Islands. In addition, the community cashback fund is providing funding to only one organisation based in the region. Given our rich culture, those cuts will have a devastating impact. Pivotal organisations such as Eden Court theatre and its outreach programme could be affected. Will the cabinet secretary go back to the drawing board and reconsider those allocations?

Angus Robertson: I think that Rhoda Grant would acknowledge that the allocation of funding by Creative Scotland is a matter for Creative Scotland. I encourage her and colleagues throughout the Highlands and Islands who believe that there should be a different method of allocating that funding to make their views heard.

This Government is very keen to support multi-annual funding solutions for arts organisations, including the regularly funded organisations in the Highlands and Islands. Rhoda Grant mentioned Eden Court, which is one of the jewels in our artistic sector. I agree that we need to make sure that the entire country has the level of support that is appropriate for the culture and arts sector. If she wants to make any input to Creative Scotland, I would be grateful if she would copy me in.

Child Obesity Rate

6. **Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):**

To ask the Scottish Government whether it is on track to meet its target of halving the child obesity rate by 2030. (S6O-02386)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Our aim to halve childhood obesity by 2030 was deliberately ambitious and part of our public health priority to ensure that Scotland is a place where children have a healthy weight.

A range of factors, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost crisis, have impacted on childhood obesity levels. The Scottish Government has delivered a range of actions from our diet and healthy weight delivery plan and remains committed to taking forward further actions, including forthcoming regulations—between now and 2030—to restrict promotions of food and drink that are high in fat, sugar or salt.

Claire Baker: I have to say that “deliberately ambitious” is a new way of describing a lack of delivery from the Government. In the recent statement on the healthy weight consultation, the minister said that she would not introduce mandatory measures on energy drinks, due to a lack of data. The most recent—insufficient—data, which was published by the Government, was dated February 2021. Does the minister recognise that, as the energy drinks market has expanded, we can all see an explosion in consumption among children and young people? If the Government will not take action because of a lack of data, what will it do to improve the evidence base? The lack of action is very disappointing.

Jenni Minto: Claire Baker raises a very relevant point. Although we do not intend to proceed with legislation at this time, we recognise that it is an issue of concern to parents and teachers. We continue to support voluntary measures to restrict the sale of energy drinks to children and we will keep the question of how we can strengthen those measures under review. We will consider additional information gathering and analysis, including in relation to energy drink consumption, to support further consideration of mandatory measures in the future.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): We are facing a childhood obesity epidemic in Scotland. When the pledge was announced in 2018, the prevalence of childhood obesity was 14 per cent. Latest reports show that it is now 18 per cent, which is an increase of four percentage points.

As a practising national health service general practitioner, I can tell you that childhood obesity leads to a host of health issues in adulthood, including type 2 diabetes, respiratory issues and high blood pressure. However, for parents who are

struggling to work out how to help their children, it is really important that they avoid the latest fads and do not put their children on diets. They should support them to make healthy choices and, hopefully, their child will grow out of obesity. I recently met Obesity Action Scotland, which told me of some great programmes in certain parts of the country, so parents who are worried should see their GP.

The Presiding Officer: Can I have a question, Dr Gulhane?

Sandesh Gulhane: Absolutely. The consultation by the minister is the fourth consultation on restricting promotions on junk food. Will the Government commit that it will be the last consultation and that action will follow?

Jenni Minto: It is clear that, to ensure that we make the best policy—which is relatable to everybody and hits the targets and makes the changes that we intend—we have to continue to consult. Standing here, I cannot promise whether that will be the final consultation, but it is absolutely key to consult in order to get the right policies.

Skills Delivery Landscape (Independent Review)

7. **Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the final report of the independent review of the skills delivery landscape. (S6O-02387)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): As I outlined during Tuesday's debate on college regionalisation, the Scottish Government is clear that reform is needed and we will not shy away from making decisions that will improve outcomes for learners and employers. I welcome the Withers review and I am minded to follow the broad direction of travel that it outlined.

However, it is right that the Scottish Government takes a little time to consider the detailed recommendations and the practicalities and consequences of implementing them, and that we work with all those who will be impacted.

Sharon Dowe: James Withers suggests giving universities the freedom to utilise funding to deliver degree-level learning in a variety of ways, including part-time learning and learning as part of an apprenticeship, as a way to uplift the current cap on university places. What is the minister's view on that proposal?

Graeme Dey: Sharon Dowe raises an important point. Among other things, the Withers review opens a discussion around different routes to positive destinations and how they might be expanded, and graduate apprenticeships are one

example of that. I have had an initial discussion with Universities Scotland on how the review might engage that sector and, over the course of the summer, I will have further engagement and discussions with that organisation and other stakeholders.

However, the Withers review is clear that there is no lack of investment in the post-school education and skills sector. It is a question of how best we deploy that funding to meet future need.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

A9 Dualling

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The A9 is a main road in Scotland stretching from the central belt to the north. It is also one of the most dangerous roads in the country. The Scottish National Party promised to fully dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness in its 2007 manifesto—16 years ago. Yesterday, campaigners were in Parliament, raising the issue once more.

Recently, *The Inverness Courier* highlighted the Government's broken promise on the issue with a tombstone on its front cover. After another death last month, the paper followed up with another sombre front page. It read—this is my question to the First Minister—

“the Scottish Government has no update on its delayed dualling project, leaving us all to ask: HOW MANY MORE PEOPLE HAVE TO DIE?”

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First and foremost, my thoughts are with every single person, family and community that have been affected by the tragic loss of life on the A9.

Douglas Ross, *The Inverness Courier* and others—including, I know, many MSPs from my party—who have raised the issue of dualling of the A9 are, of course, right to look at it through the prism of safety on our roads. It is a safety issue, which is why, since 2007 and the commitment to which Douglas Ross referred, we have taken action.

There has been £430 million of investment in the A9, and road users are already benefiting from dualled sections from Kincaig to Dalraddy and from Luncarty to the Pass of Birnam, which opened in September 2017 and August 2021 respectively. We—I and this Government—are absolutely committed to dualling the A9.

With regard to the timetable that is set out, Jenny Gilruth, when she was Minister for Transport, in February this year gave an update to Parliament—rightly—in relation to the Tomatin to Moy section. She made it clear that it could not go ahead because of our obligations in respect of public finance. During the update, she indicated that work was “on-going” and would conclude in “autumn of this year” to provide an “update” on the “renewed timescale for completion.” Of course, that does not preclude our taking action in relation to safety and road improvements on the A9, on which I can give some detail shortly.

However, I say to Douglas Ross that it is important in such infrastructure projects that we adhere to the obligation to provide value for money. We will give the update on the other side

of the summer recess, in autumn 2023, but anybody who is listening should be absolutely assured that we have a cast-iron guarantee to continue the dualling work that we have already started and to ensure that we dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness.

Douglas Ross: That is perhaps one of the most disappointing answers that I have ever heard in the chamber. Last year, deaths on the A9 were at a 20-year high. The First Minister was trying to say that the millions of pounds of investment and the upgrades that we have seen are a success. In a decade, the SNP has upgraded 11 miles of the route—just over a mile a year—and somehow that is a success, while still too many families grieve the loss of a loved one.

During his leadership bid, Humza Yousaf claimed that dualling the A9 would be

“the first thing I will do”

in office. However, since his election, Laura Hansler, who has been campaigning for improvements on the A9, has said:

“Humza Yousaf made a lot of promises—so where are these promises?”

This week, Humza Yousaf’s Government lodged a question in order to announce the latest procurement timetable for the A9, but it was withdrawn at the last minute. We do not believe that that has happened before in this Parliament. Can the First Minister tell us why that announcement was withdrawn? Will he use the opportunity today, at First Minister’s questions, to tell us what his Government had planned to announce earlier this week?

The First Minister: The Government-initiated question was withdrawn. I do not know whether Douglas Ross was in the chamber this week or doing one of his other jobs, but, if he had been here in the chamber, he would have seen that we have a new transport team in place. It is only right, of course, that I have asked that transport team to look at the detail of dualling of the A9.

It is also incredibly important, for the Government in particular, that when we give information to Parliament it is the most up-to-date and accurate information that we can provide. Today, of all days, the Conservatives should understand the value of accurate statements being made to this Parliament.

I have already asked the new transport team to look at A9 dualling and, of course, to update Parliament in due course.

In terms of safety—because I always bring it back to the issue of safety, which is so important when it comes to dualling the A9—we have an on-going programme of road safety improvements, so

the fact that we are taking time in relation to the timetable for the A9 this summer does not stop us from making those road safety improvements. For example, last year we spent approximately £100,000 to improve safety at three sites on the A9. We have also invested almost £400,000 to refurbish the average-speed system between Dunblane and Inverness. Since January, as part of a £5 million investment by 2024-25, we have delivered lining and signing improvements around Dunkeld. Additional signs are being installed at key locations, too, and we have made a number of other interventions.

I go back to what I said at the beginning of my response to Douglas Ross’s first question: a single loss of life on our roads is not acceptable. That is why we have very ambitious targets in relation to reducing casualties and fatalities on our roads. The longer-term trend for road fatalities in Scotland has been downward: since 2000, the number of people who are killed on our roads has decreased by 47 per cent.

However, I want us to go even further, which is why dualling the A9 is a priority for the Government. We will continue to make progress on that priority.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister is trying to say that the change of transport minister is the reason why his Government took what was, as far as we are aware, the unprecedented step of withdrawing an announcement. The question was lodged at 3:47 on Monday afternoon. It was just a little over 12 hours later that the new transport minister was in place. That was almost a week after the previous transport minister had resigned. Something happened between Monday afternoon, when Jim Fairlie, as a back-bench MSP, was asked to lodge the question in order to get an announcement from the Scottish Government, and the question’s being withdrawn. The fact that we were going to have a new transport minister was known to the First Minister, to the Cabinet and to the entire Parliament. Why did the question have to be withdrawn? What did the SNP want to tell Parliament and Scotland about the A9 that it now sounds like the First Minister is not going to tell us until the autumn? These are serious questions that need to be answered.

We also heard this week from the Civil Engineering Contractors Association. It said:

“The civil engineering sector in Scotland have known for many years that the promise to dual the A9 2025 would not be met.”

It said that the SNP-run Transport Scotland is regarded by civil engineers as

“the worst client to work for in the”

United Kingdom.

Does the First Minister have full confidence in his agency to dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness, and will he tell us what he planned to announce in Parliament this week that now seems to be delayed for months?

The First Minister: I have already answered the question about withdrawal of the Government-initiated question. There is a new transport team in place and it is looking again at the timetable for A9 dualling. As I have said, it is very important and when we are ready to update Parliament with an announcement on the A9, we will absolutely do that. We will also ensure, of course, that any update that we provide in a statement to Parliament is accurate.

On the criticisms from the Civil Engineering Contractors Association—which I have seen—I take them very seriously. I have asked Transport Scotland, which has engaged with CECA before, to ensure that it continues to engage with the association to consider what improvements can be made to our contract delivery, which is important, but also to the procurement mechanisms that we have in place to maximise market interest in the new procurement. I think that there is a lot in the submission from CECA that we can reflect on. I expect Transport Scotland—as I have told it—to reflect on it.

On Transport Scotland's ability to deliver infrastructure projects, I remind Douglas Ross that, under the SNP Government, we have seen delivery of the Queensferry crossing, the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the M8, M73 and M74 motorway improvement projects and many other infrastructure projects—not only on roads but in rail, for example. We have a proud track record of investing in capital infrastructure in Scotland and of improving roads and rail across the country, and I will look to ensure that we build on that progress. *[Applause.]*

Douglas Ross: The “proud track record” that SNP politicians applaud has seen only 11 miles of the A9 being dualled in a decade, despite the SNP's having said a decade and a half ago that it would be fully dualled.

The First Minister is getting annoyed about having to repeat answers about the withdrawn question. He must have known that he was about to appoint a new transport minister. I have said that, on Monday afternoon, his Government asked one of his back benchers to lodge a question. Will he pledge now to publish all details of communication between Government ministers, Transport Scotland and special advisers on what led to the decision—which is, I think, unprecedented in Parliament—to withdraw that Government-initiated question?

The fact is that the SNP has broken its promises to dual the A9 for 16 years, and there is still no end in sight, with devastating consequences for so many families. People from Perthshire to the Highlands are scathing about the Government's record. They feel that they are being forgotten by SNP politicians at Holyrood. They say that failing to get the situation fixed is a dereliction of duty. Campaigners say that they fear that dualling the A9 will now take to 2050. Is it really going to take another 30 years to fulfil a promise that was made by the SNP more than a decade and a half ago?

I go back to my first question. How many more people have to die before that road is fully dualled?

The First Minister: It is not going to take until 2050 to dual the A9. As I have said, we will give an update to Parliament, as previous transport secretaries have said, once the work is done over the course of the summer.

One of our other challenges with capital infrastructure projects, of course, is the increasing costs because of high inflation. The Conservatives should know about that well, given that they are the architects of sky-high inflation because of their economic mismanagement of the public finances. The Conservative UK Government has, of course, repeatedly cut our capital budget over the years. That is why we have to make extremely difficult choices. However, even with those difficult choices, I reiterate once again our cast-iron guarantee on dualling the A9 and building on the progress that we have already made. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: I have already asked members to resist any temptation to contribute while members are putting questions or while they are being responded to.

The First Minister: On the GIQ, I have already made it clear that we have a new transport team in place, and I have asked that new transport team to look at the issue once again.

This is desperate stuff from Douglas Ross, who is no doubt trying to dodge and deflect from the serious scandal that his party is engulfed in, with Boris Johnson having not just lied to the House of Commons but having betrayed the people of this country and the UK. When people could not visit a loved one or attend the funeral of a loved one—*[Interruption.]* The Conservatives should not be shouting this down. When people could not attend the funeral of a loved one, Boris Johnson was breaking the rules and having parties in number 10. Douglas Ross can try to deflect and dodge, but nobody in this country will forget that he backed Boris Johnson to the hilt.

Cancer Strategy

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Earlier today, the Government released its new cancer strategy. Cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer, and it brings anxiety and misery to thousands of people across Scotland every year. Identifying and treating cancer quickly saves lives. However, the 62-day treatment standard has not been met in over a decade. Today's 10-year strategy has given no indication of when it will be met, and the action plan does not mention it at all. When does the Government expect to meet the 62-day cancer treatment standard?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The worst challenge—it was there even pre-pandemic—is, as Anas Sarwar is right to say, in relation to the 62-day target. We had been achieving the 31-day target with consistency, but there are challenges because of the shock of the pandemic, which has of course further exacerbated the challenge with both the 31-day and the 62-day targets. In relation to the actions that we are taking, the cancer strategy is an important plan, which we know that many stakeholders have welcomed.

Anas Sarwar will understand the scale of the challenge that we are facing. Arguably, the most difficult decision that the Government had to take during the course of the pandemic was to pause cancer screening for a number of months. We are working through that backlog. As Anas Sarwar was right to say, we are not meeting the 62-day target. Challenges still remain and, although we are close to the 31-day target, we are not quite meeting it.

We have seen more patients in the past quarter than in the previous one, and we are seeing more people through both the 31-day and the 62-day pathways. We are taking a range of actions, because cancer treatment and the recovery of those waiting times and of the national health service are of the highest priority to the Government.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister has not answered the question about when the Government expects to meet the 62-day target. I remind him that Covid did not start a decade ago, which has been the length of time in which the Government has not met that standard.

Of course, we need a strategy and a plan, but we actually need the Government to deliver quality cancer care. Malcolm Graham is 76 and lives on Lewis. Last year, he had a tumour removed but, last month, he was told the devastating news that his cancer was back in his liver and lungs. He has been waiting anxiously to hear about when his treatment would start but, this week, he received this letter:

"We regret to inform you that currently we do not have an appropriate oncologist able to see you to supervise your ongoing treatment ... We are in discussion with the other cancer centres within Scotland but they also have a shortage of oncologists ... and as yet have not been able to offer any assistance.

This does sadly mean you are likely to experience some delay and disruption to your treatment until we can find a replacement."

"Delay and disruption"—this is life and death for people across the country. There is a shortage of oncologists across Scotland when cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer. After 16 years of Scottish National Party Government, why is there no oncologist available anywhere in Scotland to treat Mr Graham?

The First Minister: I do not have all the detail of the case, but I am, of course, happy to look at it if Anas Sarwar wishes to send those details across.

There is a global shortage of oncologists and we have been working over the past 16 years to increase the numbers of oncologists in Scotland. Since 2007, there has been an almost 100 per cent increase in consultant oncologists, from 69.5 whole-term equivalents in September 2006 to 137.2 whole-term equivalents in the most recent statistics, which are from December 2022. We have increased numbers of consultant radiologists by 60 per cent as well and we have a higher number of consultant radiologists per head in Scotland than there are in other parts of the United Kingdom.

However, given the case that Anas Sarwar has raised and the issues that have been raised—for example, around NHS Tayside breast cancer service—we know that there is still work to do. That is why I, in my role as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, set up a task force to look at what more we need to do to attract oncologists to our hospitals and cancer services.

I am happy to look into the detail of the individual case that Anas Sarwar has raised, but I want him to be assured that there has been, and will continue to be, action to increase the number of consultant radiologists and consultant oncologists working in Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: I welcome the First Minister's offer to look at the case and I suggest that he does so urgently. However, it should not take bringing individual cases to Parliament for people to get life-saving cancer treatment across the country. There is a shortage of oncologists across Scotland, and we have been raising the issue of the NHS workforce crisis for years.

The strategy that the First Minister published today states that the workforce review will not conclude until 2026. People with cancer cannot afford to wait. The crisis is now—the 31-day

standard is repeatedly missed, the 62-day standard has not been met in more than a decade and staff shortages are putting people's lives at risk. The SNP has been in government for 16 years and, today, it has published a 10-year plan. Why does Humza Yousaf think that people across Scotland have to wait 26 years to get adequate cancer care?

The First Minister: I do not think that. Pre-pandemic, we were consistently meeting the 31-day standard. Although we have dipped just below the 95 per cent performance target, the latest performance figure was 94.1 per cent, I think, which means that more than nine out of 10 people are being seen within the 31-day target. The median waiting time for treatment remains at five days for that pathway. I do not believe that people should have to wait longer.

I go back to the point that I made in response to Anas Sarwar's first question, which is that we are treating more than 35 per cent more people on the 62-day pathway than was the case 10 years ago, for example. We are seeing more and more people through these pathways, and we are doing—I am doing—everything that we can to improve the performance on both the 31-day and 62-day pathways.

We are looking at how we can redesign our cancer services and what more we can do to add capacity. For example, we have mobile MRI and CT scanners, which provide additional capacity, often in hard-to-reach remote, rural and island communities. The Government and I are entirely focused on the NHS recovery, and of the highest priority is the recovery of our cancer services.

Rural Schools (Viability)

3. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on the future and viability of rural schools. (S6F-02250)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Rural schools play an important part in our communities. Like many western European countries, in particular, Scotland is facing a set of long-term population challenges, which are particularly acute in some remote, rural and island communities. That is why, in 2021, the Scottish Government published Scotland's first population strategy.

In Scotland, there is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. When local authorities plan to close rural schools, they are required to undertake a thorough and lengthy consultation process. That includes demonstrating the educational benefit of a closure, considering the impact of a closure on the local community and school travel arrangements and consulting the community on alternatives to closure. The process

ensures that the impact of any decision is properly considered and options are explored. Of course, no school closure decision is ever, or should ever be, taken lightly.

Stephen Kerr: Last weekend, *The Herald* revealed that 40 mainly rural schools have been closed or mothballed in recent years. Colleagues across all parties in the Parliament have described that number as alarming and as evidence of the blatant disregard that this Scottish National Party Government has for the rural and remote areas of Scotland. Families with young children in rural Scotland are being left high and dry by the SNP's neglect, and the SNP Government still has no plan for any of this.

Now there are 15 more schools at risk of closure, including Blackness school, in my constituency. Will the First Minister, like his predecessor, turn his back on rural Scotland, or will he take this opportunity to send a strong message of support for our rural schools?

The First Minister: I do not agree at all with Stephen Kerr's characterisation of the situation. Let me take the issues in turn. First, these are decisions for local authorities to take. It is usually the Conservatives who are the first to complain if they perceive or believe that the Scottish Government is in any way interfering in local decision making. Let us allow and empower our local authorities to make decisions, in consultation with local communities, that they believe are right for them.

It is the SNP that brought in additional protections for rural schools. Those include the requirement that a local authority must clearly demonstrate that it has considered alternatives to closure, and there must be assessments of the likely impact on the community and the impact on school travel arrangements for local pupils. A local authority must set out the educational benefits of a closure. If the proposal to close a school is rejected, the local authority cannot repeat the process for another five years. The SNP brought in a whole host of protections.

Depopulation is a serious issue, which is why we are taking a range of actions to address the issue. As I said, in 2021, we published Scotland's first population strategy, and the delivery of the strategy is overseen by a ministerial population task force. However, what has not helped the depopulation situation in remote, rural and island communities is the hard Brexit that has been imposed on Scotland against our will. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: The hard Brexit that has been imposed by Stephen Kerr and his colleagues has not helped with European migration to

Scotland. If only Scotland had the powers to rejoin the European Union, perhaps we could reverse depopulation for good.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Many rural communities are facing complex and long-term population challenges. Schools need pupils in order to be viable, and school rolls rely on communities retaining or attracting families into their area. Many rural communities are dealing with a legacy of out-migration and depopulation, much of which predates the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Will the First Minister set out what benefits the Scottish Government's rural visa pilot proposals could offer to schools in our rural communities?

The First Minister: I have to say that it is quite depressing to listen to the United Kingdom Conservative Party and, I am afraid, the UK Labour Party compete in a race to the bottom when it comes to migration. I state unequivocally that immigration to this country has been good for Scotland, for years and decades. We welcome migrants to Scotland.

Our rural visa pilot proposal, which was described by the UK Government's own Migration Advisory Committee as

"sensible and clear in both scale and deliverability",

would enable rural and remote communities to attract migrants in line with their very distinct local needs, which would include bringing family members with them. That would offer an opportunity to bolster school communities in pilot areas. Pilot areas would also be enabled to address discrete local public sector workforce needs—for example, around teachers—and further support communities to flourish.

We continue to urge the UK Government in the strongest possible terms to engage with us and to deliver the pilot scheme or, even better, to give us the powers over immigration so that we can do it ourselves.

Clean Air Day

4. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government plans to mark clean air day. (S6F-02252)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We have the ambition for Scotland to have the cleanest air in Europe. Although there is always room for improvement, clean air day is an opportunity to highlight the great progress that Scotland is making in improving air quality. For example, for the first time outside recent lockdown periods, all monitoring sites in Scotland are meeting air quality objectives.

This year, clean air day will see a variety of activity taking place, from poster competitions for schools, run by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, to local authorities running vehicle island campaigns and businesses engaging with staff on eco-friendly commuting. The Scottish Government is supporting clean air day through funding Environmental Protection Scotland and a global action plan to provide the resources to organisations that are delivering clean air day activities.

John Mason: Will the First Minister join me in thanking the healthy air Scotland coalition for its work, and does he share my enthusiasm for the low-emission zone in Glasgow and its help for people with respiratory problems? Will he also congratulate Glasgow City Council on that?

Does the First Minister share my concerns that the UK Government is potentially revoking the European air pollution regulations under the amended Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill?

The First Minister: I welcome the work of the coalition, and I congratulate Glasgow City Council on its work on the LEZ.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Disastrous implementation.

The First Minister: I hear Jackie Baillie—I think—opposing the LEZ. That was not Scottish Labour's position, either at a local or a national level, when it voted for the LEZ. We know that the Scottish Labour Party will oppose anything that the Scottish National Party introduces, just for the sake of it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: LEZs are being introduced to improve air quality and to support Scotland's wider emissions reduction ambitions, as well as to protect Scotland's health. That is the point—at its heart, it is a public health issue. That is why the likes of Asthma and Lung UK have supported the introduction of low-emission zones.

We are very concerned at the UK Government's decision to revoke the UK-wide national air pollution control programme provisions through the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, especially as it appears to have no plan to replace those crucial provisions. Scottish Government officials continue to engage with counterparts across the UK to resolve this; however, we will not hesitate to act to protect Scotland's devolved interests and the health of the people of Scotland.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Reducing car travel is key to having clean air, but the Scottish Government cut funding for buses by £37 million by ending the network support grant

plus, and it recently dismissed my campaign to reopen the stations at Cove and Newtonhill in order to slash the amount of traffic entering Aberdeen. When will the Scottish Government actually deliver a route map to the 20 per cent reduction in the number of car kilometres driven and stop discouraging people from taking public transport?

The First Minister: The money that we gave to the sector was Covid funding and was, understandably, given to support the sector during lockdown and over the course of the pandemic. It was the UK Government that unilaterally withdrew Covid funding—I know that because I was the health secretary here, in Scotland, when it took the decision to unilaterally withdraw any Covid funding.

We have a good record not only of helping the bus industry but of investing in public transport. It does not help that every measure that we look to bring forward to tackle the climate emergency is opposed, time and time again, by the Scottish Conservatives.

Heating Systems in New-build Homes

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reported concerns that its proposals to ban gas and other direct emission heating systems in new-build homes from next year could have a serious adverse impact on the housing sector. (S6F-02247)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): That question comes right on cue.

The new-build heat standard will apply to all new buildings given warrants from next April and means that new homes will be fitted with climate-friendly heating systems from the outset and will be future-proofed against having to be retrofitted a few years later.

That standard is just one part of Scotland's programme to meet our legal climate change targets, which every single party in this Parliament voted for. Lord Deben, a former Conservative secretary of state who is now chair of the Climate Change Committee, has highlighted that England will follow the same path a year later and has urged the UK Government to meet the same timescales as we have here, in Scotland. There has been extensive consultation and engagement with the industry on the proposals since 2019, and we will continue working constructively with the industry to overcome any remaining barriers to delivery.

Brian Whittle: The Scottish Government's plan for zero-carbon heating is shaping up to be another Scottish Green-led mess. The housing sector is warning that fewer homes will be built

and that prices will rise. The construction industry has serious doubts that the supply chain can produce even the 1 million heat pumps that the Scottish Government has pledged to retrofit by 2030 and that, even if it can, there are not enough people who are qualified to install them. The industry has told me that Scotland needs more than 20,000 new engineers and tradespeople by 2028 if we are to have even a hope of meeting that goal, but, instead of having thousands of new students in training, we have Patrick Harvie crowing about another world-leading target.

Big targets are no substitute for detailed plans, and it is obvious to everyone but the First Minister that his Green minister's contribution to net zero is mostly hot air. What is more important to the Scottish National Party: a green Scotland or the Scottish Greens?

The First Minister: What is most important to the Scottish Government is making sure that we have a sustainable planet to hand on to future generations.

I will respond to Brian Whittle by giving the response from the industry, which he is wrong to categorise as universal opposition. That is not the case. Let us hear some of the reaction from those in the house-building industry. I can directly quote the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, which said

"SFHA is supportive of the need to improve the energy performance of new buildings and minimise the negative environmental impacts associated with heating our homes. Our members already build high-quality homes which exceed the minimum standard of the building regulations. We are therefore supportive of plans to regulate all tenures through changes to building standards."

Let us look at what Barratt Developments plc has to say. It

"supports the Scottish Government's efforts to meet its statutory climate change targets

and says that

"new buildings should be sustainable and fit for the future."

Tulloch Homes says:

"From our direction within the Springfield Group, we have already embraced the shift away from direct emission heating systems and have been delivering ASHP and other associated technologies within the group across the country for over 15 years. We are supportive of the Scottish Government's principal intentions on new-build heat standards and the net zero heating pathway."

The trouble with the Scottish Conservatives is that they think that, when it comes to the climate emergency, we can just wish it away. They voted—quite rightly—for those ambitious, world-leading targets, but they oppose every single action that we bring forward to do something about it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: The Tories have opposed measures to reduce city centre traffic, they U-turned on glass recycling and they now oppose new heating standards. The Scottish Conservatives should get off the fringes. They should join the consensus, in this Parliament and this country, on the need to take the serious action that is required to tackle the climate emergency in this country.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that the many benefits of the new-build heat standard will be fully realised only when the United Kingdom Government does what it has been promising to do for many years now and rebalances fuel prices to stop electric heating, the price of which is over three times the price of gas, being penalised?

The First Minister: Willie Coffey is absolutely right. I believe that the new-build heat standards will deliver a range of benefits as they stand, and I agree with him on the importance of that particular issue. For some time, we have been urging the UK Government to deliver on its commitment to publish proposals to rebalance fuel prices, which would make the running costs of zero-emission heating systems lower than those of gas boilers. However, I am afraid that, time and time again, when it comes to serious action, bold action and radical action, all that we see from the UK Government is inaction.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In recent years, several housing estates in my constituency have had gas boilers installed in them, which I think is idiotic, especially when we are trying to deal with climate change. Will the First Minister agree to send his minister to discuss with the sector its concerns about the installation of gas boilers? It is important that we use new technologies such as air-source heat pumps to try to deal with the big challenge that we face. It might be hard, but we need to get on with it.

The First Minister: I am absolutely happy to engage on that. Willie Rennie is right: it will be hard. The action that we have to take in tackling the climate emergency is not easy. We can take the path that the Conservatives choose to take, which is to not take that tough action, or we can take the tough action that I know is supported by Willie Rennie and the mainstream—and, I think, most of this Parliament.

There are real challenges in relation to the ambitious targets that we have for climate-friendly heating systems. For example, one issue is the skills that are needed to install those heating systems and the supply chain that is required.

These are very serious issues and they have been well raised by Willie Rennie. We will engage with him and the sector, as we have already done,

to ensure that we overcome the challenges together.

Scottish SPCA

6. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I declare an interest as a member of the Scottish SPCA and convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare.

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that Scotland's leading animal welfare charity, the Scottish SPCA, is in financial crisis. (S6F-02243)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government takes the issue of animal welfare very seriously, and I thank Christine Grahame for drawing this important matter to my attention and the Parliament's attention. I think that everybody recognises that she has a long-standing record on the matter, having raised animal welfare issues for many years in this Parliament and indeed outwith it.

I am afraid to say that, sadly, the often callous approach by the Conservative Government, which is failing to help people, communities and charities to cope with unacceptably high inflation levels, is all too pervasive. Charities such as the Scottish SPCA, which are on the front line of the impact of the cost of living crisis, are no exception.

I share Christine Grahame's concerns. I have asked officials to liaise with the Scottish SPCA to provide support and to fully understand the issues that it faces.

Christine Grahame: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Companion animals in particular play a huge role in helping people's mental wellbeing, but inflation, which the First Minister referenced, has put huge pressures on the cost of providing them and caused heartbreak for those who find that they simply do not have the resources to keep them. That puts more pressure on the Scottish SPCA and other animal welfare charities. At the same time, those charities have to cope with inflation themselves. For example, it costs £56,000 a day to run the Scottish SPCA, which is 14 per cent up on last year.

Will the First Minister, following the discussions that his officials are having with the charities, report back and let us see where those discussions have gone?

The First Minister: While I was giving my response to Christine Grahame's initial question, I heard the Conservatives mumbling, "What has this got to do with the UK Government?" If they have not figured out what the cost of living crisis has to do with the Conservative Government, I suspect that they will find out in a pretty brutal fashion

when it comes to the next general election. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: Nobody should have to give up a loved family pet. Keeping pets and people together is the best way to protect animal and human welfare. I therefore take the opportunity to highlight the work that is delivered by the Scottish SPCA's pet aid scheme. That initiative aims to support people and pets who are struggling by providing essential food supplies for animals through a network of food banks across most of Scotland.

Officials hold regular meetings with the Scottish SPCA to discuss current issues and to provide support, where appropriate, through policy advice and the sharing of wider communications. I will update Christine Grahame on the latest discussions that I have asked officials to have.

Finally, I urge anyone who is struggling to care for their pet to call the animal helpline in the strictest confidence, because help, advice and support are available.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementary questions.

World Blood Donor Day

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Yesterday was world blood donor day, and I will be delighted to host the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service in the Parliament immediately after FMQs. Does the First Minister share my view about that immense NHS service, thank all those who give blood to save lives and encourage others to consider doing so? *[Applause.]*

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I absolutely agree with Russell Findlay. I will come down to the photo call and try to do my bit to raise awareness of world blood donor day.

The Government has a proud track record of extending and increasing the eligibility of those who can give blood—something that I, personally, am very proud of and that we should all be proud of, as a Parliament and as a country. Anything that we can do collectively to raise and promote awareness is exceptionally important.

Many of us—most of us, I suspect—in the Parliament have given blood at some point or other. This is a good opportunity to remind ourselves that we should continue that very good habit.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Polmadie Station)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that I have been

contacted—as he will have been—by constituents and firefighters in Glasgow regarding the proposed cuts by the fire service to facilities and provision in the city. As well as the withdrawal of three fire engines, it is proposed that Polmadie station's dedicated rescue boat crew, which covers the River Clyde, will be removed, and 15 positions will be lost from the station so that, rather than having dedicated 24-hour rescue boat crew cover for the River Clyde, there will be only one crew at Polmadie to cover both the fire engine and rescue boat simultaneously.

Last year alone, 22 river rescues were carried out by the dedicated boat crew. Next week is drowning prevention week. In that spirit, will the First Minister commit to keeping the dedicated life-saving Clyde rescue boat?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am happy to look in more detail at the issue that Paul Sweeney has raised, albeit that many of the matters that he has raised are operational.

We have continued our commitment to supporting the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's delivery and reform, with a further uplift of £10 million in resource this financial year—2023-24—in recognition of the pay and inflationary pressures that I have already referenced. We have provided the SFRS with additional budget cover of up to £4.4 million on top of the allocation.

We remain supportive of the reform of our public services, which include the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. It is right that, in common with all public bodies in Scotland, the SFRS continues to review its operations and ensure that what it does is effective in delivering value for money. Of course, the SFRS would ensure that it does that in collaboration and in conjunction with communities—and safety is its highest priority.

Notwithstanding all that I have said, I will look at the issue again in further detail, as Paul Sweeney has asked me to do.

Child Poverty

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): It is estimated that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative or absolute poverty this year, as a result of Scottish Government policies. That is a significant achievement, given that the Scottish Government has limited powers and a fixed budget. What further actions could the Scottish Government take to tackle child poverty if key welfare, tax and employment powers were held by this Parliament?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Collette Stevenson makes an incredibly important point. I have mentioned on many occasions in this chamber that the defining mission of the Government that I lead will be reducing poverty, including child poverty in particular, building on the

excellent progress that was made by my predecessor.

The progress report published this week shows that our focus on tackling child poverty is making a significant and tangible difference. However, as Shirley-Anne Somerville said earlier this week, it is like having one hand tied behind our back. There is only so much that the Scottish Government can do. We can take all of the action that we possibly can, and we will, to pull people out of poverty, but we have a, frankly, cruel Conservative Government at Westminster that is overseeing not only a hard Brexit and the mishandling of our economy but regressive welfare cuts that have, over years and years, plunged people into poverty.

To take just one example, if the Tories reversed the welfare reforms that they have already imposed since 2015, they would lift an estimated 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty. There is no doubt that our ambitions to tackle child poverty are restricted, which is why we continue to argue for the full powers to tackle inequality to be in our hands as opposed to the hands of a Conservative Westminster Government.

Bracken Control

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the First Minister update the chamber on the Scottish Government's actions to campaign for the approval of emergency use of Asulox for bracken control in Scotland?

Will he also commit to reversing the appalling decision to remove support for bracken control through the agri-environment scheme? If reinstated, it will improve biodiversity, protect heather with regard to pollination, and protect walkers and workers against Lyme disease, which the ticks carry.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): As I have said previously, we are willing to look at the issue, but we are of course following the agreed process, which has been followed for many years. As a Scottish Government, we have provided a submission to the Health and Safety Executive. I think that we are waiting for other Governments across the United Kingdom to do similar.

I will look at the issue, because it is an important issue that has been raised by many members right across the parliamentary chamber. We know about the potential risk of uncontrolled bracken. If there is an update from the Health and Safety Executive, I will ensure that Parliament is informed expeditiously.

Abortion Services Safe Access Zones (Scotland) Bill

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Today, I lodged the final proposal for my abortion services safe access zones (Scotland) bill. I thank campaigners, those who contributed to the consultation and MSPs across the chamber for their support.

Could I invite the First Minister to take this opportunity to reaffirm his support for the bill and to encourage others to sign the final proposal this afternoon to show that this Parliament will not only stand up for reproductive rights but advance and strengthen them?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I agree with every single word of Gillian Mackay's question. I am very happy to reaffirm my support. Women should be able to access abortions without judgment. It is simply not acceptable for anyone to experience harassment, intimidation or unwanted influence as they access essential healthcare.

I will not have been the only one moved by the video made by Dr Greg Irwin, one of the doctors at the Glasgow facility, in which he talked about our own mothers, sisters and nieces trying to access healthcare in the face of that intimidation.

I am delighted to see that Gillian Mackay has published the consultation analysis and final bill proposal on safe access zones, which represents the next stage in bringing forward that essential legislation. I congratulate her on putting in the amount of work that she has to get to this point. She can be absolutely assured of the Scottish Government's commitment to giving her our full support. I urge members across the chamber to back her proposals.

Car Wash Licensing Scheme (Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery)

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): In February this year, the Minister for Community Safety confirmed that the car wash sector was high risk for labour exploitation. The minister also confirmed that 39 premises were attended by police across the country and that a number of offences were detected, and persons safeguarded.

In light of that, will the First Minister advise whether the Scottish Government would consider implementing a licensing scheme for car washes in Scotland to ensure that practices such as human trafficking and modern slavery are prevented in that trade?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Foysoil Choudhury for raising that incredibly important issue. I know that it is very close to his

heart and that he has raised it publicly with this Government on a number of occasions. I am pleased to say that I know that all of this Parliament shares our ambition to eradicate human trafficking. We will work right across the United Kingdom—including with other Governments where necessary, where some of those powers are reserved—to do what we can to eradicate human trafficking.

On the very specific issue of looking at a licensing scheme that Foysoil Choudhury raised with me, I will take that away and give it the due consideration that he asked me to give it. I will make sure that the appropriate minister writes back to him in due course.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time.

The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Emma Harper. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and public gallery to do so.

12:50

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

World Asthma Day 2023

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask visitors in the public gallery who are leaving the chamber to do so quickly and quietly, as we are about to resume business.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-08765, in the name of Emma Harper, on world asthma day 2023. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes World Asthma Day 2023, which took place on 2 May 2023; recognises that the Global Initiative for Asthma, supported by the World Health Organization, marked the day with the theme of Asthma Care for All; understands that around 360,000 people, including 72,000 children, have an asthma diagnosis in Scotland; believes that the Scottish Government's Respiratory Care Action Plan aims to improve prevention, diagnosis, treatment, care and self-management of asthma and lung conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and bronchiectasis; welcomes the campaign, led by Asthma + Lung UK Scotland, to improve asthma care in Scotland; regrets reports that only 25.4% of people with asthma, surveyed by Asthma + Lung UK Scotland, said that they received all the elements of basic asthma care; understands that six in 10 people in Scotland, who were polled by Asthma + Lung UK Scotland, said that they are concerned about air quality around schools, which, it understands, can cause asthma in children and exacerbate existing conditions; welcomes reports of the creation of the International Coalition of Respiratory Nurses (ICRN), which brings together nurses from across the globe to advance the care and treatment of patients with respiratory conditions, including asthma, and notes the view that better asthma care at all levels of health care can lead to better outcomes and lives for people living with asthma.

12:51

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to lead this important debate, which recognises that world asthma day took place on 2 May 2023. This year, the theme was asthma care for all. I thank members from across the chamber—in fact, from all parties—who supported my motion and so allowed the debate to go ahead. I also thank Asthma and Lung UK Scotland, and its policy officer Gareth Brown, for its briefing and for all that it does to support people with an asthma diagnosis and their families.

In particular, as the co-convener, with my colleague Alexander Stewart, of the Parliament's cross-party group on lung health, I thank everyone who is involved in that group. In the past, we have carried out a lot of work on asthma, and the input

from clinicians, asthma support groups and people living with asthma, such as Asthma and Lung UK ambassador Olivia Fulton, has been absolutely invaluable. It is worth noting that Olivia, who thought that she could never participate in sport because she has quite severe asthma, is now playing wheelchair rugby and loving it.

As the wording of my motion indicates, world asthma day is organised by the Global Initiative for Asthma, which is a World Health Organization collaborative that was founded in 1993.

Asthma is a very common long-term lung condition. In the United Kingdom, 5.4 million people have it—that is one in every 12 adults and one in every 11 children. In Scotland, 360,000 adults and around 72,000 children have an asthma diagnosis.

People with asthma often have sensitive, inflamed airways. Its symptoms can come and go. Sometimes people may not have symptoms for weeks or months at a time. However, asthma needs to be treated every day, even if sufferers feel well, to lower their risk of symptoms and asthma exacerbations and attacks.

The most common symptoms of asthma are coughing, wheezing—a whistling sound when the sufferer breathes—breathlessness and chest tightness. When, as a nurse, I looked after people with asthma, they would sometimes describe it as feeling as though a brick was weighing down on their chest, making it difficult for them to breathe. If someone experiences one or more of those symptoms it could mean that they have asthma, and they should speak to their general practitioner as soon as possible. There are nurse specialists in asthma care and respiratory medicine in many of our GP practices, so there are great experts out there.

There are lots of things that can make asthma worse, but not everyone will be affected by the same things. If people finding out what sets off their symptoms, whether it is colds and viruses, pets, pollen, pollution, house dust mites or stress, they can work out ways to avoid the triggers if possible.

There are certain stages in people's lives that might affect their asthma, too. For example, some women find that hormonal changes at puberty, pregnancy or menopause can affect their asthma, and research is under way that is looking at the issues that face women with asthma and whether asthma is exacerbated by those changes.

The best way that someone can cope with their asthma triggers is to always take their preventer inhaler as prescribed, even when they feel well.

How serious asthma is varies from person to person. There are different types of asthma, too.

Someone with severe asthma, which affects around 5 per cent of all people with asthma, can have symptoms most of the time and find them really hard to control, but we now have new biological medicines that target the processes that cause inflammation, and those meds are helping. Asthma can kill. It is serious and it needs continued action.

As my motion states, Asthma and Lung UK Scotland carried out a survey that showed that only 25.4 per cent of people with asthma said that they received all the elements of basic asthma care. Part of how we can address that issue is through ensuring that people have their own personalised asthma action plans and that those plans are being reviewed at appropriate times.

Correct inhaler technique is key, and up to a third of people with asthma are not using their inhaler correctly. That was noted when we did some research ahead of the debate. People with asthma who are unable to use their inhaler correctly are at an increased risk of poor asthma control, potentially resulting in an attack, which may lead to the person being hospitalised.

My go-to person, Garry McDonald, who is a community pharmacist who specialises in asthma, said in a conversation with me that most people can have their inhaler technique checked at their community pharmacy and that community pharmacists are often the only healthcare professionals that people with asthma see.

Recently, when I hosted a lung health event in Parliament to mark that the respiratory care action plan has been running for two years, I met Paul Wilson, who has had many, many hospital admissions for treatment and resuscitation for his poorly controlled asthma. His asthma improved when his inhaler technique improved, and he has had zero further hospital admissions since he had his inhaler technique check and then had his personalised asthma action plan put in place. He is now giving back to the national health service by training to be a nurse, and I hope that Paul will be a respiratory nurse. That is a good news story that we have heard in relation to the work that community pharmacists can do in supporting people.

Inhaler technique is part of the personalised action plan for people's asthma control. I would be interested to learn how those inhaler techniques and personalised asthma action plans are being communicated to patients, as they are both absolutely necessary, and whether the Scottish Government would consider further awareness-raising efforts in order to support that.

Following lobbying from the cross-party group, the Scottish Government launched the respiratory care action plan 2021 to 2026, which I just

mentioned. The plan sets out the vision for driving improvement in the prevention, diagnosis, care, treatment and support of people living with respiratory conditions in Scotland. It identifies five key priorities for respiratory care and is intended to be an enabling document that is driving continuous improvement.

One of the key areas that the plan focuses on is asthma, and it mentions pulmonary rehabilitation. The evidence shows that PR has beneficial effects in patients with asthma, at any stage of the disease, improving exercise capacity, asthma control and quality of life, and reducing wheezing, anxiety, depression, and bronchial inflammation. However, many patients report waiting lists of up to 18 months to access PR referrals and appointments. I ask the minister whether targeted support could be considered to improve waiting times for pulmonary rehabilitation and asthma referrals, as requested by Asthma and Lung UK Scotland.

There is a link between asthma and inequality. We know that people from the most deprived areas of Scotland are much more likely to receive an asthma diagnosis. Managing a variable lifelong condition with complex treatments such as inhalers is hard enough. Managing asthma while juggling multiple jobs, family responsibilities and financial pressures is even harder. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling health inequalities, but it is important to ensure that good-quality housing, sound state welfare support and good air quality are key components of achieving health equality.

Asthma is a serious health condition. We need to ensure that people are aware of its signs and symptoms and that we are taking all the action possible to support people who have been diagnosed. We must ensure that there is the right inhaler for the right person, as that is one of the ways forward. Importantly, we need people to know how to use their inhalers properly.

I look forward to hearing other members' contributions.

13:00

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am grateful to Emma Harper for securing the debate and providing us with the opportunity to mark world asthma day 2023, which took place last month. The global initiative, supported by the World Health Organization, had the theme of asthma care for all. The theme holds immense significance for Scotland, a country where an estimated 360,000 people, including 72,000 children, are diagnosed with asthma.

Asthma is more than just a chronic health condition; it is a challenge that touches every

aspect of a person's life, whether it is their ability to play, learn or even work. It impacts not only those who are diagnosed, but their families, schools and communities. We must see it not just as a health issue, but as a social issue that demands our collective attention and action.

Despite its widespread prevalence, asthma remains a misunderstood condition. Society often underestimates the severity of asthma, not fully comprehending that uncontrolled asthma can lead to life-threatening attacks. The Covid pandemic has highlighted the severity of respiratory conditions and has shone a spotlight on their prevention and treatment. Over 80,000 people in Scotland who have respiratory conditions, including asthma, were asked to shield at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic—they were the largest group of people on the shielding list.

With proper diagnosis, appropriate treatment and effective management, people with asthma can lead active, healthy lives. I acknowledge the admirable efforts of the Scottish Government's respiratory care action plan, which aims to improve the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, care and self-management of asthma and other lung conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—COPD—and bronchiectasis. Those comprehensive efforts are geared towards enhancing the quality of life for those affected by those conditions and reducing the burden on our healthcare system. However, the reports about access to basic asthma care make stark reading. The theme of this year's world asthma day, "asthma care for all", speaks volumes about our shared commitment and collective aspirations. I know that the Scottish Government and our health ministers are committed to working with people who are living with asthma to better understand the barriers to accessing support.

In my constituency, we are fortunate to have the fantastic Breathe Easy Fife, which provides a support network for people who are living with any kind of lung condition as well as their families and carers. From social activities and exercise sessions to education and information, the invaluable support helps people to self-manage their conditions, while the invaluable peer support from those who understand what it is like to be breathless helps people to live with their condition, rather than just suffer from it.

We cannot underestimate the impact of the cost of living crisis on our constituents' health. According to a survey that was undertaken by Asthma and Lung UK, 93 per cent of people in Scotland with lung conditions such as asthma have made significant changes to their lives in response to the cost of living crisis. One in three of those surveyed say that their health has been worsening as they have cut back on food and

heating. No household should be faced with those difficult decisions.

We must also turn our attention to the environment around us. There is increasing evidence linking air pollution to the worsening of asthma symptoms, with children being particularly vulnerable. We cannot talk about asthma prevention and care without addressing the need for cleaner air and healthier environments. Poor air quality can cause asthma in children, exacerbate their existing conditions and limit their ability to enjoy the simple pleasures of childhood. The role that clean air plays in that narrative cannot be overstated. Our children breathe at a faster rate than adults and their developing lungs absorb more air per unit of body weight, making them more susceptible to airborne pollutants. Our children deserve to grow up in safe environments, which we must commit to delivering for them.

Recognising world asthma day prompts us to focus our collective consciousness on a health issue that is of immense global and national relevance. In order to provide asthma care for all, we need to face the challenges head on. We need to address the stark disparities in access to healthcare, the geographical variations in asthma prevalence and the gaps in public awareness about the condition. Our approach should be multifaceted, integrating prevention, early diagnosis, effective treatment and long-term management of asthma. Once again, I thank Emma Harper for securing the debate and allowing us to renew our dedication, rekindle our determination and continue our journey towards a world that is free from the constraints of asthma.

13:04

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests—I am a practising NHS GP—and I thank Emma Harper for bringing the subject of asthma to the chamber.

We need to double down on our efforts to raise awareness of a condition that affects millions of lives worldwide. Asthma is a chronic respiratory disease that knows no boundaries. It demands our attention, and not just on world asthma day, when pollen counts are sky high. I am delivering my speech outside in order to highlight the fact that, despite the glorious weather, lots of people suffer from asthma, which is made worse by the current high pollen levels.

According to Asthma and Lung UK, around 370,000 Scots suffer from asthma. That is about one in 15 of the population. Asthma does not discriminate—it affects people regardless of their age, race or background and robs them of their ability to breathe with freedom.

In 2021, 96 Scots died from the condition, 67 per cent of whom were women. Those are not numbers—we are talking about real people who had dreams, aspirations and loved ones, who mourned their loss. We have a responsibility to strive for better treatment, research and resources to improve management of the condition. Through a concerted effort, the mortality rate can be reduced. We can get it down to zero if people use their inhalers and get their asthma reviews. We need a brighter future.

I want to address one of the leading causes—*[Inaudible.]*—and that is smoking. Tobacco smoke is a known trigger for attacks. It is crucial that we educate and support individuals on their journey to quit smoking, but we must also create smoke-free environments, promote smoking cessation programmes and have healthier environments.

I call on the Scottish Government to take decisive action to make it easier for patients to switch from traditional asthma inhalers to dry-powder alternatives. We have a duty to explore sustainable solutions for managing this chronic condition, and dry-powder inhalers, or DPIs, offer a greener alternative to their commonly used, propellant-based counterparts. As DPIs do not release harmful gases into the atmosphere, use of them reduces carbon emissions, thereby contributing to a cleaner and healthier planet.

However, to bring about that change, effective communication is crucial. The Scottish Government must prioritise education and awareness campaigns to inform patients of the benefits of dry-powder inhalers. By providing accessible information to healthcare professionals, asthma clinics and patients themselves, we can dispel any misconceptions and encourage a transition to more sustainable and user-friendly options.

Let us strive for a Scotland where environmental—*[Inaudible.]*—and patient wellbeing can go hand in hand. Let us use world asthma day as a catalyst for change so that, together, we can raise awareness, advocate for improved treatment and work towards preventing asthma-related deaths. Let us empower people with asthma to engage with their condition effectively and promote a world where breathing is a right, not a privilege. Together, we can shape a future in which asthma management is both effective and sustainable.

13:08

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I start by apologising for not having a leafy backdrop as I make my speech.

I thank Emma Harper for securing today's debate about world asthma day 2023, and I

compliment her on the content of her speech. The theme this year is asthma care for all, but the statistics tell us that just 35 per cent of Scots with asthma receive the three components of basic asthma care that they require.

The Scottish Government's respiratory care action plan was introduced in 2021, but little progress has been made. At 137 per 100,000 people, Scotland has one of the highest death rates from respiratory disease in Europe and, in some health board areas, waiting times for essential respiratory rehabilitation are longer than a year, so it is clear that we can do better.

One in five Scots has a lung condition, but a lack of decent funding and workforce planning to meet patients' needs has resulted in the lowest levels of access to care since 2013. Unfortunately, the data shows that the Scottish Government is not giving lung conditions such as asthma the priority that they need. I am ever hopeful that the new minister will correct that situation.

Surveys that are carried out by Asthma and Lung UK consistently find that Scotland fares worse than the rest of the UK for basic asthma care. It is depressing to note that just 11 per cent of those who responded reported that their asthma care is improving, compared with previous years.

That lack of basic care has consequences. In Scotland, it contributes to more than 6,000 emergency hospital admissions each year. It is the cause of around 100 asthma-related deaths, as we heard from Sandesh Gulhane, two thirds of which are of women. The lack of access to something as simple as an annual asthma action plan places undue strain on an already in-crisis NHS.

In a nation such as Scotland in 2023, it should not be acceptable that hundreds of lives are lost each year because of a condition that is actually well understood. We also need to recognise, as Emma Harper did, that there are significant healthcare inequalities when it comes to asthma, and analysis from Asthma and Lung UK shows that women are almost twice as likely as men to die from an asthma attack. Data from NHS Scotland reveals that people in the most deprived households are more likely to live with asthma and have more asthma attacks, but are also two to three times more likely to require an emergency admission for asthma.

Therefore, it is clear that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and I encourage the Scottish Government to invest in better research to identify new treatments, and make better use of existing treatments, to save women's lives and to address levels of asthma that are triggered by things such as housing conditions or living closer to areas of higher air pollution.

Emma Harper: My sister is a respiratory nurse consultant. During the pandemic, pulmonary rehab was moved online—that is one of the innovations that has been taken forward. Does Jackie Baillie welcome the fact that PR can now be delivered in various forms—face to face and online?

Jackie Baillie: Yes. Anything that makes the service available to people who require it should be welcomed, and I very much welcome what Emma Harper's sister is doing in her service.

The Scottish Government needs to outline how it will invest in training and recruitment in those rehabilitation services, and to publish a progress report on the achievements and failings of the respiratory care action plan as it reaches halfway into its five-year term.

I hope that the new public health minister, Jenni Minto, will work to ensure that the action plan does not simply languish on the shelf. Health boards need to be supported to rebuild services and deliver the outcomes that people with lung conditions such as asthma need. The 358,000 people in Scotland who live with asthma deserve more than warm words from this Parliament on world asthma day; they need real action and they need it now.

13:13

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As co-convenor of the cross-party group on lung health, I congratulate Emma Harper on securing the debate and on all the work that she does for the cause.

World asthma day is organised by the Global Initiative for Asthma and supported by the World Health Organization, and, as we have heard, each May, the day raises awareness of asthma worldwide. For this year's event, as we have heard, the theme has been asthma care for all, which fits in perfectly not only with the sentiments of the debate, but with the main aims of our cross-party group.

Indeed, only recently, the cross-party group highlighted ground-breaking research into women with asthma and the effects of oestrogen on the condition. Our scientists and secretariat, Asthma and Lung UK Scotland, have also highlighted that women are more likely to suffer asthma and have more severe symptoms. They also experience a significant worsening of symptoms around menstruation and at certain times of the month, which potentially puts them in a very dangerous situation. Research, although still quite patchy, is being undertaken, and I look forward to seeing what comes through when that is established and solutions are found.

The charity also works with additional collaborative organisations such as ASH Scotland to prevent smoking. We have heard today about smoking cessation programmes. Those are important, along with mass media campaigns to achieve the 2034 target of less than 5 per cent of people smoking in Scotland, which has to be achieved. I commend that, and I play my part as the Parliament's smoking cessation champion.

We have talked about the campaign for a respiratory care action plan—the Government has worked hard to ensure that that happens. Only last month, on 25 April, our cross-party group held a reception in Parliament, attended by patients, guests and fellow members, to look at the respiratory care action plan two years on. At that event, we heard from a number of speakers and entertainers about the situation. We also know, however, that we have yet to see the latest progress report from the Scottish Government on what it is achieving, how the plan is progressing and the areas that require to be looked at.

As the Scottish Government heads to the halfway point of the current five-year session of Parliament, we also heard from the charity's head of devolved nations, Joseph Carter, who highlighted that, although things were challenging before the pandemic, they have got much worse since.

As we have heard today, only 25 per cent of people with asthma are receiving the three components of basic asthma care: their annual review, the inhaler technique and the asthma action plan. That needs to be looked at, because we already know that in Scotland, we suffer from one of the worst respiratory death rates. Only 14.5 per cent of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease patients are receiving the five fundamentals of care that they require.

However, I was disappointed, but not surprised, to learn, through the charity's freedom of information requests to Scotland's health boards, that in my region, in NHS Forth Valley, patients are still waiting between 12 and 18 months for respiratory treatment. Despite the excellent campaign by the breathe easy Clackmannanshire group in my region, it is still looking for things to happen.

In conclusion, with regard to COPD and all the issues that we are talking about today, I commend Asthma and Lung UK Scotland for the work that it is doing, and I reiterate what Joseph Carter said about the lack of respiratory care for those with lung disease across the country.

It is vitally important that the situation is turned around, urgently, for the sake of all those respiratory patients who are suffering in Scotland,

because they deserve nothing less from this Government and this Parliament.

13:17

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I thank Emma Harper for lodging this important motion, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. I know how much work Emma Harper does regarding asthma and respiratory diseases and as part of the cross-party group that she co-chairs with Alexander Stewart. I had the pleasure of joining the group at one of its round-table meetings one evening, and it was great to hear the choir, with members from Leith and across Edinburgh, sing as part of that event.

I also thank my fellow members on all sides of the chamber for contributing to this important debate. A number of questions were asked, which I will try to cover—if I do not, I am happy to discuss them further with members later on.

I put on record my thanks to those who are supporting people across Scotland who are living with asthma, including those in NHS Scotland, other public services and third sector organisations such as Asthma and Lung UK. That collaborative working enables progress to be made.

The theme of this May's world asthma day, as other members have said, was asthma care for all. That resonates with our commitment to tackling health inequalities. We know that those who are living in poverty in Scotland are much more likely to develop a lung condition, and we know that care and treatment for conditions such as asthma is not always as accessible as it could be. I recognise the difficulties that are faced by those who are living with respiratory conditions such as asthma, and I am committed to improving services across Scotland to meet their needs through the implementation of our respiratory care action plan.

As others have said, that plan, which was published in 2021, sets out key priority areas for driving improvement in prevention, diagnosis, care, treatment and support for people who are living with a range of respiratory conditions. The Scottish respiratory advisory committee oversees the implementation of the plan. Its membership includes healthcare professionals, third sector groups and other national policy teams, and I am grateful for their input and leadership. Importantly, it has engaged with those living with respiratory conditions to ensure that their voices remain at the heart of the plan's implementation.

The point that Emma Harper raised about inhaler technique is really important, and that is included in the draft Scottish respiratory quality prescribing guidance.

A key part of the plan is to ensure early and accurate diagnosis of asthma. With an early diagnosis, people have much more opportunity to explore self-management techniques and are more likely to avoid the need for additional intensive treatments. We are working closely with colleagues in primary care and specialist respiratory services to identify improvements in diagnostic pathways.

We recognise the benefits of pulmonary rehabilitation for people who are living with lung conditions. We have a commitment on that in our respiratory care action plan, and a working group has been established. We are working with physiotherapists and other key clinical staff from across Scotland to improve access to pulmonary rehabilitation.

Another key area of focus is ensuring a positive transition from child to adult services, which David Torrance touched on. We want to ensure that young people who are living with asthma receive the best possible support as they progress into adulthood by helping them to gain a greater understanding of their condition and how to manage it. A best practice document that is due to be published this summer aims to improve the consistency of transition services for young people across Scotland.

Several other large-scale improvement projects are being progressed in collaboration with key stakeholders. For example, the centre for sustainable delivery has a specific respiratory speciality delivery group that supports improvements in processes, pathways and innovation, and it is developing a severe asthma pathway.

Public Health Scotland is also supporting us to enhance data collection, so that we have a deeper understanding of people who are living with asthma and other respiratory conditions, to enable us to undertake improvement work accordingly. Funding has been initiated this year to develop a much-awaited respiratory audit programme.

I will touch briefly on dry powder inhalers, which are included in the quality prescribing guidance. Driving a better quality of care is the main aim, and there is an understanding that many people find DPIs easier to use. However, they might not be suitable for everyone, which is why inhaler technique education, which Emma Harper touched on, is so important.

Jackie Baillie raised a few points, but I note that the progress report has been shared with all respiratory stakeholders. David Torrance and others highlighted some of the areas that we need to focus on with regard to prevention. We have a number of approaches that aim to reduce the impact of factors such as air pollution, smoking

and cold homes, all of which are closely linked to the onset of respiratory conditions.

The Scottish Government takes air pollution very seriously. Our vision is for Scotland to have the cleanest air in Europe, and we are committed to protecting the public from the effects of poor-quality air as soon as possible, as the First Minister mentioned during First Minister's question time. For example, the introduction of low-emission zones in our four largest cities in 2022 was a key initiative in further improving urban air quality, and I was pleased to meet the healthy air Scotland coalition outside the Parliament yesterday.

As Alexander Stewart noted, exposure to cigarette smoke, whether directly or second hand, is another well-known risk factor. We aim to have a tobacco-free Scotland by lowering smoking rates in our communities to 5 per cent or less by 2034. We want to see a generation of young people who do not want to smoke. Our refreshed tobacco action plan, which will be published in the autumn, will renew our focus on meeting our ambitious 2034 target.

As we begin to understand the potential harms of vaping, we are considering our next steps in that area. It is an evolving issue, and we want to better identify ways to prevent children and young people from vaping as a lifestyle choice.

None of that important work would be possible without the dedicated clinicians who provide asthma services in our NHS. I note the creation of an international coalition of respiratory nurses, and I hope that that, in addition to our Scottish respiratory nurse forum, will provide a further opportunity for sharing good practice and learning. Perhaps Emma Harper's sister can be involved in that, too.

NHS staffing levels are at a historic high, following 10 years of consecutive growth, but we recognise the pressures that boards and front-line staff are experiencing. We continue to invest in international recruitment to increase capacity in the short to medium term, but we are also exploring more innovative solutions, such as broadening the remit of respiratory physiotherapists and other allied healthcare professionals.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to ensuring that everyone in Scotland who is living with asthma receives the best possible care and support. Although we have made progress, I recognise that there is much more that we can do.

Again, my thanks go to all the members who have contributed to this important debate and, most importantly, to the people across health and social care who are working to deliver the commitments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2 pm.

13:25

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business this afternoon is Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Passholder Secure Entry System (Access Difficulties)

1. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will provide an update on the efficiency of the passholder secure entry system to the Parliament, in light of reports that passholders are experiencing difficulties in gaining access. (S6O-02390)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliament Corporate Body): Since April, we have had around 800 passholders attending Parliament on business days. Although I recognise that there have been a few instances of passholders experiencing difficulties, those have all been resolved. If anyone is having persistent problems with their pass, I urge them to contact the pass studio, where staff will be happy to discuss any particular issues with the passholder and to provide support.

John Mason: I do not know whether the system records how often someone fails to get access, but, one day last week, it took me nine attempts. I tried each of the turnstiles twice, and it kept turning me down. Since I lodged this question, a number of MSP colleagues and Parliament staff have told me that they have had similar problems.

I do not know whether the advice would be to have your fingerprint removed from the pass and a new fingerprint taken, which some people have done and could be one answer, or whether there is some other way to take this forward.

Claire Baker: I thank the member for raising the issue. I appreciate how frustrating it is to have intermittent difficulties with the system, and I appreciate the member raising the fact that he has spoken to other members and passholders who are experiencing the same. I encourage him in the first instance to book an appointment with the pass studio so that staff can check the pass. I will also ensure that the contractor is made aware of the intermittent issues and ask whether there are upgrades that could address any potential glitches and speed up the process.

Car Parking for MSPs and Staff

2. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body when it will next review the car parking arrangements for MSPs and staff. (S6O-02356)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliament Corporate Body): As the member will recognise, the increased security measures for the car park were recommended by Police Scotland following a terrorist attack in the United Kingdom in 2017. The car park was updated in 2021. Although there is no intention formally to review the car park arrangements, the operation of the car park and the experience of its users are constantly reviewed and monitored, as we seek to balance the need for security with the ease of use for members and their staff.

Liz Smith: SPCB members will know that, some time ago, I wrote to the chief executive and to them about the difficulties that were being encountered on exiting and entering the car park at that time. Fairly frequent malfunctions of the barriers were making entry and exit extremely slow. Things improved markedly, mainly as a result of careful and judicious manual operation of the entry and exit system, but in recent weeks the process has again become exceptionally slow—although I have to say that I think that it has been a little better in recent days.

Could I get confirmation, which I think will also be of interest to many other members, that the more efficient manually operated system will be in place from now on, so as to avoid lengthy delays, especially underground when several cars and motorbikes are waiting, with the car fumes that that entails?

Claire Baker: I understand that the member has a letter with the corporate body at the moment, to which we will respond as soon as possible. It is fair to say that there have been teething problems with the vehicle entry system, and those have been dealt with by facilities management and the contractors.

If the member is asking whether we intend to remain in manual mode, I have to say that that is not the intention. It is more secure to operate the system as it should be operated. There is one outstanding issue to resolve with the entry gates, and that is in the induction loop system. Work to resolve that issue will be disruptive, but the plan is to take it forward during the summer recess. That will lead to a reduction in the need to operate in manual mode and will restore the integrity of the system. It is about ensuring that we have the level of security that is required.

I know that that is not the answer that the member is looking for, but the intention is to move away from operating in manual mode.

Children and Young People (Visits)

3. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what action it takes to ensure that children and young people from across Scotland can visit their Scottish Parliament. (S6O-02391)

Christine Grahame (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The SPCB provides a school engagement programme through its public engagement services office. We offer schools free sessions and tours at the Parliament. Understandably, Covid changed things for schools and our service. We now have a digital schools service, as well as having restarted our team that visits schools across Scotland. Those services are popular and are especially appreciated by those who do not want to travel to Edinburgh or who, for a number of reasons, find coming to Edinburgh to be too challenging.

Across our services, we have reached schools in 69 out of 73 constituencies, and we are continuing to improve ways of maximising our engagement with schools. Children and young people also visit the Parliament to take part in committee meetings, meet their MSPs and take part in our engaging events programme.

Ruth Maguire: I appreciate the good work that the Parliament and the education team do. Like me, members will have visited schools in their constituencies and seen the interest that children have in the workings of our Parliament. I have been disappointed on a number of occasions that the young children I have visited have not been able to visit Parliament due to cost constraints. They find the cost of transport to be very expensive. Is there anything that the Scottish Parliament can do to assist pupils in less well-off areas or rural areas who find travel to Parliament too costly?

Christine Grahame: We are continuing to review how best to deliver our education services in the most effective and inclusive way post-Covid. It is important to the SPCB that we can ensure equity and meet the aims of our public engagement strategy to break down barriers for those who are least likely to engage with us and that we take into account other commitments, such as reaching net zero and ensuring the most effective use of our resources.

There are many factors around distance travelled and deprivation that we would want to consider. From our evaluation forms, we know that 25 per cent of schools say that cost is a factor. To date, the SPCB's approach for those who cannot travel to Edinburgh to visit us has been to provide targeted services in schools. Our outreach and digital services are popular and remove other

significant barriers, such as time away from the classroom.

The SPCB is happy to explore whether, as part of that review, offering some sort of subsidy is within its power and helpful to meeting our engagement goal of inclusivity. It is important that we consider the feasibility of any subsidy within the context of reviewing our education service as a whole in the context of our wider corporate commitments, including public engagement and sustainability. We will ask officials to engage with schools from across Scotland, and we will look to other legislatures to ensure that any decision takes account of the needs of schools alongside our service capacity to support those needs.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): In the recent memory of the institution, has there been any attempt to organise a parliamentary week or a parliamentary fortnight across all the schools in Scotland that would allow us to promote the activities and work that go on in the Parliament and, in effect, to reverse the situation that has been described in relation to visits by taking the Parliament into the classrooms of Scotland?

Christine Grahame: In the answers that I have given, I have said that the Parliament endeavours to do that all year round. However, Stephen Kerr has asked me a specific question, and I would be happy to inquire into that with the corporate body and report back to him.

Scottish Parliamentary Business (Public Access Apps)

4. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what the newest developments are in the creation of Scottish Parliament apps to allow the public easier access to parliamentary business papers and other resources. (S6O-02389)

Maggie Chapman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body does not develop mobile applications, but we utilise several mobile apps to help to deliver services to the public. The latest development in that area involves officials working with suppliers to establish how we can bring access to broadcasting material via an app that will be available to the public to download. That app will allow the viewing of live proceedings as well as archived material.

The main source of information about parliamentary proceedings remains the website, which has been designed to be accessible and compatible across different types of devices, including mobile phones and tablets. Members of the public with any device with a web browser and internet connection will be able to access all

parliamentary business papers and other resources from that website.

Stephen Kerr: I do not think that that is a satisfactory line that we should be taking. I know that the corporate body will be aware of my very keen interest in apps that can be downloaded from the various stores that exist. I welcome the fact that Maggie Chapman has been able to tell me that work is on-going on a broadcast app. We should all be motivated to try to make it easier for the people of Scotland to access Parliament and view its proceedings.

Can Maggie Chapman give me some assurances? First, when we are developing those apps, will there be space in that development work to create access to business papers, such as the *Official Report*, and a digital annunciator that would allow someone that accesses the app to see the current business of Parliament—who is speaking at any one time and what is being debated?

Secondly, one of the problems with the website access to Scottish Parliament TV is that there are too many clicks and it is too difficult to find. Will there be a single-click access in the app that Maggie Chapman has already mentioned in her first answer to me to allow a viewing of live broadcast?

Thirdly, might it be possible to trial a pilot version of the app that Maggie Chapman has described, or of the ones that I have described, later this year?

Maggie Chapman: I take Stephen Kerr's point about the multiple clicks that you often have to go through on the website. We can take that point back to the web developers and maintainers to see whether we could make that process much more streamlined.

On the specific question about different apps, one of the reasons for which we do not go down the route of having different apps that members of the public and, indeed, members, have to download from the app store, Google Play or other providers, is that it would require constant interaction and engagement with those providers to ensure that those apps and their updates are compatible with our systems, which would lead to security concerns. That is one of the fundamental reasons why that is not the preferred method of app provision for systems in Parliament, whether for our own use as members or for the public. However, I hear what Stephen Kerr has said about the business papers and the digital annunciator, and we can certainly take those points forward into conversations that we have about this.

I will have to come back to Mr Kerr on the pilot scheme; I am not sure at this stage how far we are in the developments. I know that next week Mr

Kerr is meeting our head of digital services, who I am sure will be able to pick up some of those points as well.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes Scottish Parliament Corporate Body questions. There will be a brief pause while the front-bench members change before we move to the next item of business.

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Just Transition

14:13

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio questions on net zero and just transition. I invite any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Just Transition Plan for Energy

1. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made towards developing a just transition plan for energy. (S6O-02373)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): The draft energy strategy and just transition plan was published for consultation on 1 January this year, setting out our vision for an energy transition that responds to the climate emergency but is fair. A very high number of responses to the consultation have been received, and an independent analysis of those responses is currently being carried out. We will fully consider stakeholders' views as we develop the final strategy and plan.

James Dornan: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the £7 million of Scottish Government funding for projects such as a study into treating water from the River Clyde to produce cheap hydrogen and the creation of a hydrogen hub at Glasgow airport for storage and distribution will greatly help to create renewable and low-carbon hydrogen production by 2030?

Màiri McAllan: The £7 million of funding that was recently offered by the Scottish Government's hydrogen innovation scheme to 32 innovative projects such as those that were mentioned by James Dornan will help to drive technological progress and advance innovation, supporting our ambition of 5GW of renewable and low-carbon hydrogen production by 2030. The projects will progress innovative solutions to address and overcome key challenges related to scaling up hydrogen production, storage and distribution in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of requests for supplementary questions. I hope that we will get through them all. They will need to be brief.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): There has been a £25 million allocation to the Scottish Government's just transition fund, but, unlike with previous funding rounds, the money is being

assessed and distributed by the Scottish National Investment Bank instead of being provided directly to support projects. For what reason did the Government abandon the initial process, and what does it say to companies that missed out the first time round and now see that the goalposts have shifted?

Màiri McAllan: I reassure Liam Kerr that the Scottish Government has not abandoned the process. The £75 million that has been made available so far is part of a £500 million fund over a decade. I hope that Liam Kerr is not casting doubt on the Scottish National Investment Bank's ability to invest the £25 million well. Indeed, I challenge him on his colleagues' contribution to the just transition in Scotland, which has been left sorely wanting to date.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Offshore trade unions, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and Unite the union are working with the Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organisation, environmental organisations and others on the introduction of a much-needed offshore training passport to provide a clear pathway for oil and gas workers to transition into renewables. The Minister for Energy and the Environment was unable to confirm whether the offshore training passport will align offshore safety standards, so will the cabinet secretary take action to ensure that all developers of wind farms that are leased through the ScotWind process recognise the digital offshore training passport when it comes online in the autumn?

Màiri McAllan: The raison d'être of the skills passport is interreliability and interrecognition. I absolutely agree with the principle behind Mercedes Villalba's question that we want the passports to make the process a great deal easier for workers. I am looking into that matter and into the delivery of the skills passport in general.

I assure Mercedes Villalba and other members that the involvement of our trade unions in our just transition—in this case, the oil and gas transition—is critical. That is why we have trade union representatives on the just transition commission, and we are funding two posts in the Scottish Trades Union Congress to ensure that the Scottish Government is cognisant of workers' views and needs in this important transition.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The cabinet secretary will be aware that, having received a significant amount of public money, the Wood Group, which is based in Aberdeen, is now increasing its fossil fuel extraction processes and reducing its shift to renewables. How can we ensure that our public money does not, even indirectly, support

increasing use of fossil fuels during a climate emergency?

Màiri McAllan: I understand that the Wood Group was awarded a United Kingdom Government-backed £430 million green transition loan in August 2021. However, to be clear, no funding has been provided directly to the Wood Group through the just transition fund.

Through the fund, we will, of course, support the wider energy transition, which could involve companies that are diversifying away from fossil fuel activities. That approach—an inclusive approach in which everybody gets round the table, recognising the scale of the challenge—is critical to a transition that is truly fair and, equally, rises to the imperative of addressing the climate emergency.

Net Zero Transition (Economic Benefits)

2. **Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the net zero secretary has had with ministerial colleagues in relation to maximising any benefits of the transition to net zero across the economy, including the manufacturing sector. (S6O-02374)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): The Scottish Government sees the just transition to net zero not just as an environmental imperative—although it certainly is that—but as a massive economic opportunity. I engage regularly with my ministerial colleagues on the issue and have established a monthly meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, which covers how we maximise opportunities.

In relation to the manufacturing sector, ministerial colleagues are supporting several initiatives. In particular, the First Minister will formally open the flagship building for the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland on 21 June, which will be a significant milestone for the project and the sector.

Ivan McKee: It is great that the NMIS will be formally opening in the coming days. Scotland is well placed to benefit economically from the transition to net zero, but to realise those benefits, the Scottish Government needs to lead on ensuring that the policies on decarbonising heat and transport are aligned with industrial strategies to help to build Scotland's manufacturing capabilities—for example, through the Government supply chain development programme.

What specific work has been done to ensure that that alignment happens? Is the work on the supply chain development programme continuing?

And what are the priority areas to deliver that industrial development?

Màiri McAllan: The Government's national strategy for economic transformation, which Ivan McKee played a key role in, sets out our commitment to realising the opportunities that, as he rightly identified, lie in front of Scotland in the green energy transition. As he mentioned, our supply chain development programme aims to align economy and innovation policy interventions with public sector spend by using both more strategically to improve the capacity and capability of Scottish manufacturing supply chains.

By way of example, I point to the recently launched low-carbon manufacturing challenge fund, which is a £26 million fund over five years that is available for innovative proposals to reduce the carbon output of manufacturing in Scotland.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Given the scale and urgency needed to decarbonise our homes in an affordable way, what work is the Scottish Government doing with local authorities to set targets and to work with suppliers so that we get retrofitting and renewables into our communities? In particular, I am thinking of solar technology, heat pumps, wind turbines and the infrastructure for heat networks. We need those jobs in our communities now.

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely agree that local authorities have a critical role to play in the delivery of the enormous change agenda that is in front of us as a country. The Scottish Government, local authorities and the public sector generally have a critical role to play, and I was really pleased to speak recently at a public sector forum in Scotland, in which we explored all the ways that we need to work together, the synergies that we need to make sure are in place and, equally, ensuring that there is scope for different regional and local authority priorities to arise out of that. For example, I have no doubt that the approaches required in the decarbonisation of transport will be different across urban, rural and island Scotland.

Water Scarcity (Peatland Restoration)

3. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of recent water scarcity updates from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, which state that the majority of Scotland is now affected by water scarcity, what assessment it has made of the impact of water scarcity conditions on peatland restoration and the ability to sequester carbon. (S6O-02375)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): Water scarcity is a very serious issue, and I would be glad to touch more specifically on that should Mr

Whittle wish me to. On peatland restoration, there are currently plans for the James Hutton Institute to model the potential for water scarcity to impact peatland and for spatial analysis to identify areas of peatland that are, or might become, vulnerable to drought and fire risk. Those projects are scheduled to report in 2024 and 2025 respectively, and they are funded as part of the Scottish Government's £250 million environment, natural resource and agriculture strategic research programme.

Brian Whittle: Research has shown that drier conditions not only reduce the amount of carbon that peatland can sequester but can negatively impact biodiversity in the wider range of teal carbon habitats across Scotland, including riparian woodlands, wetlands and ponds. What progress has been made since the water shortages in summer 2022 to improve management of biodiversity in wetland habitats, especially given that 90 per cent of freshwater ponds have disappeared over the past 100 years?

Màiri McAllan: I thank Mr Whittle for raising an important point. We know that peatlands, when wet, are capable of sequestering carbon and supporting biodiversity. Therefore, it figures that, in drought conditions and when peatlands are dried out, those benefits are lost. The Scottish Government's £250 million of funding in peatland restoration is, in part, seeking to alleviate that.

On preparedness for droughts and water scarcity conditions over the summer, I work very closely with SEPA on that matter. Just this afternoon, I have written to MSPs, inviting them to a factual briefing session next week on the range of matters that might come to our constituents' attention as these dry conditions are due to persist.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Restoration of Scotland's peatlands is vital for our biodiversity, so I welcome the £250 million investment that the Scottish Government has made to restore 250,000 hectares of peatland by 2030. What work is being undertaken to ensure that our peatland restoration is responsive to the risks caused by global warming and climate change, including the risk of water scarcity?

Màiri McAllan: As I said in my response to Brian Whittle, water scarcity, which is linked to climate change, clearly puts wetland ecosystems, including peatlands, at risk of drying and degradation. Jackie Dunbar is absolutely right to mention the Scottish Government's investment in peatland restoration, with full public sector funding being available for projects.

As we take action to mitigate emissions, as peatland restoration does, we must also adapt to the climate change that is already embedded.

Changing weather patterns and water scarcity are causing increasingly significant adaptation issues, and the Government is committed to keeping abreast of that.

20mph Speed Limit

4. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how it is encouraging local authorities across the country to follow the lead of Highland Council in rolling out the 20mph speed limit in built-up areas. (S6O-02376)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): The Scottish Government is committed to developing a national strategy for 20mph speed limits, which supports commitments in the 2021 Bute house agreement and the 2022 programme for government.

We welcome Highland Council's enthusiasm as an early adopter of the strategy and we want to see more areas of Scotland benefiting. In addition to the £1.4 million that was allocated to road authorities in the most recent financial year to help them to identify the number of roads affected and to assess the financial implications, we will also be providing funding to all road authorities to fully implement 20mph speed limits by 2025.

Ariane Burgess: That is an encouraging response. There are 118 communities that will benefit from Highland Council's roll-out of 20mph speed limits. Will the minister share how the working group is progressing to ensure that more councils roll out those schemes, alongside investment in high-quality active travel routes such as those that were recently completed at the Inverness campus and at Raigmore?

Patrick Harvie: Having 20mph speed limits in cities, towns and villages—particularly in places where vulnerable road users and vehicles mix—is internationally recognised as a key element in reducing road casualties and creating safe conditions for people to walk, wheel and cycle.

The multipartner task group, which includes members of the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, as well as various active travel and sustainable travel partners, agreed that the wider policy objectives should be considered alongside road assessments being conducted.

River Water Quality Testing (North-east Scotland)

5. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any increase in water

quality testing that is proposed for rivers in the north-east. (S6O-02377)

I refer members to my entry regarding the River Dee in the register of members' interests.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan):

Although I was not the minister at the time, it is my understanding that, in November 2022, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency provided Alexander Burnett with detailed information about, and summarised sample numbers for, water quality testing from 2017 to 2022. SEPA's projections of the 2023 sample numbers, which the member has asked for, indicate an increase of approximately 50 per cent on 2022 levels for total samples across all of Scotland, including in the north-east.

Alexander Burnett: There are 42 waste-water treatment works and 99 sewage discharge points on the River Don, and 26 waste-water treatment works and 69 sewage discharge points on the River Dee, but there is no requirement or licensing condition from SEPA for Scottish Water to report discharge data at any of those locations. Why not? When will Scottish Water be required to report sewage discharge data for those rivers?

Màiri McAllan: As I have previously reported to Parliament, Scottish Water's improving urban waters route map, which was published in December 2021, sets out a programme of continued action to reduce waste-water pollution and sewage litter over the coming decade, and is backed by £0.5 billion of investment. The first annual update to the route map was published in December 2022.

The scheme includes commitments to upgrades to deal with combined sewer overflows and targets some of the most problematic of them, which is the right thing to do. I want us never to lose sight of the fact that, as we strive for improvement, we are starting from a very high base: as I have said before, SEPA's recent results show that 66 per cent of Scotland's water bodies are in good condition or better, compared to just 16 per cent in England.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As a reminder, I note that the question is about water quality in the north-east. I call Foyso Choudhury.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): A recent Marine Conservation Society report noted that only 4 per cent of Scotland's sewage discharge points are monitored. The overspilling of sewage and recent heavy rainfall have left water in Leith being potentially dangerous. Residents have no idea what impact that is having on their health or their environment. Will the cabinet secretary commit to having the water in Leith tested by a

public body so that the residents can know the condition of their water?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: While confirming that Leith is not in the north-east, I invite the cabinet secretary to provide a response if she so wishes.

Màiri McAllan: Leith is in the north-east of Edinburgh. [*Laughter.*]

I am happy to answer the question, Presiding Officer, because it is an important one. I understand that monitoring is regarded as very important for our sewer network and I understand why. However, Scottish Water was able to make a decision some years ago on whether to monitor every outlet or to invest that money in making improvements, and Scotland has done the latter.

Foysoil Choudhury has asked me to make sure that a public body monitors water quality. That is exactly what the independent Scottish Environment Protection Agency does, and—as I narrated in response to the previous question—the results of that survey are really rather good for Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 has not been lodged.

Environmental Quality and Protection (Community Initiatives)

7. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what funding it will make available for community-led initiatives in the Coatbridge and Chryston constituency that promote environmental quality and protection. (S6O-02379)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): A range of funding is available to support community-led initiatives to promote environmental quality. For example, the vacant and derelict land investment programme awarded North Lanarkshire Council £230,000 in 2022-23 for the Glenmanor greenspace project. That has supported the adjacent communities in Moodiesburn and Chryston by creating a green space for outdoor education, play, active travel and biodiversity. The fund is currently open again for applications from all local authorities to support community-led regeneration. I encourage them to bid.

Fulton MacGregor: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I welcome her mention of the Glenmanor greenspace project, which is an absolutely fantastic example.

My constituency is home to many community-led environmental initiatives, including the friends of Monklands canal, which won the most improved walking place award at the recent Scottish walking

awards. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish Government should encourage community participation in such initiatives via increased funding, promotion and other avenues?

Màiri McAllan: I take the opportunity to congratulate the friends of Monklands canal on the award. I very much agree with Fulton MacGregor that involving communities in shaping their neighbourhoods should be strongly encouraged. In fact, I think that there is no other way of going about it. That is very much in line with our planning policies, which aim to encourage more people to live well locally, as well as our funding programmes, which help local people to improve their places.

Partnership working with community groups is key to promoting increased use and enjoyment of our outdoor spaces. We have committed to increasing funding to £320 million in 2024-25 to increase active travel opportunities for community groups and local authorities alike. My colleague Patrick Harvie is ably overseeing that work.

Just Transition (Grangemouth Community)

8. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to make the community central to its plans for a just transition for Grangemouth. (S6O-02380)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): Our commitment to develop a just transition for the Grangemouth industrial complex acknowledges the critical role that we think Grangemouth plays in Scotland's journey to net zero, which involves utilising existing industrial heritage, infrastructure and manufacturing excellence.

A strong partnership between industry, unions, the workforce and local communities will be a critical success factor for Grangemouth, given the long-standing and interwoven relationships between the cluster and the wider town. That is something that the Scottish Government wholeheartedly supports.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the minister for that answer. I know that there are a multitude of bodies that aim to give voice to the community. Despite that, however, the Economy and Fair Work Committee has heard clear evidence that, at this stage, the community feels excluded from what a just transition could mean for it, especially when it knows that it hosts Scotland's largest industrial site, which accounts for about 4 per cent of Scotland's gross domestic product.

Will the cabinet secretary commit to ensuring the development of a co-design process with not just regular input from the community, but feedback to highlight where its input has influenced decision making? Further, will she

ensure that specific measures of success from a community perspective are put in place up front?

Màiri McAllan: I am very happy to answer the various parts of that question. First, baselining and monitoring thereafter are a critical part of how we measure a just transition generally.

In my view, Grangemouth is a symbol of the need for a just transition to net zero. It has unique economic importance. It is home to a cluster of strategic manufacturing assets in energy—petrochemicals—and it is our largest logistics hub. It also employs thousands of people. However, equally, it contributes significantly to industrial emissions, which must be driven down rapidly.

One example of our commitment to a community-led just transition is our decision to fund a community just transition participation officer for Grangemouth, employed from within the community to liaise with the just transition process to make sure that it always responds to community need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow front benches to change.

Provisional Outturn

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Tom Arthur on provisional outturn. The minister will take questions on the issues that are raised in his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:36

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): I welcome the opportunity to update the Parliament on the provisional outturn against the budget for the financial year 2022-23. The provisional outturn demonstrates once again that the Government is prudently and competently managing Scotland's finances.

The financial situation that the Scottish Government faces has been the most challenging since devolution. The shocks of more than a decade of austerity, a hard Brexit, the Covid pandemic, the cost of living crisis, pressure on public sector pay and the war in Ukraine, combined, have placed extreme inflationary pressure on the public finances.

The plain fact is that the buying power of the 2022-23 budget was significantly eroded by inflation after initial spending plans were set out in the budget publication. At the same time, understandably, demand for Government support and intervention increased. However, ultimately, our in-year budget has, effectively, been fixed. The United Kingdom Government took no action to address the in-year impact of inflation. We are constrained by UK Government spending decisions and have limited fiscal levers. In particular, we have no ability to borrow for day-to-day spending, and our income tax powers do not allow for changes to be made during the financial year.

Within those constraints, the only avenue by which we could manage the pressures that we face was the reprioritisation and robust management of demand-led budgets. That is why we undertook the emergency budget review in the autumn: to balance the budget while prioritising funding to support the cost of living challenge.

That effective and prudent financial management has meant that every penny received by the Scottish Government has been channelled to where it was needed the most. In 2022-23, we invested significantly in fair public sector pay deals, committing more than £900 million more than was originally factored into spending plans. That delivered higher increases in pay for lower earners and, in turn, supported families and individuals with the cost of living

crisis. It achieved more beneficial packages than did UK counterparts, minimising the impact of strike action while ensuring the continuity of vital public sector services.

We spent nearly £4.1 billion on social security benefits, including £219 million on the Scottish child payment, which we more than doubled to £25 per week. We doubled the fuel insecurity fund from £10 million to £20 million, to provide additional immediate support to the people most impacted by the cost of living crisis—specifically, by rising energy prices. We introduced new payment break options to help to protect those who have agreed to repay debt through the debt arrangement scheme but who face unexpected increases in the cost of living.

We also spent £216 million to support those who have been displaced by the on-going war in Ukraine. We have welcomed more than 24,000 people—20 per cent of all UK arrivals—from Ukraine since the outbreak of Russia's war against that country, and we continue to provide financial aid and medical supplies.

We will continue to press the UK Government to provide sufficient funding to meet the scale of the on-going inflationary pressures, for more powers, and for necessary reforms to the fiscal framework through the forthcoming review.

Our medium-term financial strategy, published on 25 May, made clear the scale of the anticipated future pressures on the public finances, on top of those that have already been felt over recent years, and how the Government will address the challenges of sustainability of the public finances.

The Scottish Government remains committed to achieving and maintaining a balanced budget while delivering against our three central missions. Those are: community, prioritising our public services; opportunity, a fair, green and growing economy; and equality, tackling poverty and protecting people from harm. Sound finances are the strong foundations from which we will deliver for the people of Scotland and progress those vital missions set out by the First Minister.

Turning now to the 2022-23 provisional outturn, under the current devolution settlement, the Scottish Government is not permitted to overspend its budget. We must therefore operate within a tight margin of just over 1 per cent. The level of volatility in our overall funding envelope continues to increase. On top of that, our block grant is not finalised until February each year, and we must manage that uncertainty with the limited fiscal levers at our disposal. Despite that, the Scottish Government has a strong track record of delivering a balanced budget while continuing to provide the public of Scotland with the broad

range of high-quality public services that they expect.

I am pleased once again to announce to Parliament that we have maintained that balance. I can report that the provisional fiscal outturn for 2022-23 is £46.9 billion against a total fiscal budget of £47.1 billion. The remaining budget of £244 million, which represents 0.5 per cent of our total budget, will be carried forward in full through the Scotland reserve if confirmed at final outturn. It is made up of £180.6 million of fiscal resource, £24.7 million of capital and £39 million of financial transactions. There is no loss of spending power to the Scottish Government as a result of that carry forward.

As I have said before, the management of funding across years is an essential part of our financial strategy. Every penny of that carry forward has been allocated in full in 2023-24, allowing us to implement measures at the most optimal time, rather than being constrained to a single financial year. We are required to actively manage a resource underspend to cover the risk of post-year-end audit adjustments, which have occurred in previous years.

The majority of that carry forward has already been proactively anticipated in the 2023-24 spending plans, which have already been approved by the Parliament. Those include the £39 million of financial transactions anticipated within the 2023-24 budget, published in December 2022, and £115 million of additional funding announced at stage 3 of the Budget (Scotland) (No 2) Bill on 21 February 2023 by the then Deputy First Minister to further support local government, Creative Scotland and the interisland ferry network. That carried-forward funding is directly linked to late UK Government consequentials, which were finally confirmed only six weeks before the end of the financial year.

The revised budget allocations will be set out later in the year as part of our autumn budget revision process and will be subject to the usual parliamentary scrutiny and approvals process. An element of our budget allocation from HM Treasury is non-cash, which is used for accounting adjustments, predominantly depreciation. It is not possible to use that ring-fenced non-cash budget to support any day-to-day spending. Non-cash funding does not flow to the Scotland reserve and is not included in our headline provisional outturn results. For 2022-23, that shows an underspend of £984 million against a budget of just over £2 billion. A large proportion of that budget is consequentials for student loan impairments, which are simply not required at the same level in Scotland because of our policy of free university tuition.

Turning to the accounts, I must address the ongoing focus on the headline accounting underspend figure. It is spend that just does not flow into the reserve. It is only the elements within HM Treasury limits for discretionary funding that are controllable and which matter. Every year, we see a charade in which the higher headline accounting underspend is quoted as though the budget has been mismanaged. This Government has never had an underspend that has fallen outside the narrow limits within which we can carry forward funding. There is no loss of spending power to the Scottish Government this year, as has been the case in each and every year of Scottish National Party-led Government.

Finally, I emphasise that the £244 million underspend is provisional and will be finalised later in the year, once the Scottish Government and its bodies complete their year-end audits. Finalised figures will be reported, as usual, in the annual Scottish Government consolidated accounts, and a statement of final outturn for the financial year 2022-23 will be published later this year.

The provisional outturn demonstrates once again that the Scottish Government has maintained its firm grip on Scotland's public finances. We have ensured that we have met our priorities while balancing the budget within the very tight margins that we have available.

I commend to Parliament the figures that have been published today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will have to move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to ask questions could press their request-to-speak buttons.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for the advance sight of his statement. Most members of the public will be shocked to hear that there was an underspend of nearly quarter of a billion pounds last year. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have listened to the minister's statement, so we will listen to the questions similarly.

Douglas Lumsden: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. Last year, nearly quarter of a billion pounds was underspent. It seems that, in key areas, the Government likes to announce high spending figures in its budget, but it is woeful on delivery. It talks the talk, but it does not walk the walk. At a time when our local communities are seeing swimming pools, libraries and sports facilities being closed, how can that be the case? For a Government that talks about there being a

skills crisis, how can it be that its education and skills budget has been so massively underspent? For one that claims that tackling climate change is a key priority, how on earth is it that the net zero and transport budget has been so massively underspent once again? Those are serious questions, so perhaps we could have serious answers.

Tom Arthur: I do not think that the public will be shocked that, in a budget of some £47.1 billion, 0.5 per cent has been underspent. That money has been proactively announced—the majority of it as part of the budget process to be carried forward. There was £115 million at stage 3 of the budget process and £39 million of FT at the time when the budget was introduced to the Parliament, in December 2022.

We have managed the public finances competently and prudently, as is demonstrated in the outturn figures. Every penny that I have identified in my remarks—£244 million—is being carried forward and spent against this year's priorities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have already made an appeal for members to listen to the questions and answers with equal respect.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for the early sight of his statement, which trumpets the Government's allegedly effective and prudent financial management. That claim comes as Scotland stares down the barrel of a £1 billion gap in its public finances this year, and a looming gap of £1.9 billion by 2027-28. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the Government has precious

"little sense of how to address it."

Instead, it has a completely non-strategic approach, with top-slicing cuts to budgets being made year in, year out.

The minister has told us that the Government's current approach will deliver the vital mission set out by the First Minister. However, last year, Mr Arthur said:

"the Scottish Government has a purpose and a mission ... That is exactly what the resource spending review will deliver."—*[Official Report, 8 June 2022; c 76.]*

Yet, here we are, with Kate Forbes's resource spending review completely ditched. That strategic approach has gone and nothing is replacing it. Does the minister not accept that his Government has no plan to bring about the changes to our public finances that this country so badly needs?

Tom Arthur: I reject absolutely everything that Mr Marra has said. The central point of his question on the resource spending review was addressed yesterday by my colleague the Deputy

First Minister. I am sure that Mr Marra can look at the *Official Report* if he has already forgotten what the answer was.

We have set out, through our policy prospectus, a clear set of missions for Scotland, upon which we will deliver. In our medium-term financial strategy, we have set out the approach that we will take to deliver on that fiscally. We will set out further details as part of the annual budget process, as we always do.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The need for additional fiscal flexibilities to allow the Scottish Government to better manage its budget is pretty clear to most of us and has been highlighted beyond doubt by the pandemic and the challenging economic conditions that we continue to face, not least the projected 14 per cent cut from Westminster to our capital budget over the next four years. Can the minister provide any update regarding the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the UK Government on the review of the fiscal framework and can he say any more about the outcomes that the Scottish Government would hope to see as a result of that review?

Tom Arthur: I very much agree with Mr Brown on the importance of the fiscal framework review. We are placing a priority on getting a successful outcome from that, because our current borrowing powers are heavily restrained and that limits our ability to support the economy in the short term. Although the UK Government has previously ignored our calls for greater fiscal flexibility, we remain in constructive discussions on the wider fiscal framework review. The Deputy First Minister will be meeting the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the coming weeks to progress those discussions.

In terms of outcomes, Scottish ministers have made clear to the UK Government the need for greater budget flexibility and borrowing powers to enable us to manage risks and support economic recovery as well as ensuring that the block grant adjustment mechanisms remain in line with the Smith commission principle of no detriment.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Does the minister acknowledge that the difficult fiscal circumstances that we are facing just now are in no part always to do with the UK Government but are in large part a result of the SNP Government not growing the economy?

Tom Arthur: Do you know what, Presiding Officer? I always find it fascinating that the Conservatives are keen to trumpet that Scotland has two Governments, but whenever the anaemic economic growth of the UK comes into question, all of a sudden, the UK Government is nowhere to be found. Apparently, Scotland is already

independent and the UK Government has no role at all to play in Scotland's economy.

The reality is that the factors that have been driving low economic growth and low productivity in the UK, which are impacting on Scotland, are a decade of austerity by a Conservative Government; the reckless policy of Brexit; and the chaotic approach to public finances, which reached its apotheosis in the mini-budget—and which Liz Smith wanted this Government to follow.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): As mentioned by my colleague Keith Brown, the Scottish Fiscal Commission projects a real-terms cut of 14 per cent in the Scottish Government's capital expenditure budget in the next five years, which, of course, restricts our ability to undertake infrastructure projects such as road building. As we also do not have proper borrowing powers, that ultimately flows through into limiting our productivity and therefore how much tax we can raise to fund vital public services.

Does the minister think that all members of the Scottish Parliament, particularly the ones who are involved in the Finance and Public Administration Committee, understand that point? If they do understand it, surely they would agree that that is an example of the damage that is being done by our not having control over the normal financial levers and of leaving their future in Westminster's hands?

Tom Arthur: Michelle Thomson hits the nail on the head—she hits it absolutely square on the head, Presiding Officer—because we are being lectured by the Conservatives on economic growth when we are in a position of having to reduce our capital spending, which is so fundamental to economic growth.

Through the fiscal framework review, we want to get increased borrowing powers for this Parliament and for this Government, including in relation to capital, but, ultimately, we want to get full fiscal powers—which only independence can deliver—so that we can really unleash Scotland's potential.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Maybe we can return to the numbers. On the £244 million that will be carried over, I would point out that, because of the time-based value of money, it is worth less this year than it would have been last year. However, when did the Government identify the £274 million underspend for the net zero budget? I note that those figures are very close to the sums that were being talked about in relation to the cost of uplifting social care pay. When did the Government know about the underspend, and by how much would £180 million in resource uplift social care pay?

Tom Arthur: On the £180 million of fiscal resource, £115 million was announced at stage 3 of the budget to support local government, Creative Scotland and inter-island ferry services.

As the member will know from the figures in front of him, the largest element—by some distance—in relation to net zero and transport is capital. About half of that is an international financial reporting standard 16 technical adjustment on leases. It is a ring-fenced sum; we do not have any discretion over how we use it. On the remainder of the capital, the largest drivers of that were based on reprioritisation to support the emergency budget review process and an uptake of demand-led schemes that was lower than anticipated.

Those were the drivers in relation to net zero, and the total capital that we have carried forward is just under £25 million.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I congratulate the minister and the cabinet secretary for being so close to balancing the budget—the figure of 0.5 per cent is incredibly good for any organisation or business. Will the minister reiterate to Douglas Lumsden and others who are struggling to understand it that we cannot have the budget dead-on?

Tom Arthur: I thank Mr Mason for his remarks and commend the Scottish Government's officials who have been so central to delivering a near-balanced budget position. I recognise Mr Mason's professional background. It is a pity that we do not have more accountants in the Parliament. If we did, perhaps we would have fewer of the sorts of questions that I have been subjected to following my statement.

The reality is that we have to spend underneath our allocated budget; we are not allowed to go above it. I am pretty sure that, if I had come to the Parliament saying that our provisional outturn was in excess of Treasury controls, we would be getting a different line of questions from the Conservatives. We have delivered an underspend or variance of 0.5 per cent. The majority of that was proactively anticipated through our budget process, which once again demonstrates the Scottish Government's prudent and competent handling of the country's public finances.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I apologise for my slightly late arrival.

In the context of the health and cost of living crises, it is critical to get money to where it is needed as fast as possible, so that we can treat people quicker and ease the pressure on household budgets. Despite the long shadow of the pandemic and its visceral impact on our communities, £50 million was cut from mental health over the winter, and the Government is still

way behind England and Wales in its provision for people who are suffering from long Covid. As the underspend rolls on, will the Scottish Government finally commit to funding those priorities properly?

Tom Arthur: As I have already indicated, the money that has been carried forward through the process of the provisional outturn, if confirmed, will be committed against pressures this year. The majority of what is within the provisional outturn as a variance was already proactively anticipated as part of the budget process. The formal allocation from the reserve to the budget will take place through the budget revision process.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): In previous years, the overspend on core Scottish Government civil service costs, known as total operating costs, has significantly exceeded the budgeted costs, often by up to 10 per cent or more than £60 million out of a budget of around £600 million. The balance has been covered by transfers from other budget lines within relevant portfolios. What was the budget for the Scottish Government's total operating costs in the past year, and what was the final outturn?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the important work that Mr McKee did as a minister in ensuring that we are as efficient as possible within the Government's operating costs. In the past year, the total budgeted cost for the Scottish Government was £706 million and the forecast outturn was £744 million, which is an overspend of £38 million or 5 per cent, with staff costs being a driver of that increase. That reflects our wider position and investment into public sector pay deals and our support for families and individuals with the cost of living crisis. That has minimised the impact of strike action while ensuring that there is continuity of vital public services. That spend also supported investment in our operating systems, which ensure that the Scottish Government is being run as efficiently and effectively as possible, now and for the future.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): As has been demonstrated in the debate, the Government's underspend is misrepresented every year, both at provisional outturn and when Audit Scotland publishes its report on the annual accounts. Have Scottish Government officials had any discussions with officials at Audit Scotland about how we present the underspend as part of the annual accounts, and on how we foster good public understanding in the face of such deliberate disinformation being spread from elsewhere?

Tom Arthur: We recognise the independence and autonomy of Audit Scotland, but we all have a shared ambition for public finances to be presented and reported in as transparent a manner as possible, to ensure that our debate is as informed as possible. When the consolidated

accounts are published in due course, it is important that the way in which those figures are used and reported on, particularly by members of the Parliament, is done so in a way that demonstrates responsibility.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind the minister to address his remarks to the front so that we can be sure that they are caught by the microphone.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As usual, the SNP has tried its best to shift the blame to the UK Government for the financial mess that has been made in Scotland by the Government of Scotland. It has failed to point out the tremendous investment that the UK Government has made in Scotland over the past year, including £177 million in levelling up communities and £52 million for the establishment of free ports, which will generate billions of pounds of investment for Scotland.

Will the minister acknowledge that investment as a positive benefit of the union and an example of why working together across nations enhances all our communities?

Tom Arthur: It would be better for the people of Scotland if their hard-earned taxpayers' money was administered by this Parliament rather than a Government at Westminster that they did not vote for.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As the minister has explained at some length, the narrow limits within which we can carry forward additional resource makes managing underspend a very careful balancing act. How does the Scottish Government's underspend compare with that of other devolved nations that are also required to balance their budgets?

Tom Arthur: Our underspend for 2022-23 is £244 million, which is just 0.5 per cent of the budget. We do not yet have this year's figures for the other nations in the UK, but if we look at the figures for 2021-22, we can see that the figure for Wales was 2 per cent and the figure for Northern Ireland was 2.1 per cent. I do not make that comparison as part of some sort of competition, but it is illustrative of what is normal and what the normal tolerance levels for underspend are within budgets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Gender-sensitive Audit

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on the Scottish Parliament's gender-sensitive audit. I ask those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. Members may wish to be aware that the format for today's debate allows some flexibility for longer interventions to be taken, should members wish to so proceed.

I call Karen Adam to open the debate on behalf of the board. I can give you a generous eight minutes, Ms Adam.

15:02

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Fantastic—thank you, Presiding Officer.

It is a privilege to open this debate and to have the opportunity to discuss our collective efforts to construct a gender-sensitive Parliament. The concept of a gender-sensitive Parliament is recognised by legislatures around the world and is a response to what my colleagues around the chamber will have lived experience of day in, day out. Sadly, women's representation in Parliament is not reflective of our representation in society, and even here, where the decisions about Scotland are made, women are denied real power.

The Parliament's gender-sensitive audit, which was launched by the Presiding Officer in 2022, looked at our rules, practices and culture to examine how women are—or are not—included and represented here. The new report, "A Parliament for All: Report of the Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit", which I encourage every member to read, makes a number of recommendations to address the issues that were highlighted by the audit.

Of course, the barriers to entry for women to this Parliament and politics in general are many, and I want to spend a few moments talking about the obstacles that many of my colleagues across the parties might have faced.

In the 2021 election, I stood on an all-women candidate list in Banffshire and Buchan Coast. On many occasions in that election, I was challenged by a small but vocal minority not on my ability, my values or what I could bring to the debate, but on the basis that I stood on an all-women shortlist. For that small yet vocal minority, it did not matter what experience I could bring to bear when discussing the many issues that are faced by people across Banffshire and Buchan Coast.

For them, it did not matter that I was working class, that I was brought up in an LGBT home, that I had experience of translating for my deaf

father or caring for my children with additional support needs, or that I had succeeded in many voluntary positions while juggling a degree and being a councillor and single parent to six children. For them, it did not matter that I had the opportunity of bringing those experiences to Parliament and being a voice for so many others like me, who rarely see themselves reflected in Parliaments like this one. All that mattered was that I was on an all-women shortlist, which meant that I had somehow skipped the queue. While we discuss how we support women in Parliament, I hope that I have given every party leader pause for thought on the uphill struggles, misogyny, abuse and harassment that women face on their journeys into this place.

The audit, which was carried out by Dr Fiona McKay, found that there had been fluctuations over time in the number of women in leadership and decision-making roles in the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body, the Parliamentary Bureau and committee convenerships, for example. That suggests that equal representation of women and men is not embedded within Parliament, nor is it guaranteed going forward. We can and must do better.

The audit also found that the number of women and men on committees does not always reflect the gender balance in Parliament. Men tend to be overrepresented in a number of mandatory committees, such as those dealing with finance, audit, standards and procedures and delegated powers. The one mandatory committee where women tend to be overrepresented is the committee that is responsible for equalities, which is the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, on which I sit.

On the level of participation in Parliament, the audit found that women tended to make fewer contributions during First Minister's questions and were less likely to intervene in debates. It also found that men were more likely to have their interventions accepted by men and women.

To the surprise of no women in the chamber today, the audit found that, although there appears to be a positive shift in attitudes towards women in politics, women members of the Scottish Parliament still encounter sexism. I will not go into full detail here, but I have lost count of the number of times that I have been told what I should or should not say, what I should or should not do and where I should or should not sit. I have lost count of the number of times that I have been spoken over or expected to explain myself, and we know full well that that is seldom the case for our male colleagues. I call on my male colleagues to challenge that behaviour wherever they see it. Only in that way can we change the culture for good.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Adam: Absolutely.

Alexander Stewart: I acknowledge what Karen is saying today. She makes a valid point about the respect that women should be given when they come into a role in Parliament. That respect has not always been shown. As she says, it is up to all of us to do our bit and for the men in Parliament to stand up and be counted because it is they who are, at times, not treating women with the respect that they deserve.

Karen Adam: I thank my colleague for that intervention. He is absolutely right. I thank him for his acknowledgement and for always being respectful to me. We can all spread the message to our other male colleagues that they should do better. Setting a good example is a good way of doing that.

As a mother of six children with caring responsibilities for my children and father, I was particularly interested in the report's findings on childcare provision and our oft-lauded family-friendly Parliament. It is exceptionally hard for a parent, particularly a single parent, to be a parliamentarian. I welcome the return of the crèche and I hope that greater provision and more flexible childcare will become available in the future.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Adam: Yes.

Bob Doris: I am conscious that I am the second man to seek to make an intervention, but nothing should be read into that. It is because of my interest in the debate rather than my seeking to have my voice magnified more than anyone else's.

As a working dad—that puts constraints on my wife as it impacts on her job as a nurse in Glasgow—I am interested in seeing the crèche extend beyond four-hour slots, perhaps to partnership nursery status with much more flexibility. Did anything on that come out of the gender-sensitive audit? I ought to say that I am asking not just for my benefit, but for my family, so we can get the balance right in our lives and have proper equality in everything that we do.

Karen Adam: Thank you. I agree with those comments—four hours is a good start, but we certainly need to go further, with a more flexible approach. As the member said, the more childcare we can provide for families as a whole, including for men, the lesser the burden of childcare on women will be.

The report states:

“The retention of hybrid and remote systems was seen as increasing flexibility and access, including for those with caring responsibilities.”

In the past few months alone, our hybrid system has allowed me to carry out my duties in the Parliament when I have been unable to be in Edinburgh. However, we must be mindful that whether to allow remote or hybrid participation is often at the discretion of individual parties.

I am proud that my party is invested in supporting more women into politics at every level of government. I am proud that, under Nicola Sturgeon’s leadership, we introduced the first gender-balanced cabinet in the United Kingdom and that, under Humza Yousaf’s premiership, we now see more women in Government than ever before.

We must celebrate that, but we can and must do more, in Government and as a party and a Parliament, particularly on the unprecedented levels of abuse that are faced online and in the media by women in elected politics.

How can I, in good conscience, encourage women to step into any political sphere in the knowledge that doing so will lead to abuse on a daily basis? Many women to whom I have spoken have told me that they have no desire to put themselves in the crosshairs of keyboard warriors, and that breaks my heart.

It was an honour to be a member of the gender-sensitive audit board. I thank the Presiding Officer, Alison Johnstone, and fellow members who sat on the board, namely Maggie Chapman, Monica Lennon, Jeremy Balfour and Alex Cole-Hamilton; the experts who have helped to shape this important report, including Professor Sarah Childs, Dr Meryl Kenny and Professor Fiona Mackay from the universities of Edinburgh and Strathclyde; and Susan Duffy and Tracey White from the Scottish Parliament, Catherine Murphy of Engender, and Eilidh Dickson.

As is the case with the pursuit of equality, change is never instant, and efforts to enact change must be continuous. We need political commitment over the long term, not only so that the quick wins and short-term goals are reached, but so that substantial institutional change is reached. Equally, our introspection must not stop here. Assessing a Parliament for its gender sensitivity is not a one-off event. Progress needs to be monitored, data needs to be collected and analysed on an on-going basis, and further changes need to be made as inequalities are identified. I am encouraged by the enthusiasm and commitment of the Parliament’s staff. I fervently believe we will make change for the better, and I look forward to working with all to enact the recommendations of the report.

This year, we celebrate the centenary of the first woman from Scotland being elected to the UK Parliament; I note that my colleague John Swinney has celebrated the remarkable Katharine Stewart-Murray in a motion this week. We have come a long way over the past 100 years, but we still have a long way to go.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, Emma Roddick. You have a generous seven minutes, minister.

15:12

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I welcome the report, and I thank Karen Adam for her contribution to the debate today and to the report. Having been elected at the same time as her, I know that these have not been an easy couple of years. We have both faced quite a lot of online abuse and the types of obstacles that she described, yet she still took the time, and made the effort, to contribute to this really valuable report, so fair play to her.

I have genuinely been looking forward to this debate, because I know that there are a lot of serious issues to be raised and a spotlight to be shone on the experiences of women in this Parliament and in politics in general. In addition, I know that there is likely to be a great deal of cross-party consensus, which I hope will mean that we can get into the details rather than focus simply on the headline issues.

The Scottish Government has consistently held the position that it is for the Parliament to consider any proposals that are relevant to its internal operation, membership and working practices, but we routinely monitor the proposed development of parliamentary policy and operation to assess any potential impacts on ministerial interests, and we are happy to provide assistance if we are invited to do so. Although it is for the Parliament to act on the report, I am here as a minister to offer support on the work that it will lead to, and to pick up on any lessons that the Scottish Government can learn.

It would look pretty daft if I got up and did not acknowledge the obvious: I am also a woman in politics—a queer disabled woman. As many members will know, I have had my struggles in contributing to a system that was very much not designed for me or with people like me in mind. From being left out or not managing to get a word in when there are men in a meeting, to unacceptable comments and abuse, I face misogyny and sexism at work from folk in other parties and, sometimes, my own. If that surprises anyone, they are not paying attention. Sexism is

so rooted in our society that it is not an issue for one party, one politics or one workplace; it is a problem everywhere. Not one party or area of society is free of it, and we have to recognise and accept that fact first if we are to stand any chance of dealing with the issue.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Emma Roddick talks about her route into politics. I for one am very glad that she is in politics; I think that she brings a lot to the chamber. Members will have been struck by her excellent address to the outgoing First Minister just a few weeks ago, in which she talked about her route in and how she was asked to stand by a senior politician. Does she recognise that the responsibility falls to all of us to identify strong, talented women, suggest that they run for political office and find ways to help them to do so?

Emma Roddick: Absolutely. However, that relates to an important point that Karen Adam touched on. I, too, struggle with telling women that they should stand, because I know what they will come up against. We have to encourage women to stand, but we also have to do the work to ensure that, once they are here, this is a safe space for them and that politics is not putting them in danger.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Briefly, I want to mention that, although we should encourage women to stand, all of us who are in political parties will understand it when I say that the selection process can be the most brutal experience. As parties, we might not want to talk about that, but it is often the elephant in the room. We should support people once they get elected, but the selection process can be the most brutal part of the process, and that can put people off. Does the minister recognise that point, and will she suggest to all political parties that we must do better?

Emma Roddick: Absolutely. That is an important point, not only because of how difficult selection processes are but because being a candidate does not mean that a person will be elected, but it can mean that they face an awful lot of conflict even if they are not successful. They might have trauma from the things that they experience, and some people who are not successful in elections still manage to attract abuse long after the contest is over. I am more than happy to speak with my party and all other parties about how we can do better by candidates.

We have to acknowledge that there is a long history of sexism, discrimination and inequality. The report was right to state that change

“is not going to happen overnight or without political commitment”.

It has taken a sustained effort on the part of many people to embed sexism in society, and it will take a sustained effort to embed equality instead.

Leadership is an important step in that journey, and we in Parliament have a responsibility to set an example and, crucially, to ensure that a seat in our national Parliament is accessible and attainable for women across the country who want to be here and who have something to contribute to public life.

The Scottish Government is playing its part in that regard. I highlight the work of the First Minister’s national advisory council on women and girls. Off the back of its important recommendations, we have made progress on ensuring consistent access to self-referral for friends at medical examinations after an assault, we are funding Engender’s development manager post to support gender-equal and gender-sensitive representation in the media, and we are delivering on our commitment to expand entitlement to 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare. Those are just a few of the things on our very long list of important advances.

I will now talk specifically about a few of the report’s recommendations. As Karen Adam said, the report discusses the goal of a family-friendly Parliament. That term is used often here when there are late sittings, when unreasonable expectations are placed on people with caring responsibilities or when plans change unexpectedly and at short notice. I am very aware that there are different ideas across the chamber about what “family friendly” means. I like the alternative phrase that was offered in the report of “life friendly”, not only because it is likely to give us more room for flexibility but because, whether or not someone has a family, this Parliament can often be very unfriendly to the idea that people have real lives going on, too.

I welcome the suggestion of a disability audit of the Parliament. Our reputation for being an accessible, liberal Parliament makes sense when we are being contrasted with Westminster, but, in many ways, it is not entirely deserved. If anyone has ever tried to get around this building and its winding and undulating corridors with any kind of mobility aid, they will understand that it is not accessible. Everyone in the chamber has sat in these chairs for hours on end. They do not meet basic recommendations on desk height, and they are incredibly uncomfortable. Uniformity is often prioritised over health and safety. The general public are not uniform, so we cannot expect their representatives to be uniform. There is work to be done so that the building is able to accommodate a full variety of physical needs.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The media and access are really important. I know

that one thing that members have struggled with is group photos. That might be something else that we can look at to ensure that everyone can participate. I know that there have been times when we have been rushing after First Minister's question time, for example, and people with mobility issues have not been able to get down in time to get a group photo. That might be another thing that we can look at to make the Parliament more inclusive.

Emma Roddick: Absolutely. That is one of many things that we should be looking at. It is always clear to me at the end of First Minister's question time and at photo calls that some people have grown up learning how to elbow others out of the way. I have not necessarily learned to do that. There are very basic, everyday challenges for women in the Parliament.

I am a member of a majority female Government, and I do not mind folk celebrating that. That is a good thing, but we have to be clear about what it tells us. It tells us that we have a First Minister who promotes, supports and values women in his team—that is big—and it tells us that a lot of women have overcome a lot of barriers to make it into the Parliament, but it does not tell us anything about system change. We need to come back in five years to see how many women who are here today, across the chamber, are still in politics and how many left, and why. Retention will tell us a lot more about the state of play than a snapshot number of female ministers or MSPs at any given time.

I am aware that we are having this debate at a time when colleagues who have been here for longer than I have been admit that conduct in and out of the chamber and the behaviour that is directed at women in particular have never been so bad. Sexist and ableist language, including dog whistles and downright abuse, is directed at women every day in Scottish politics, and that is not acceptable. We all have a responsibility to raise the tone and set a line that nobody should cross, and we have to be clear that, however harmless someone might think their comments are, if they are relying on a culture of misogyny to give their words the effect of getting one up on someone, they are putting people in danger. Misogyny is killing women, and there is no space for making any form of it acceptable.

I will conclude by saying that it is great to see detailed consideration of proposals to change the workings of the parliamentary estate, which are not gender sensitive. However, all of those tangible changes have to come alongside attitude changes. I know that they are a lot harder to implement, but we all have to be part of that.

I look forward to everyone's contributions to the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Meghan Gallacher, who has a generous six minutes.

15:22

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I offer my apologies to you and members for being late to the debate.

I welcome the Parliament's gender-sensitive audit report, I thank those who contributed to its findings, and I am delighted to lead for the Scottish Conservatives in the debate.

Since I entered the world of politics at the age of 21, the political landscape has changed significantly. We have had our first female First Minister and our second and third female Prime Ministers, and, at one point, the three largest parties in Scotland were led by women. I even managed to achieve a first in North Lanarkshire Council when I became the first female group leader of a political group since the council's creation. Regardless of our political persuasion, those are achievements of which we should all be proud.

However, as I said, the political landscape has changed, but not always for the better. As a young woman who entered politics at the peak of the Scottish independence referendum campaign, I quickly learned that politics is not for the faint-hearted. I will admit that I was not prepared for the online abuse that I would receive. It was personal, sexual in nature and grim. That was before I was even elected as a councillor in North Lanarkshire. After my election, the abuse escalated, and the sad reality is that not a day goes by in which I do not receive some form of abuse. I am sure that colleagues across the chamber share similar experiences.

I have had to get the police involved on not one but two separate occasions because of other people's inappropriate behaviours. It is regrettable that the abuse that I have received has heightened again in recent months because of debates that we have had in the chamber. As I said, I know that I am not the only person in the chamber who has been wrongly stereotyped or labelled, all for standing up for what she thinks is right and for what her constituents want her to fight for.

I am not sharing that story with members as a "Woe is always me" story, but because I know that we can and must do better. Parliament needs to understand why women do not want to stand for election: abuse on social media is one of those reasons. Until we provide better support to women who enter politics, I am afraid that we will prevent talent from entering the chamber.

I turn to the report's findings. There appears to be a lot of focus on the number of men and women on committees not always reflecting the balance of MSPs in Parliament. I am less concerned about that, because I feel that people in Parliament will naturally gravitate towards issues that they care about. For example, I am passionate about education-related issues, but that does not mean that I do not have interests in other areas of devolved government. I am not entirely sold on the recommendation of not having single-sex committees, because I do not think that Parliament should dictate to political parties who would best be representatives on various boards and committees. I hope that Parliament would prefer to have on committees people who have a genuine interest.

The report states, too, that

“women tend to make fewer contributions during“

Parliament business, including First Minister's questions and debates. I am afraid that that comes down to behaviours—a point that has been mentioned previously. We, as women, are often accused of being shouty or mouthy when we are being robust, although comments such as those spur me on a bit because I like to prove people wrong. I am sure that other MSPs feel the same.

I have a question for the chamber today: is Holyrood family friendly? I have pondered that question since my election to Parliament and following the birth of my daughter, Charlotte. The conclusion that I have reached is that, as it stands, Parliament is not family or life friendly. For balance, I appreciate and commend Parliament for introducing proxy voting, for which previous MSPs had called for quite some time. However, I am often drawn to the article that *Holyrood Magazine* published in 2021, when it interviewed four MSPs—Aileen Campbell, Ruth Davidson, Gail Ross and Jenny Marra. I read the article for the first time before I went on maternity leave last year. All those talented women politicians decided not to seek re-election because it was difficult to balance being an MSP with their family lives. They shared their feelings of guilt at not being able to spend time with family and mentioned the mental impact that it had on them. They also shared the reasons why Parliament is not family friendly, which relate to the working day and voting times being moved “at the last minute”, which puts pressure on the MSP and their family. I have lost count of the number of times that I have had to phone a family member because I would not be home when expected.

Travel is another factor to consider. Whether we rely on public transport or battle the M8 every morning, if we do not have accommodation in Edinburgh, we are up at the crack of dawn and

usually do not get home until very late in the evening.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I associate myself with virtually everything that has been said today. The debate is powerful. Does Meghan Gallacher agree that one of the challenges is that we do not have a unified definition of “child friendly”, “family friendly” or, probably more importantly, a definition of “life friendly”? People tend to see what they want in that phrase, instead of seeing in it an agreed balance that we should have between our job—representing constituents—and our family life outwith Parliament.

Meghan Gallacher: That point is really interesting. That is a discussion that we should have. This is the beginning. It is certainly the first discussion on the subject in which I have been involved in Parliament. We need to crack down and define that. I really like “life friendly”, which is the phrase that Emma Roddick used, because the matter is not just about MSPs with children; it is also about MSPs with various things going on in their lives.

I appreciate that I am pushing it, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—I can be very generous, Ms Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: Thank you very much; I will continue, then.

There is the crèche to consider. We have a facility in Parliament that is suitable for childcare that one can use for a maximum of four hours. Although that is great for people who are visiting Parliament—please, do not get me wrong on that—I have to ask what use the crèche is to MSPs, MSP staff and Parliament staff because, as Bob Doris mentioned earlier, the vast majority of them work longer than four hours.

Bob Doris: I am conscious that I face fewer barriers than the women in the chamber, but trying to have a partnership of equals in one's marriage can be tough. This morning, I attended committee remotely, so I went to my constituency office and my two-year-old daughter was in the room with me. I would have much preferred to have come to Parliament, used the childcare facility and had my daughter here with me. That would have better supported my daughter and my wife. We have to think again about the four-hours service. As positive as it is, it does not quite meet the needs of all staff—not just MSPs, but all staff in the Parliament.

Meghan Gallacher: I could not agree more. I have been in exactly the same position as Bob Doris. It is getting to the stage at which we need to be bold in what we do. If we are telling people—

especially young people who are starting a family, people with a disability and people from various walks of life—that this is the Parliament for them, we need to ensure that we mean it. I think that we are not there yet.

In contrasting the Scottish Parliament with Westminster, I note that it has a full-time nursery, which we could consider. I do not fully buy into the idea that the hybrid system is making the MSP role easier for people with young children. I can give an example: I ask colleagues to imagine trying to concentrate during stage 3 of a bill with a baby in one arm while voting on amendments with the other. One can make mistakes, and we do not want to make mistakes because we are trying to do our job. That happened to me in December last year, when I broke my maternity leave to vote on legislation. I feel that members who participate remotely do not get the same experience as MSPs who are physically in the chamber or a committee room.

More work needs to be undertaken to make the Parliament more life friendly; otherwise history will, unfortunately, continue to repeat itself. We will lose talented MSPs, and I do not want to tell any more young women that it is difficult to balance being a mum and a parliamentarian.

To conclude, Presiding Officer—I feel as though I have pushed it today—I agree with the principle of the gender-sensitive audit and the majority of the recommendations that are set out in the report. I applaud the continuation of events taking place in Holyrood to ensure that Parliament reflects our society. Data is key to monitoring progress. However, we need to address the culture of and behaviours in the chamber, to support our MSPs who receive online abuse and to finally make the Parliament family friendly and—I like this phrase better—life friendly. Only then will we see more women enter the world of politics.

15:32

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The report is welcome, and we thank the Presiding Officer and the audit group for encouraging MSPs to participate in the exercise. I hope that it will go on to improve and strengthen gender representation and participation in the Scottish Parliament. Because of the audit, we now have a women's forum to take forward some of the recommendations.

It is right that the Parliament take steps to ensure equal representation. However, to make a real and lasting difference, equal representation must start before any of us get here. From the outset, the Scottish Labour Party took seriously the need for equal representation and ensured gender balance among our candidates. In the

early days, that was met with derision, with one male MSP calling Scottish Labour women an “affront to democracy”. We have come a long way—there is further to go, but we have come a long way. Needless to say, those fearless women whom he insulted made sure that he very soon learned a valuable lesson.

An aspect of the audit that I found particularly interesting was committee representation—in particular, the point that was made regarding the Conveners Group, the power that it holds as the link between the Parliamentary Bureau and committees and the need to ensure that the group has adequate female representation.

Sadly, until there is equality of representation across the Parliament, we cannot get equal representation on committees. To do so without equal representation in Parliament would simply mean that women would be asked to work harder. However, I view the findings on representation in key committees powerful, and we need to address that, but it must not be at the expense of women or of parties who have embraced equal representation. Too often, I have witnessed pressure on our party to pick up the slack, which is simply wrong, given that there are two larger parties. That point is about not just our representation on committees, but our being asked to take part in panels or on programmes because they want a woman there for gender balance. The parties that persistently choose their representatives from misogynistic standpoints should lose their right to be represented on committees and panels. If we did that, it would soon change their ways.

Our society is not equal; therefore, there are barriers to women taking part. The greatest is caring responsibilities—of those, being a mother is probably the greatest. Whether we like it or not, those responsibilities fall predominantly to women. Until that changes, we need to recognise them as a barrier and to provide solutions.

As has already been mentioned, at the end of the previous parliamentary session, we lost a number of young women who found it difficult to balance caring responsibilities and their parliamentary duties. Now, due to Covid, we have a much more flexible system of working that can facilitate a better work-life balance. However, we should not stop there. We need to recognise that, by working remotely, people miss out on the conversations around the chamber and on meeting stakeholders at cross-party groups and receptions. We cannot simply accept that; we need to find ways around it.

When Covid happened, we found ways. With the same urgency, we should look at new ways of working that make our Parliament accessible for all our citizens.

The audit touches on job sharing. That is interesting but, again, I sound a note of caution. I know that I am not alone in thinking that there are not enough hours in the day, or days in the week, to fulfil my role. I seem to skim across the top, leaving behind more work than I am able to tackle.

If we look at job sharing, we need to be very careful that we do not end up with two people working 24/7 for half the pay, because that would simply be wrong. I believe that we need to look at our working practices; for example, the impact on parents of having fluid decision times. A 10-minute change can mean a missed train and desperate attempts to find alternative childcare with little or no notice. That is becoming more prevalent.

Do we really need to vote at 5 pm? Does the Parliament really need to sit in afternoons? Could it maybe sit in mornings instead? Should the Parliament crèche be adapted to meet the needs of members, as Meghan Gallacher pointed out, as well as the needs of the public? Those are questions that we need to ask.

As an MSP for the Highlands and Islands, flexibility does not really work unless decisions are made much further in advance. The Government knows its timetable months in advance but shares it with the Parliament only a week in advance. That does not give MSPs who live a long distance from the Parliament the ability to plan. There are people who need to travel or book flights—they need to incorporate travelling time into their diaries weeks in advance. Therefore, it would be helpful to know weeks in advance what they are expected to do.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I have some sympathy with what Rhoda Grant is saying—in particular, regarding the difficulties for members from the Highlands and Islands. Would she accept that what goes for the Government also goes for the Opposition? Generally, debates in Opposition time, which are announced 24 hours before the debate, also create problems for people who are moving around the country.

Rhoda Grant: Yes, indeed. Planning beforehand is really important but, again, the Parliament has to be flexible to deal with issues that come up in an emergency. However, we have a virtual system that allows people to take part if we know when people should and should not be here.

The 2021 Scottish elections resulted in 45 per cent of MSPs being women, which is the highest percentage since devolution. However, it is still not 50:50, so we cannot be complacent. We need to ensure equal representation for all underrepresented groups. It is only when people see MSPs to whom they can relate that they will

see the possibility of stepping forward into those roles. Embracing that diversity must be our aim.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Maggie Chapman. You have a generous six minutes, Ms Chapman.

15:39

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I was honoured to be the Scottish Greens representative on the gender-sensitive audit board. I place on record my gratitude to all those who participated in and supported the board, and to those who contributed to the research undertaken by Dr Fiona McKay and the wider discussions that have been going on around these issues over the past year or so.

The report, which my Scottish Green colleagues and I warmly welcome, highlights many of the ways in which this Parliament's structures, processes and proceedings disadvantage women and identifies some of the ways in which those imbalances can be redressed.

Much of the injustice and discrimination identified is structural and is a result of deep-rooted societal attitudes, traditions and assumptions. Misogyny, as we have been exploring in recent years and months, can often be institutional, embedded and unconscious. Education, awareness raising, data collection and the sharing of best practice both regionally and globally can go a long way towards uncovering and alleviating gender bias.

However, we will fail in our duty if we do not acknowledge that that is not always the case. Expressions of misogyny in this place, and particularly in this chamber, are not always unconscious, unwitting or accidental. I will be specific—I must be for the sake of my women colleagues here and now and those whom I hope will join us in the future, if they are not repulsed by the less than pleasant reception that they can, unfortunately, expect. The language used by some Conservative members of this Parliament is deliberately and consciously sexist and misogynistic, using age-old myths and toxic tropes to manipulate political discourse and to distract attention from their own shortcomings and their party's current chaotic depravity.

For example, last week, I dared to critique the Tory party's legend of infinite growth on a finite planet, its view of tourism as yet another extractive industry and its baseless opposition to a policy that has been successful throughout the world. I presented a vision of a different kind of tourism, one that works with local communities, economies and ecosystems for the common good and wellbeing of all. In his summing up of the debate, Murdo Fraser made no response to my

substantive points, dismissing me with the comment that I was

“wired to the moon and on a different planet from the rest of us”.—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2023; c 90.]

I have, of course, heard far worse, both in this place and elsewhere. One incident that sticks in my mind happened in 2007, when I was a newly elected councillor and a Conservative elected representative told me that he did not believe that women should be in politics but basically should be pregnant, barefoot and in the kitchen.

Others have already mentioned the disproportionate level of online abuse received by women, our being talked over or ignored and our points being taken seriously only when they are repeated by a man. Those are not one-off incidents. My women colleagues and I are regularly the objects of Tory ad hominem attacks, of shouting and sedentary chuntering while we are speaking and of aggressive interventions. Figures in the report showing that women speakers accept 72 per cent of men’s interventions although only 53 per cent of women’s interventions are accepted by men indicate something of that power imbalance.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I know that you are describing experiences in this place. Do you agree with me that it is worrying to hear what is happening in other places, such as Westminster, where female colleagues are moored at across the chamber? That would worry me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to speak through the chair.

Maggie Chapman: I absolutely share Emma Harper’s deep concern about those comments, which only reduce what politics is and should be and will further discourage women from taking part and being in this place.

Meghan Gallacher: I do not want to get involved in tit-for-tat. However, there have been occasions on which I have been subjected to abuse, this time from Scottish Green members. On the day that I got engaged to my fiancé, I was referred to as a “dead body” by a member of the Scottish Greens. Does the member recognise that behaviour must change across the chamber?

Maggie Chapman: I absolutely recognise that and I am sorry that that happened. I hope that I would have had the courage to call that out if I had seen or heard it, because that is unacceptable behaviour.

Murdo Fraser was rightly criticised by members of this Parliament for his language, which drew upon deeply offensive and damaging conceptions of people with mental illness and of women. Both groups are “wired to the moon” by their vulnerabilities or their reproductive systems.

However, he and his party did not seem to mind that at the time. In fact, I am quite sure that many relished it, because that was now the story—not the threadbare cloak that is Tory policy, but the fact that another privileged cis white man was being called to account for his bigotry.

I was not the real victim of the words that day; I was only the excuse. The real victims—the collateral damage—are the people who have experienced mental health difficulties, who hear their struggles dismissed with a cheap jibe; the women who turn away from the circus that is public life in disgust at its poison; the Scottish communities who want a grown-up conversation about inclusive and sustainable tourism; and the poor souls lost in Twitter limbo who hear their own misogyny, ableism and concomitant homophobia and transphobia amplified and vindicated. Of course, there are more victims and survivors of the normalisation of prejudice, as this week’s hate crime figures illustrate.

It is a stimulating game for the boys, perhaps, but the Scottish Tories did not make it up. Donald Trump’s response to his criminal charges and Boris Johnson’s accusations against the Committee of Privileges both follow the populist playbook of defensive masculinity, and, if there is a woman to be blamed, as Harriet Harman knows, that is pretty near perfect for them.

We can and should do better than that here. A few years ago, the Young Academy of Scotland drew up a charter for responsible debate with principles to enable discussion that is informed, meaning that it is accurate, broadly evidenced and honest; respectful, meaning that it is empathic, judicious and open to change; and inclusive, meaning that it identifies common ground and addresses imbalances of power.

I urge all my colleagues throughout the Parliament to look at those principles and ask how fully we uphold them, both in what we say and in the standards that we expect and demand for our shared proceedings. Our culture will be the better for it, and women and Parliaments of the future, as well as the Scotland of today, will thank us for our courage.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask all members who are seeking to speak in the debate to ensure that they have, in fact, pressed their request-to-speak buttons. Thank you.

15:47

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I have really enjoyed listening to the contributions so far. Parliament is always at its best when we find a rich seam of consensus, as it appears we have this afternoon. It is an honour for me to represent the Liberal Democrats in this

debate and it was an honour for me to take part in the gender-sensitive audit commission.

To put it in the simplest terms, this Parliament, like any other, exists to represent the people of our country and to reflect them as best we can. That can be achieved only when all groups in society are proportionally represented and are able to be represented free from any kind of structural or cultural barriers. Gender equality is intrinsic to achieving that level of representation and proportionality, and it is therefore also intrinsic to this Parliament and the work that we all do.

The audit set out to explore the way that gender impacts individual experience in Parliament. That bears serious attention. However, we must ensure that we also remain mindful of how other intersections such as those with race, sexuality and disability affect those experiences.

As we have heard, the Parliament is currently the most diverse that it has ever been, with women constituting towards 45 per cent of our MSPs. That is a fantastic achievement. However, as the audit has explored and as we all know, we cannot take it for granted. We are only as good as the current Parliament in which we find ourselves. Equality can never be taken for granted.

Although the report lies within the remit of Holyrood, I think that it bears mentioning that women's representation in other layers of elected government remain worryingly low, particularly in local government. In Scotland, some 65 per cent of councillors are male and a quarter of wards have no female representation whatsoever. Perhaps the audit report could feed into gender-sensitive audit work on local government in the future. I will take that back as a suggestion in my party.

Representation is crucial, but it is not sustainable without accessibility. A career in politics should be accessible to everyone, but we all know that that is, sadly, far from being the case. The long hours that are associated with this job often clash with family or caring responsibilities, and we must try to mitigate that as much as possible.

One such method is increased parental leave, which Scottish Liberal Democrats have campaigned fiercely on for many years. Indeed, it was a Liberal Democrat minister who brought in new arrangements for shared parental leave, which I am very pleased that the Scottish Parliament has taken up.

It is also why the recent reopening of the Parliament crèche is such a vital move. I echo the point that was made about availability to all staff in this place. The crèche allows anyone who works in or visits the Parliament to do so more easily, as it

takes up some of the burden of the tricky logistics that we all know can be associated with childcare.

Martin Whitfield: When it comes to maternity and paternity leave, would Alex Cole-Hamilton welcome funding for an MSP to appoint an additional member of staff during such a period so that the support in the constituency office can reflect the loss of a worker in the form of that MSP, and so that the constituents are still served to best effect? I realise that there are challenges when it comes to the chamber but, to put those to one side, such an arrangement would allow the same level of service to constituents in an area.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Absolutely. We have to recognise that many of us employ staff who are in their early or mid-20s and are likely to entertain the prospect of parenthood soon. Martin Whitfield has made an excellent point.

Such flexibility is crucial to making the Parliament gender sensitive. That could be bolstered by the report's recommendation of proxy voting, which we have trialled and which could include grounds such as parental leave, caring responsibilities and ill health.

The audit has also highlighted an issue that is becoming all too normalised within our politics. The environment that we work in can be brutal and is becoming more hostile. Although we all experience hostility, female politicians receive a disproportionate amount of abuse.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): What does Mr Cole-Hamilton think of the phrase "F you, Maree", and how does that fit into gender sensitivity?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am dismayed that Kevin Stewart has sought to shatter the consensus that we have worked hard to foster this afternoon.

Kevin Stewart: You said that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, can we let Mr Cole-Hamilton speak?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: It is a matter of public record that I said that. It is also a matter of public record that I have apologised in the chamber, to committees of the Parliament and to Maree Todd. I reiterate that apology today.

I am not a saint. I recognise the shortcomings in my character and I have sought to address those. One of the reasons why I sought membership of the gender-sensitive audit board was that I recognise the distance that I personally, and we as a Parliament, still need to travel in addressing all the issues that have been described.

In particular, female MSPs face a higher level of vitriol than male politicians, including me, have to contend with. It is essential that we investigate the effect that such hostility currently has, in order to

limit further impacts. That is why the recommendations in the report, such as interviewing any outgoing MSP, could prove extremely useful.

The aim of creating a gender-sensitive Parliament encompasses the experiences not only of female MSPs but of everyone who works here—MSPs' staff, our facilities team, our catering staff and civil servants, to name just a few.

The audit has produced overwhelming evidence that a dominant masculine culture is still prevalent in the Parliament. That has an adverse impact on women who work here. In fact, evidence from 2017—as we all know—found that one fifth of women in the Parliament had experienced sexual harassment or unwanted behaviour while working here. That is simply unacceptable. We must increase our measures to tackle such behaviour.

Monica Lennon: Will the member give way?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will happily give way to Monica Lennon, if I have time.

Monica Lennon: It is good to have a debate in which we have a bit of time for interventions. I am grateful to Alex Cole-Hamilton for his role on the board and his reflections. In addition, it is nice to see Kevin Stewart in the chamber—I wish him well. We would all benefit from more kindness in our politics and our Parliament. Often, that is seen as a weakness, but it is a strength.

What I wanted to say to colleagues is that, as well as being a political chamber, it is also a workplace, and the words that we say and the tone that we take here can have an impact on the colleagues who write down our words and who work across this chamber. Given that it is a workplace, should we not all take more care not only to reflect and look back, but to make the commitment that we will be respectful and more constructive in the language that we use?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That was a typically eloquent intervention from Monica Lennon. I whole-heartedly agree with everything that she said. The aim of creating a gender-sensitive Parliament encompasses the experience of not only female MSPs but everyone who works here. I have said that. We know that the evidence tells us that we still have a long way to travel.

Before Monica Lennon's intervention, I talked briefly about the nature of sexually-charged language and sexual harassment in this workplace. Alongside tightening the existing reporting system to make sure that everyone can have confidence in making a report if they wish to do so, we need to encourage a culture where we call it out if we see it. We must also not forget that, as people who are responsible for creating that culture, it is especially incumbent upon male

MSPs such as me to ensure that we do all that we can at an individual level to dismantle the culture wherever possible.

Our female colleagues have been unacceptably disadvantaged for far too long. We must make sure that we are playing an active role in changing that by listening and learning. It has been a privilege to have been part of that by being involved in the audit. By implementing the recommendations in the final report, I hope that we can continue to work towards a Parliament in which everyone, regardless of gender, feels equally represented, treated and valued.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. We still have some time in hand for interventions, should members be so inclined.

15:56

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I welcome the debate. To be honest, I am proud to be part of a Scottish Parliament that seeks to lead in this way, and I give credit to the Presiding Officer for her leadership.

I elected to speak today for several reasons. First, I think that most people who know me often hear me speak up about how women are still not fairly represented as we go through the processes for allocating finance and in enterprise. I am also a steering group member for the British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.

Perhaps the best positioning of the need for the work was in a blog that was written by Eilidh Dickson of Engender. In advance, she set out some of the challenges that the report should meet. Fundamentally, she pointed out that it is about recognition of not only the need for and value of creating shared equity for women but the need to embed equality for women in all aspects of its work. Implicit in the blog was the need for structural solutions for systemic problems.

I regard the change process as a continuum; at its most basic, we must build knowledge, awareness and habits of conscious consideration that permeate throughout every process. For example, only the other day, in one of my committees, we were discussing the framing of an inquiry. I noted that it had to explicitly include a gender-focused lens because, otherwise, we would not get the entire picture. Everyone immediately agreed, but why had that been forgotten about in the first place?

Women parliamentarians have to be at the table when decisions are being made, policy must be made from a fundamentally gender-focused lens—which is an inherent feature of developing a wellbeing economy—and the distribution of money

must be equitable. In our representation, we need far more women with a background in business, finance or economics, for this is, and always was, about power. If there is a continuum starting from building knowledge and awareness at base camp, we are still scoring relatively low. I am pleased to see the report acknowledge that that work will be on-going.

What of the report itself? It sets out considerations around rules, practice and culture, with a long list of recommendations. I am pleased to see the external expert contribution from the likes of Engender and the drive for internal lived experience to be shared. I will play my part in supporting women here. I was very struck by some of the speeches that have been made today.

There are many recommendations around the likes of making the Parliament family friendly, job sharing, representation on committee and proxy voting. I will not mention them all, bar another nod to the fact that it proves that men still dominate in roles that involve finance when you look across the board.

I note, too, that although the report concentrates on us as MSPs and on our supporting structures, work on the wider environment still has further to go. I would include in that special advisers, which is an area in which there is still nowhere near equality, and the media, which continue to be heavily male dominated.

The area that I want to focus on is data. Data gives us power to articulate reality. I was delighted to see that at least seven of the recommendations focused on that. If we cannot collect data, we cannot measure the status quo and we cannot start to move beyond base camp in making change.

Many of the recommendations are for obtaining quantitative data, such as the gathering of basic diversity and intersectional data monitoring. However, importantly, there is also provision for obtaining qualitative data, such as the planned exit interviews for women MSPs. It is often in such exercises that key insights are obtained. Even better is the fact that we have the commissioning of research via academic fellowship.

The forum meetings that the Presiding Officer has already started to hold will form a valuable resource for us all to share as we proceed.

The guidance about the split by sex on committees and other groups is complex, and I am sensitive to the fact that each political party is in a different place on its journey, with one of the minor ones not yet appearing to have started. I note the recommendation from Engender that political parties should commit to auditing their own practice and culture through accessing the equal

representation in politics toolkit. Such toolkits are always worth while.

My final point is about culture and the role that we all play in it, especially in the chamber. This is a theatre that brims with passion and strongly held views, and it is quite right that we debate matters of state in the most robust and vigorous way. On that, I am aware that I have had a lifetime of experience of standing up to bullying—mostly in corporate life, but with some experience in politics, too. The requirement to use the Glasgow phrase “Come here and say that” has often had to be deployed. Being cowardly, the bullies did not do so. However, I do not say that with pride; it is more a recognition that standing up in that way has become second nature to me.

For me, progress is not measured by other, younger, women having to learn and adopt the same strategies as I have, for that would be failure. For me, progress will happen when women take their rightful place and are represented fairly and squarely throughout all our decision-making processes, with their needs at the forefront at all times.

16:02

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Presiding Officer, I advise you and members in the chamber that I am having an ocular issue today—I have forgotten to bring my glasses, so I ask everyone to bear with me.

I am delighted that the Scottish Parliament is taking the issues raised in the gender-sensitive audit so seriously, and I am pleased to be adding my contribution to the debate.

I will start by focusing on the wording “gender-sensitive”, as I believe that it is important that we recognise what we are actually looking at so that we can properly make moves to change it and, I hope, change our culture, too. In this situation, it is not what is intended but what is happening that needs to be recognised, called out and eradicated from our processes.

As a newly recruited member of this illustrious establishment, I want to put it on record that in the past nine months I have found the Parliament and its processes, staff, members and general procedures to be open, welcoming and encouraging. I recognise the work that has been done, and which continues to be done, to eradicate all forms of prejudice, including sexism and gender bias.

I want to highlight a couple of the points from the report that particularly stood out to me. I have therefore selected some facts that I believe that we should address collectively.

The report highlights that women members are less likely to intervene and to have their interventions taken. It states that, of the 293 interventions made during the period observed, 110 were made by women, which equates to almost 38 per cent. The remaining 183 interventions were made by men, which equates to just over 62 per cent. It seems that women are almost half as likely to make a point in a debate as are our male counterparts. As someone who has not yet fully embraced the intervention process, I note that I literally have to step up and be heard.

How many interventions are taken and by what gender can be changed only if we make more, take more and loudly state our intention to make an intervention—

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Roz McCall: I will take an intervention.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Roz McCall for taking an intervention on that point. Does she feel that the practicalities of how an intervention is achieved are one of the boundaries that stop that and, if there were other methods of drawing speakers' attention to a member's desire to intervene, it might in fact be easier and perhaps, as we heard earlier, make for a happier or kinder environment?

Roz McCall: I am all for a happier and kinder environment and I would agree with that point because, in many cases over the past nine months, I have seen women stand but not speak quite loudly enough to be recognised and sometimes that intervention goes by. I would highlight that point based on what I have observed over the past nine months. I would encourage all female representatives to intervene.

The report also states that men are more likely to have their interventions accepted, with almost 69 per cent of men having their interventions taken, while the rates for women are down at 53 per cent. The stats for women taking interventions are just as discouraging, with women more likely to accept men's interventions, at 72 per cent of the time, than interventions by women, at 52 per cent. It seems that, across the board, women's interventions are taken only half the time.

I will highlight an example of exactly that situation, which happened earlier this week. While listening to the lively and interesting Education, Children and Young People Committee debate on college regionalisation on Tuesday, I noted that there was far more engagement from the male members of the Scottish Parliament present. In the discussion, 18 interventions from male MSPs were taken, which is in stark contrast to the three interventions from the female attendees.

It seemed to me that my talented and knowledgeable female colleagues took a while to find the points that they wanted to come in on. The early part of the debate, therefore, was dominated by men. I certainly would not presume to know why that was the case, but the pattern of later interventions from female MSPs has been something that I have observed and, unfortunately, that means that we are run out by the clock, given the timed debate structure that is operated in the Scottish Parliament.

I mentioned in my opening remarks that it is important to recognise what we are actually looking at so that we can properly make moves to change it. In the hope of being constructive, I urge all members, including myself, to recognise the beauty of thorough and rigorous debate, which is an integral part of what we are here to do, to embrace interventions in a timely and early manner and, at the very least, to be open to raising the statistics of female participation.

The report also points out that women MSPs still encounter sexism. It accepts that there have been positive shifts in attitudes towards women in politics and I gratefully welcome the fact that we have progressed down a long road when it comes to public opinion. However, it is concerning—if unsurprising—that the report finds that women MSPs still encounter sexism with regard to what is said to them and how they are perceived.

Social media is one of the largest platforms for gender bias. I know a male member of staff who has worked for two MSPs in the capacity of augmenting their social media accounts. One of the MSPs was male and one of the MSPs was female. They both had the same member of staff, with the same tone of post and the same type of content but, according to this gentleman, the replies and responses to the female MSP were more aggressive, more personal and more disparaging—a reason, if one were needed, that we have to do more.

It is up to each and every one of us in the chamber to be accountable, responsible and ready to step in where necessary to ensure that abuse online, of any kind, is called out, reported and acted on. We must unite to say that it is totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Roz McCall: I will.

Keith Brown: I thank the member for taking the intervention. Would the member support the Parliament, through its Presiding Officers and its structures, becoming more involved in monitoring that kind of behaviour towards MSPs where they can? I know that that has been talked about

across different parties. Is that something that the member would support or is that going too far?

Roz McCall: I am all for more information. Certainly, monitoring will allow us to see where the issues are and how things are proceeding, so I would certainly be interested in seeing a little bit more about that.

I know that, if we are united in our objective, we can carry on with the good work of the gender-sensitive audit, not only in the Parliament but, I hope, progressing that to an inclusive Scotland.

16:10

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank all those who were involved in the gender-sensitive audit and I call out, in an entirely biased way, the Presiding Officer for instigating it. Gender-sensitive audits have been done in other Parliaments and have had some levels of success. Anything that we can do to move forward society, our smaller communities and, indeed, our workplaces, so that we can have a better gender balance and better environments in which people can work, debate and participate must be welcomed. I thank everyone who was involved, including the experts, professionals and clerks who gave their wisdom and experience in crafting the audit.

I will start with something that has been addressed by a number of people in the Parliament. It is harsh, but I think that we have to address the code of conduct and the way that members who sit in this chamber—those who put MSP after their names—conduct themselves. It is clear in our rules, which are not rules that have been imposed on us by those outside, but rules that we have accepted ourselves, that we must act “with courtesy and respect” towards each other, our staff and staff in the Parliament. There is broader guidance about how we should treat people who are outside the chamber—in the main, that is the people of Scotland, who make up our constituents, but it includes others—with courtesy and respect. There is no hidden gender bias in that, although I feel that some male colleagues—and me—struggle with our approach towards female colleagues. However, if we take on the code of conduct on every occasion, before we stand up to intervene, chunter from a sedentary position or say something in a speech—perhaps even before we press send on that tweet from a Twitter account—we might live in a kinder and better environment. Rightly, it is for the people of Scotland to look towards us and the choices that we make in our behaviour and, indeed, to hold us to account on it, even when we fail to see those standards in others outside the Parliament.

I will turn to the gender-sensitive audit. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, which I have the privilege to convene, will look at a number of recommendations. To echo some of the asks that have been made in earlier speeches, I would like to hear the chamber’s thoughts on some of those recommendations, because I think that they would be particularly important.

We have already heard discussions about the value of data. I echo Michelle Thomson’s call for more data: if we are not collecting it, we cannot analyse it and we cannot be held to account. One of the recommendations is that data is collected in a more in-depth and logical fashion so that we can measure whether we have any success with the proposals that we try. That relates particularly to committee memberships and convenerships, which I will deal with, and party spokespeople and cross-party groups. That is important. I am probably pushing at an open door in seeking the chamber’s approval to collect that data, so let me try something that might separate us slightly, although I hope in a kind and generous way.

Recommendation 18 of the audit requests that the committee:

“propose amendments to Standing Orders to specify there should be a minimum of 40% women, for the SPCB, the Parliamentary Bureau and Committee Convenerships.”

I will play devil’s advocate. One of the questions that arises is how we will measure that 40 per cent. We have already heard about the challenges that political parties have when they feel that they are being forced by people outside of them to either fill a space, appoint someone to fill a gap or put a woman on a committee because there is not one on it, whether she has any interest in it or not. In calculating that 40 per cent, what should we be looking at the make-up of political parties, the chamber—

Alexander Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Martin Whitfield: I am more than happy to.

Alexander Stewart: I embrace what Martin Whitfield is saying. Although we may have an aspiration to achieve the 40 per cent target, it is difficult and it will be up to individual parties and their management to make sure that things happen. There has sometimes been a reluctance for that to happen. If we are to truly embrace that recommendation, there needs to be greater demarcation when it comes to parties’ selection proposals.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful to Alexander Stewart for that, as for so many of his interventions and his wisdom.

It boils down to individuals. When individuals come together in different groups, they need to carry forward that responsibility to seek a massive improvement in the gender balance—ideally parity—because decisions in committee and in the chamber are better made when they are made by members who reflect the people whom those decisions will affect.

There is a question about how we calculate that 40 per cent or how we identify the pool from which that 40 per cent will be drawn. I am more than happy to take comments now, but I invite members to give wider consideration to that, because it is a very tricky problem that sometimes crosses individual political beliefs. The chamber as a whole is responsible for the make-up of the committees and the committee convenerships, but where that gift lies rests elsewhere. There could be a call for elected convenerships, for example, whereby members would have a choice in a gender-balanced ballot.

Monica Lennon: It is good to hear Martin Whitfield's reflections as a convener of a committee of this Parliament. My colleague Alexander Stewart will know that I am a regular attendee at the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee—we like long titles. I mean no disrespect to the current membership of that committee, but it has 100 per cent white male representation. When we do our work as parliamentarians, we also present representation to the public, so surely it cannot be right that, when the public attend the committee to hear consideration of their petitions, they do not always see or hear themselves reflected. Therefore, we must ask ourselves whose voices are missing.

I understand some of the challenges that Martin Whitfield is hinting at, but it cannot be acceptable that we have committees with zero women on them and zero representation of more than half the population.

Martin Whitfield: I am incredibly grateful for that intervention, as I am for a number of discussions that I have had with Monica Lennon on that issue and related matters.

The issue is one that we have to deal with in this session of Parliament. We must show that we have a way forward for the remainder of this session and, more importantly, for the Parliament in the future. We might try something that does not work, which the collection of data allows us to revisit. We must have the bravery to do that. I agree that it is absolutely unacceptable for us to do nothing.

I recognise that time is short.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We can be generous.

Martin Whitfield: That is the kindest offer, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The other element that I would like to talk about is some successes that we have had. There is a recommendation in the report on the audit about having a gender balance across the Presiding Officer and the Deputy Presiding Officers. It is a fact that we have achieved that in every session of the Scottish Parliament. Given that history of always having achieved that balance and recognising the importance of that, I would like members to consider whether it should be set in stone that we continue that practice, or whether we have confidence that those who come after us will continue with a practice that has become established not because of an audit or because there has been a clamour for it, but because it is the right thing to do.

Keith Brown: Laudable though I think what Martin Whitfield proposes is—I think that we should aim for that—bringing it about depends on and is interlinked with the level of female representation that each of the parties achieves. We must drive up the total level of female representation in the chamber. If we do not achieve more balance in that way, we will be asking a smaller group of women to do more and more work. I simply wanted to point out that those two things are related.

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely—that is one of the challenges that we have in these discussions, and my colleague Monica Lennon pointed to that. We can always create a situation where doing something becomes difficult, but it is perhaps in addressing those difficult decisions that we can make the greatest advances. Irrespective of the party make-up in the Scottish Parliament and irrespective of the representation of independent members, we have managed to achieve that balance over time.

With regard to proxy voting, I confirm that the current system will be reviewed by the end of this year but, on the surface, it appears to work very successfully. We will be writing to members for their views on their experiences of using the system as casters and those who have had proxy votes cast on their behalf. It is an important step forward that any member—irrespective of gender—can, on occasion, step away because of their responsibilities to their constituency and note that that need will still be met.

Because it is the most challenging, I have left to the end my question in relation to recommendation 26, which is about who should look at the behaviour of MSPs when there is bullying and harassment. Other places have given that out to independent assessors, because of the very personal nature of victims' allegations. Those other places have deemed it inappropriate that

people should judge themselves in such cases. I am not expecting an answer to that this afternoon, but if people have views on it, I am happy to purchase a tea or coffee and sit and chat about it.

I am very grateful for the time that I have been given, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Emma Harper will be the last speaker in the open debate.

16:21

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome today's debate on the Scottish Parliament's gender-sensitive audit and the work of the Presiding Officer and the Parliament officials who have been involved in the process. They should be commended for producing the audit and for the huge amount of background work that has gone into it. I also thank all members who are involved in the gender-sensitive Parliament advisory group for their input and experience.

I am particularly interested in the audit, as I am the only female member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee at this time. It has been interesting to look at its findings. For me, achieving a gender-sensitive Parliament is more about making sure that there is gender sensitivity than it is about ensuring that there is equality.

As the audit states:

"Parliaments are unique institutions. They are both places of democracy and places of work. To deliver the best outcomes for both under-represented groups and for society as a whole, women must be fairly represented, be able to fully participate in parliament, and be centrally involved in decision-making".

It continues:

"Scotland has a record that bears international comparison: arguments for equal representation were central to wider debates over devolution and embedded into institutional 'blueprints' for the new Scottish Parliament".

That included policies to ensure "family friendliness". I also like the use of the phrase "life friendly" in the audit. This afternoon, we have already made progress: we have moved forward with our use of language to be more inclusive and to support an approach that is not just family friendly but life friendly.

We need to make sure that we enshrine a commitment to equal opportunities and to mainstream equality, including gender equality, across all areas of work. Of the 129 MSPs who were elected to the Parliament for the first time in 1999, 48 were women, which equated to 37 per cent, but, as Rhoda Grant rightly said, women now represent 45 per cent of Scotland's 129 MSPs.

As we started the debate, I was checking the balance of our members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. Of the members who chose to say how they wanted to be identified, 54.89 per cent said that they were female versus 42.86 per cent who said that they were male. There are other interesting MSYP stats, such as LGBT+ and carer stats. We need to be cognisant of those figures for our MSYPs—both male and female—and we need to make sure that we support them in their future progress and journey in this political environment that we aim to make more gender sensitive.

Progress is being made, but the record number of women winning seats in this parliamentary session did not happen by accident or chance. During the 2021 campaign, growing pressure on political parties led to many of them introducing a range of measures to increase women's participation in parliamentary democracy. As members know, those measures included all-women shortlists for constituency election contests and zipped lists for regional list elections, in which female and male candidates were alternated.

From the 2021 outcome, it seems that those measures have worked. Indeed, as the audit highlights, they have worked in previous elections both in the UK Parliament and in Parliaments around the globe, including in Australia.

I found the findings really interesting, especially as much of the evidence indicates that shortlists in a range of areas such as disability and ethnicity—and, in particular, gender—support people, including many women, to be empowered to consider standing for election.

I am especially interested in recommendations 13 and 14 in the report. Recommendation 14 states that the SPPA Committee should

"consider these statistics (from Recommendation 13) biennially—

so, every other year—

"and develop new rules and/or conventions to rebalance participation, where there is evidence of inequalities of participation."

Roz McCall highlighted that in detail in her contribution, and I thank her for doing so.

As is covered in recommendation 13, we need to look at potentially publishing intersectional data on gender participation in chamber debates; questions by type, including First Minister's questions and statements; and interventions. The reason for doing so is that it could potentially enable us to create new rules and conventions to rebalance participation where there is evidence of inequality—for example, in particular areas such as the economy or science, technology, engineering and mathematics. I know that my colleague Michelle Thomson is vocal on economic

and financial issues; she and I are on the cross-party group on the USA together. That gives us a voice that ensures that we are represented around the globe.

Rather unsurprisingly, the audit highlighted issues to do with social media. I will pick up on that issue, as other members have done. We know that there has been a massive impact from interactions on social media. At the Presiding Officer's meeting that we attended last week, I heard Meghan Gallacher describe what has happened to her—it was absolutely shocking. We have had reports of women parliamentarians around the globe being subjected to horrific abuse on social media, including, sometimes, from other parliamentarians.

Social media can be quite toxic. I would like social media to be a valuable tool that we use to access reports, research and data—I used it during the Covid pandemic to find out so much information about what was happening around the globe. I would rather that social media was a positive thing rather than the toxic influence that it is just now. Indeed, the former First Minister recently said that social media was a significant barrier for women pursuing a political career.

Recommendation 28 in the audit report says:

"The SPCB, working with the Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group, and a group of MSPs from ... under-represented ... groups ... should update"

the Parliament's continuous professional development provisions and potentially extend that work to explore a social media policy.

I am a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, in which the Governments and assemblies of these islands work together. I have written to the BIPA clerks to pursue the question of whether BIPA has done any inquiry work into social media policy. I know that the Welsh Parliament already has a social media policy as part of the standards that it works towards.

I have given a commitment to the convener of the SPPA Committee to share any response that I get from the BIPA clerks, and I will also write to the co-chairs, Karen Bradley MP and Brendan Smith TD, to find out whether they would like to undertake any further inquiry on the matter.

I am sure that my time is a bit out, Presiding Officer—you have been very generous with every member this afternoon. In closing, I simply state that equality for women is at the heart of the Scottish Government's vision for an equal Scotland, and in Parliament we need to see the same approaches to look at achieving gender equality and gender sensitivity in the way that we work.

I look forward to working with colleagues across the chamber to help to make this place kinder. I absolutely agree with Monica Lennon's intervention in that regard, and I look forward to hearing the closing speeches this afternoon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the closing speeches. I call Paul O'Kane. We still have a bit of time in hand, Mr O'Kane, should you wish to add to your planned contribution.

16:29

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am very grateful, Presiding Officer, as I am sure every member is, for the opportunity to take some time this afternoon to reflect on and listen to colleagues' contributions, and to have a little bit of extra space in which to do so.

This has been a very consensual and helpful debate. There have been very considered contributions from across the chamber about the importance of the work of the gender-sensitive audit, and the importance of this conversation not just happening at a set point in time but becoming something that we move forward with together. We heard a lot of consensus on that.

The concept of a gender-sensitive Parliament is an international democratic standard. It is very welcome that our Presiding Officer commissioned the audit and took a lead in putting her own stamp on the assessment of the gender sensitivity of the Scottish Parliament in all our processes and work. Most fundamentally, as we have heard reflected in the debate and as I have just alluded to, the audit has to be more than a tick-box exercise or a moment in time; it has to provide tangible outcomes and an on-going conversation that we can all engage in, recognising that we all have a role to play in bringing some of these ideas into reality and improving our Parliament more generally.

The response to the audit's publication cannot be focused just on the words; it also has to be about measurable actions. Already this afternoon we have had quite a good conversation about what could work and where we probably need to do a bit more to explore how it would work.

Broadly, on behalf of Labour members, I reiterate our support for the work of the gender-sensitive audit and congratulate and thank those who were involved, from across the parties, in the working group. We want to see continued engagement in that space.

As we have all heard this afternoon, it is critical that, in their composition, our democratic institutions look and sound like the people of Scotland. We have to reflect ourselves. From the beginning of our discussion, many colleagues

touched on the idea that political parties can do some of this work in the first place by making sure that they increase the number of women who stand for election and who are elected to this place, in order to ensure that we have a Parliament that reflects our population and our communities. Then, because we will have more women MSPs, as Rhoda Grant rightly said, we will not have to make a few women work harder. We need to increase how many women we have in Parliament.

I am very proud that the Scottish Labour Party and the UK Labour Party led the way, even when this was not popular, on mechanisms such as all-women shortlists, twinning arrangements and zipping. We were very proud of that, but I absolutely hear my female colleagues who were in politics at that time when they talk about the challenges to those moves from men who said that it was grossly unfair that we should do those things.

Monica Lennon: Many of us might be following on Twitter the journalist Michael Crick, who spends a lot of time following the parliamentary selections of various political parties. He has noticed the trend in twinning selections that, in most instances, men are getting more votes than women. Therefore, the male candidate gets to pick the seat, which is often the more winnable one. I wonder whether my colleague has any observations on what can be done about that.

Paul O’Kane: I thank Monica Lennon for that observation, and, in true Labour Party style, we could begin to have an internal discussion between us about the mechanisms that are used in the selection processes.

I think that Monica Lennon’s broad point is correct. The challenge for the Labour Party is that, now that the parliamentary Labour Party in the UK Parliament is 50 per cent women, all-women shortlists cannot be used, so it is looking at different mechanisms that work. We need to make sure that we do not think that that is the only system that can work. We need to look around the world and learn from other political parties that use different systems and try to find the systems that give us broad scope and allow us to think about what will we do.

Bob Doris: I have a brief intervention. I would not dream of commenting on Labour Party selection procedures and equalities mechanisms. More generally in politics, the challenge for political parties with regard to equality is getting more women and people with other characteristics to become active in parties in the first place. There are some wonderful trailblazers out there, but we need more people who have joined political parties to remove the barriers to being active in the first place.

Paul O’Kane: Bob Doris makes a very good point. It is about encouraging more diversity and activism at the grass-roots level.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will just finish this point and then give way.

We can all be guilty in politics of getting caught up in running from one campaign to the next. We think about what needs to be done and not about how sensitive we are to the barriers that exist for a lot of people, even in going to chap at a door or to deliver a leaflet, for example. We need to think about that, and about how toxic our political campaigns and election time can be. We have heard a lot about the toxicity that often exists in the chamber. That is absolutely true, too, outside the chamber and on social media.

Meghan Gallacher: I am sure that all political parties have a female organisation in them to nurture, help and support women. We have Women2Win, and I am sure that other political parties have similar organisations. Do they need to be more robust with the political parties to try to encourage more women to stand for election? Should we all, as elected members, be pushing for that in our respective parties?

Paul O’Kane: I certainly think that we need to acknowledge that. As I said at the outset, we all have a role to play in encouraging more women and working with our organisations and our party structures in order to make that a reality. Perhaps we should not be afraid to talk to one another about those things and about what happens in other parties.

I am conscious that I have been given a generous allowance of time, but I do not want to stray into going over the score slightly.

In the past few days, I have hosted a number of politicians from Northern Ireland who were involved in the Good Friday agreement and the peace process. Professor Monica McWilliams was one of those people. On Tuesday night, she spoke very passionately in the Parliament about the role of women in that peace process and the barriers that existed to her even being at the table—or to women even being at the table—and the tropes that we heard 25 years ago about going back and being a housewife and that the housewives of Ulster should go back to the kitchen.

We heard such things in the creation of the Scottish Parliament. We are about to mark the 25th anniversary of this institution. We have to reflect on how we will continue to challenge some of the attitudes that persist. We can learn a lot from other people internationally about what to do. We could learn a lot from Monica McWilliams about how to take out toxicity and find common

ground and purpose, and to do that in a gender-sensitive way that respects the fact that we need to have everyone at the table.

We had a good conversation in the debate about our sitting times and the time of decision time—I do not want to fall foul by running over into decision time, which we might have at 5 o'clock today. New Zealand and other countries around the world have structures that we could look at. The Presiding Officer and I have spoken about that in the past. There is a lot of potential in that work.

To conclude, colleagues often hear me say this, but this is not a full stop in the discussion; it is a comma. It is about us taking a pause in the debate to begin to think about some of those ideas and initiatives. We must continue those discussions and move them forward in our various roles, and ensure that we have a gender-sensitive Parliament that is ready for the next 25 years and beyond and that encourages more women—particularly more young women—to come in and feel safe in this space and contribute to our important democratic life.

16:38

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to sum up on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives in this debate. The debate has been a really good one, with lots of very interesting comments by members across the chamber. Parliament is at its best when we discuss such issues. We can all become enthusiastic, and we wish to see things improve and get better. I pay tribute to, and commend and congratulate, all those who were involved in the audit.

The Scottish Parliament has always striven to be an institution that is open, welcoming and inclusive. Indeed, when it was created back in 1999, the level of female representation was one of the things that were praised most. Although female representation has continued to improve in the years following that, the gender-sensitive audit has been an opportunity for us to take stock of the progress that we have made, and to identify potential areas for further improvement.

A growing number of countries around the world are actively engaging with the issue of gender equality, and they wish to see their political systems embrace that. We want to see that here, too. Organisations worldwide, such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, to name a few, are attempting to ensure that gender-sensitive Parliaments exist across the globe.

Given that it is the right time and the right place for us to do that work, I commend and

congratulate all those who have talked about inclusiveness and have given instruction to try to make things happen. We have come a long way from where we were; we still have a journey to make, but we are all trying to do so. Each party has made clear that they want to see progress and improvement; we all have that work on our agendas. Some have come later to it—my party probably has—but Meghan Gallacher and Roz McCall have indicated that we as a party have embraced the Women2Win organisation, which has done a lot of work and is trying to identify how we could get more women actively involved in standing for Parliament and council, and at all levels in our party.

We talked about councils earlier. That was where I first became involved in politics, and I think that my colleagues Meghan and Roz did the same. We need to encourage more women to get in at council level, because it is a stepping stone to somewhere such as here, Westminster or other Parliaments. A blockage still exists there because the lifestyle that a councillor needs to live can be very demanding with regards to timetable, salary and so on.

Paul O'Kane: The member makes a valid point. I, like him and other members, served as a local authority councillor. Councils can have real challenges, from timings of meetings and accessibility to, again, appropriate times for childcare. Does the member agree that it is shocking that, until recently, we still had councils that had no female councillors at all?

Alexander Stewart: I agree. It is a disaster, and it is shocking that we have council chambers that do not have any female representation. The job itself needs to change and can no longer be a role for someone who has another occupation or for a retired individual—we have to encourage younger people. I had 18 years as a councillor and I know the challenges of trying to balance the lifestyle, which can be a real barrier for younger people. Those points are vital.

Our current pilot of proxy voting is a really good example of what we are trying to do to accommodate people and to be more equal in this place. It is clear that there is still work to do when it comes to gender equality. There are 34 separate recommendations in the report, some of which will be easier to achieve than others. Each one has a role to play, however, and it is particularly important that we look at recommendations that apply to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, of which I am a member.

We have already discussed single-sex committees. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee is one, but I need to mention to Monica Lennon, who observed that it was all

male and all white, that we have Foyso Choudhury in the group, too, so we have some representation of an ethnic minority.

Monica Lennon: I was going to clarify my remarks in closing, as I will be speaking shortly. There had, indeed, been a recent change, and Alexander Stewart has clarified my earlier point.

Alexander Stewart: I am happy to make that clarification and to support Monica Lennon on that point.

Given the gender balance of the current Parliament and Scottish Government, it could prove difficult to implement some of the recommendations in this parliamentary session, although there is of course an intention to continue to develop recommendations for future parliamentary sessions.

Recommendation 20 proposes that a party's membership of a committee "must be mixed" when it appoints more than one member. Although that recommendation will ensure more balanced committees in the future, it is important that such a rule does not prevent party groups from appointing the members whom they feel are best suited to that committee, because that is vital in itself.

I would like to mention one or two of the many contributions that have been made. Karen Adam spoke about the frustration and the rules as well as the participation and respect that are required. That is all vitally important. As Karen Adam and many others talked about, we cannot get away from the abuse that women receive, which is absolutely appalling.

The minister talked about accessibility and being family friendly and accessible to individuals, supporting people and ensuring that we have that balance. There is much more work to do on that.

My colleague Meghan Gallacher talked about her journey as a young woman coming into the political fray and how difficult it can be to deal with some of the challenges. Once again, the issues of social media and abuse featured heavily in Meghan's interventions and involvement in the debate. It is a real shame that young women come here and are subjected to abuse from individuals within and outwith this organisation. That must be called out at every opportunity, and we must stamp it out as much as we can.

Rhoda Grant talked about the flexibility of what happened during Covid and the ideas that we could develop. That is vital. We must learn from the experiences that we have had.

Alex Cole-Hamilton talked about the level of representation, practices and being life friendly, what we can do with the crèche and other facilities. Those are all vital issues, too.

My colleague Roz McCall is a new member. In her nine months of being a member, she has experienced and seen things and looked with fresh eyes at this environment. She has identified areas of concern and areas that she would like to see changed.

There is also the whole issue of interventions and how we play within this room. How we are perceived in this chamber is vitally important with regard to how we move forward.

In conclusion, it is clear that all parties in the Parliament are united in their aim to achieve a Parliament that is truly gender neutral. As such, the debate has shown that we have real goals and ambitions that we want to achieve.

As a member of the SPPA Committee, I look forward to the role that I will play in the process to ensure that the workings of this chamber and Parliament can remove many of the barriers that we know still remain. As was said earlier, we need a kinder and happier environment because, in that way, we will encourage and we will also inspire, which is vitally important.

The Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick. Minister, you have about six minutes.

16:47

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I am glad that we have had a consensual debate, and I hope that we can look back on this session of Parliament as an important mark in our journey towards being a life-friendly place.

Change is clearly necessary, and it is possible, too. It is important to recognise that we are not starting from nothing: we have made progress and we are building on good work and knowledge. I have been glad to hear intersectionality coming through as a clear theme today. The report contains an important reflection that it was not until 2021 that any women of colour were elected to Holyrood and that we had our first permanent wheelchair user. Women who are disabled, LGBTQ, mothers, carers or young and women of colour or who are otherwise subject to racism and prejudice face additional barriers, and we need to consider removing all of them.

I was glad to hear Emma Harper mention mainstreaming, which is an important part of Government work in my portfolio. I agree that it is vital if we are going to succeed in being inclusive. Equality has to be a fact and a habit, not something that those who most need it have to spend their valuable time forcing in at every stage.

It will benefit everyone to make the Parliament accessible, to make it possible for carers to come here and to make it sensitive to equalities issues.

Even if you do not need it yourself, nobody is going to complain about it being easy to get around the building or knowing what time they will be available after voting for the day.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Emma Roddick for giving way on that point. I want to hark back to a comment that Karen Adam made about the role of hybrid working in making this place more accessible. I think that—I am phrasing this carefully—any political party that tries to find anything in the rules that says that you can or cannot use hybrid working is looking in vain. I think that the minister has more power to use it, when it is needed, than perhaps she feels that she has. The minister should look to the standing orders and the guidance on when she can attend remotely.

Emma Roddick: I congratulate Martin Whitfield on his new role as Scottish National Party whip. He knows that I have enjoyed using the hybrid system—it worked very well for me in the early days. He will remember me giving evidence and saying that it is far more difficult for ministers to make use of it due to criticism about not being in the building, and here I am. It might be a while before members see me on a screen again.

Many members have also talked about online abuse, which reflects the impact that the extensive abuse that women here are receiving online is having on our health and our confidence. There is nothing that we can do to avoid it. We will get, “Why has she got time to put make-up on?” or “Could she not be bothered to put make-up on?” We get, “Those clothes look cheap,” or, “Oh, I bet that dress was expensive.” We get, “She doesn’t speak enough,” or, “She’s too loud.” Folk will shout for us to be normal, relatable human beings and then tear us down for everything that makes us just that.

That puts people off. We have no way of counting the women who did not stand because of the environment and danger that they would be putting themselves in. However, we know that they exist. I want more Karen Adams in Parliament, and I want more Monica Lennons, Emma Harpers and Pam Duncan-Glancys—women representing women from all walks of life and different political beliefs. However, I get why many people look at this place and go, “Absolutely not.”

It is really hard to be something other than a white middle-aged man in politics. When I stood for the Highland Council in 2019, the campaign had yellow posters up that said “Roddick”. I gave an interview and afterwards, the interviewer said to me, “Do you know him?” I said, “Sorry, who?” and he goes, “Roddick.” Also during that campaign, I was bundling leaflets on my own when an activist came in. I was glad of the help, so I asked him to keep bundling them into 50s

while I went to print something. I turned around to see him counting the ones that I had already counted. I said, “No, no, those are in bundles already; it’s these ones that you need to count”. He said, “No, I know, but I need to check that you’ve done it right first.”

I was coming in to work the other day and my private office asked someone to open a locked door. They said, “I’m with the minister,” and I could see him look at me and look around us both, looking for this minister that he was supposed to let in. I say this because impostor syndrome is a very real issue that many of us here suffer from, and things like that do not help the feeling that we do not belong. I know that it will take time for people to recognise that a politician can and should look like anyone, because anyone can and should be able to be a politician. In the meantime, I beg colleagues to make a concerted effort not to contribute to it.

We have heard a lot today, and I know that the men who are here believe in advancing gender equality at work. I commend Bob Doris, Alexander Stewart, Martin Whitfield and Paul O’Kane for their tone and their considered contributions, all with the required self-awareness that they are speaking in this debate as men. I trust the passion for the issue that the men who have spoken today have shown, and that they want to do their bit, but I am going to have to tell them a tough thing: we are not doing enough. Women—accomplished, confident, strong women—in this place are having a hell of a time, from being belittled 100 times a day all the way to sexual harassment and assault. That is going on in our workplace. It could be worse, but it could be a lot better too.

Men have a huge part to play, so I ask them to please call it out; stop speaking over us in committees, in the chamber or in meetings; stop making jokes about what we are wearing or using ableist and sexist language to put us down; and stop inviting only men to events, mentioning only their male colleagues when they make speeches, or standing in front of me and Meghan Gallacher at photo calls. I ask men to notice when it is happening around them and to support us. I say to them: whoever you are, you can do more. Allyship is vital.

I will end by saying that having a female Presiding Officer is, in itself, a good thing. Presiding Officer, you might have missed Paul O’Kane giving you a compliment earlier on, but it is so important that the Presiding Officer this session has decided to prioritise auditing the Parliament in this way, to put that on the agenda and make lasting change for women.

The vision that we have discussed today is ambitious, but I look forward to seeing the Scottish

Parliament reformed for the better, to better serve and reflect the public.

The Presiding Officer: I call Monica Lennon to wind up the debate on behalf of the board.

16:54

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege to be speaking at the end of today's debate, which has been very good. I think that it shows the value of listening to colleagues and taking interventions, so hopefully we will see more of that.

It was a privilege to represent my party, Scottish Labour, on the audit board; I echo the comments that were made by my colleague Karen Adam in opening the debate by thanking all our colleagues, the participants and experts and, importantly, Parliament staff.

I am going to be a big sook now and again say a big thank you to you, Presiding Officer, for your leadership and for making this possible. You have been very clear that this is not a report that will just sit on a shelf, but is a catalyst for change and that we are on a journey. I have high hopes and expectations because, for all our differences, today has shown that Parliament is united and that we want to get this right and to do better.

That is not because we are being trailblazers; it is the norm. We should be looking beyond our borders and beyond Scotland at international good practice and at what it means to be a gender-sensitive Parliament and a gender-sensitive society. That is absolutely at the heart of what I believe is our shared vision for a fairer, more equal, healthier and happier Scotland.

We have heard a number of important contributions today. Karen Adam set the scene by setting out our collective efforts to construct a gender-sensitive Parliament. It is really important that the minister, Emma Roddick, spoke about the lessons for Government because, although the report is about Parliament, it is important to have support and buy-in from Government and from all political parties, as we have heard today.

We need to make some big changes, but Meghan Gallacher very helpfully pointed out that there are also some small things that we can consider. She made a point about the race to get out of the chamber and down the garden lobby stairs when we gather for the weekly photo call to show the people of Scotland that we support important causes and issues. We must also think about how easy it is to get around Parliament. What happens when a person uses a wheelchair or has mobility issues? We must think about that, because the small things matter. I am grateful to Meghan Gallacher for making that point.

Many colleagues from across the chamber reinforced the point about childcare. I am looking at Bob Doris, who made such points really well, as did others.

Maggie Chapman's passion will not have been comfortable for everyone to hear, but we must all reflect on our words, language and actions. She was right to talk about the deep-rooted issues in our society that colour what happens in the chamber. We must all look closely at that.

More practically, we have heard a lot about the value of data, particularly from an intersectional perspective. I again credit the Presiding Officer for asking colleagues in Parliament to count and measure who speaks, whose voices are heard and who takes up space in our Parliament.

Before I came into the chamber today, I attended an event that was hosted and chaired by Rona Mackay. Some journalists were there to talk about the role of the media in ending male violence against women and girls, and they shared quite a staggering statistic, which is that the vast majority of commentary pieces in our print media—more than 68 per cent—are written by white men. We, and particularly the men, have to ask whether we are taking up space. We must all ask ourselves, "Am I a gatekeeper? Am I taking up space? Am I hoarding power, or am I empowering others?"

We see all-male panels and all-male committees too often. Roz McCall made really important points. It was good to hear her reflections as someone who came into Parliament after the 2021 election. Why are men more likely to make and take interventions and more likely to refer to their friends? This is not a boys' club: this is the Parliament of Scotland and we are here to represent the people of Scotland. We must look at that. I know that women will not make interventions if time and again their interventions have not been taken. None of us wants to come here and look like a fool or like we are not as credible as other colleagues.

The report speaks for itself and the recommendations should be accepted in full. They should be welcomed by every member of this Parliament. However, it is not just about how we speak to one another in Parliament or who takes seats where—it is also about what happens long before we get here, which is why I made my interventions about the gatekeepers that exist in all political parties. No political party can stand up and boast and claim that it is getting everything right. We have heard some very visible and obvious examples of misogyny and sexism, but sometimes it is so subtle. Sometimes, there are microaggressions that make people think that they are losing their minds, and when they call them out, people do not believe them.

I am really grateful to all the women in this Parliament. It might not be seen by our colleagues, but we hold one other up, regardless of our party politics or our affiliations. This can be a tough environment; it can be brutal and our politics and our Parliament do not always show the country at its best. As others have said today, we can and must do better. I encourage everyone to get behind the report and all the recommendations, and to be part of the change.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on the Scottish Parliament's gender-sensitive audit. It is now time to move on to the next item of business.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

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