



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 12 September 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Tuesday 12 September 2023

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Police Scotland (Recorded Police Warnings).....	3
Covid-19 (New Variants)	5
Chinese State Surveillance	8
DRUG DEATHS	11
<i>Statement—[Elena Whitham].</i>	
The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy (Elena Whitham)	11
FOOD AND DRINK SECTOR	25
<i>Motion moved—[Mairi Gougeon].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Rachael Hamilton].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Rhoda Grant].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon).....	25
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)	30
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	34
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	37
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	39
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	42
Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)	44
Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab).....	46
Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	48
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green).....	50
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	52
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	55
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab).....	57
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP).....	59
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab).....	62
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	64
Mairi Gougeon	67
BUSINESS MOTION	72
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	73
CHILD POVERTY	80
<i>Motion debated—[Bob Doris].</i>	
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)	80
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	83
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	85
Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP).....	88
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	89
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	91
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	93
Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab).....	95
The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick).....	96

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 12 September 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Barry Hughes, minister, St Mark's parish church, Raploch in Stirling.

The Rev Barry Hughes (St Mark's Parish Church, Stirling): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Later today, I will head off to Loch Venachar, just outside Callander, where I will join the Raploch primary school primary 7 class for the rest of this week for their outdoor residential week. It is one of the greatest privileges of being parish minister in the Raploch that I am able to work with the local schools—the teachers, the staff and, most of all, the children themselves. I know that, during this coming week, we will see the children grow in confidence. They will learn new skills. They will face challenges that will be new to them and they will emerge from this week stronger as individuals and as a class.

We adults in Scotland could do well to learn from our children. Children are not encumbered by the things that can often hold us back as adults. Children always embrace new opportunities with excitement and enthusiasm, whereas our approach as adults can sometimes be tainted with cynicism.

Jesus Christ knew that better than anyone. That is why he said in Mark's gospel:

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

He went on to add that all of us need to become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Within our community of Raploch, children are offered many wonderful opportunities, not just by local schools but by organisations such as the scouts and the big noise orchestra, with which many of you will be familiar. I am also all too aware that there are too many children, not just in Raploch but across Scotland, whose opportunities can be limited by social and other factors. We owe it to all the children of Scotland, whatever their background, to ensure equality of opportunity for them all.

During the summer, I was privileged to attend the world scout jamboree in South Korea along with 35 scouts from central Scotland—we were known as the kilted kelpies—and 45,000 other

scouts from around the world. It is fair to say that, as you may have seen on the news during July and August, we faced a few wee challenges while we were in Korea, but we were so proud of all the young people who attended from Scotland for the resilience, adaptability and positivity that they showed throughout those challenges and for their attitude, which was always a can-do one.

Presiding Officer, as I pray this week for God's blessing on you and all in this place, I do so remembering the words of Jesus Christ:

"When you welcome children in my name, you welcome me also".

Thank you.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the next item of business, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Bjørt Samuelsen, the speaker of the Faroese Parliament. *[Applause.]*

Topical Question Time

Police Scotland (Recorded Police Warnings)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that Police Scotland has issued more than 100,000 recorded police warnings over the past five years. (S6T-01529)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The use of recorded police warnings is an established part of the Scottish justice system. The purpose of such warnings is to provide police officers with a speedy, effective and proportionate means of dealing with certain less serious offending behaviour. The current system was introduced in 2016, replacing the previous system of formal adult warnings. In England and Wales, there is a long-established system of simple cautions, which is broadly similar.

The Lord Advocate issues guidance to Police Scotland on its operation of the scheme. Decisions about when to issue recorded police warnings are an independent operational matter for Police Scotland.

Russell Findlay: In 2016, the Scottish National Party Government said that recorded police warnings would be used only for “very minor offences”. Police Scotland said that they would

“not be used for any offence of violence.”

We now discover that they have been used for offences involving violence, fraud, housebreaking, theft and fire raising, and—most shocking of all—in response to almost 50 sex crimes.

Does the cabinet secretary really think that those crimes are minor? Will she explain why the public was misled?

Angela Constance: I challenge Mr Findlay on his narrative, which does not always stand up to scrutiny or address the substance of the matter at hand.

It is important to note that the operational guidelines to which Police Scotland operates are publicly available, and they are clear about the types and severity of offences for which a recorded police warning is not appropriate. That information is publicly available.

As, I am sure, Mr Findlay is well aware, under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012, Scottish ministers are unable to investigate alleged crime, nor do we have the power to instruct the police to investigate alleged criminal activity. That is an important part of our system with regard to the separation of powers, and to keep our policing free from political interference. I

support that, and I am sure that Mr Findlay does, too.

If individuals are unhappy with the outcome of any case, they can raise that directly with Police Scotland. If they are unsatisfied—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: —with the response from Police Scotland, they can go to the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner for Scotland.

Russell Findlay: There is a fundamental lack of transparency about exactly how or why recorded police warnings are being used, which risks creating a parallel system of secret justice.

New statistics show that more than 7,500 shoplifters were issued with such warnings instead of being prosecuted. Scottish retailers are in despair. They tell me that there are no consequences for organised gangs that terrorise staff and prey on shops that serve our communities.

Why has the SNP Government, by stealth, effectively decriminalised shoplifting?

Angela Constance: Again, Mr Findlay’s narrative does not stand up to the facts. As I indicated in my earlier response, the operational guidance to which Police Scotland works, which is publicly available—there is nothing hidden about it—states clearly that “persistent or alarming conduct” should not be considered for a recorded police warning, and neither should major disturbances or offences in which there are repeat victims.

As I stated clearly, the issuing of a recorded police warning is a matter for individual police officers in order to allow them to make greater use of discretion once they have fully assessed each individual incident.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Chief Superintendent Gordon McCreadie has said that the recorded police warning

“allows officers, in appropriate circumstances and on a case by case basis, to use their discretion to deal with offences on the spot.”

Can the cabinet secretary outline what the impact would be if we did not have a system with the option of a recorded police warning for minor offences?

Angela Constance: The benefit of having such a system is to ensure that the court system can focus on cases that need to be prosecuted. The delivery of quicker justice is also important, and

the option helps to free up officer time to focus on more serious offences.

A recorded police warning is also a proportionate response for someone who has committed an offence that is considered less serious, once the facts of the circumstance have been investigated. It also avoids the potential harm that might arise from someone receiving a criminal conviction for the first time. Clearly, prosecution in court is needed in many cases, but the use of recorded police warnings, where the police use their judgment and knowledge in assessing how best to deal with an offence, is a sensible way to help to develop justice.

Covid-19 (New Variants)

2. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to keep people safe, in light of reported concerns about the spread of new variants of Covid-19. (S6T-01524)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): The increases in Covid activity in Scotland appear to be driven by the usual mix of waning immunity and the circulation of variants of omicron. The risks continue to be low, but in response to the identification of changes in one variant—BA.2.86—we have taken the precautionary measure of bringing forward the planned vaccination of people at highest risk. Vaccination remains the best way to protect oneself, and we encourage all people who are eligible to take up their invitation when they are offered it.

The Government will continue to work closely with Public Health Scotland and other partners to monitor, assess and be ready to respond to any new outbreaks of Covid-19.

Jackie Baillie: I think that we agree that vaccination remains an important defence against Covid. Last week, I raised the issue of constituents in Helensburgh not receiving their Covid vaccinations and, this morning, I have received an apology from the cabinet secretary explaining that it was because of human error and that supplies of the vaccine had not been ordered on time. That was in NHS Highland.

I was then contacted by Graham Collie, who lives in NHS Grampian. Graham has cancer, is on chemotherapy and is classed as a vulnerable adult. He was told that the

“new version of the vaccine”

was “not available yet” and that, even if it were, he would

“not get an appointment until January.”

Is a new version of the vaccine coming? In any event, why would Graham Collie have to wait until January to be vaccinated, given that he is vulnerable?

Michael Matheson: In relation to the point that Jackie Baillie made on the issues that she raised at First Minister’s question time last week, I wrote to her setting out that an error had been made at a local level in Helensburgh in ordering the vaccine for patients who were due to attend for vaccination. There was no problem with the availability of vaccine; it was human error. Staff then failed to escalate the matter to the local immunisation team, which was therefore not in a position to notify us at a national level. That situation has now been corrected by NHS Highland to ensure that the right arrangements are now in place where the error was made.

In relation to any future vaccines, at the present time—as members would imagine—vaccine manufacturers are tracking new variants to ensure that the vaccines that they have available are relevant for dealing with them and any other new variants that develop. That work is on-going. However, the existing vaccines are still viewed as being appropriate to meet our needs.

On the specific case that Jackie Baillie raised, I do not know the circumstances of the individual; however, if she wants to provide the details to me, she can do so.

I want to finish on this important point: there is adequate vaccine available for those who require it. The vaccination programme is being taken forward in the usual systematic manner in which it has always been delivered. The people who are entitled to vaccination will be called forward to take up that offer. Some boards have started earlier than others because they were in a position to start. Others will start slightly later than we had hoped they would be able to start because of changes in the arrangements that we have put in place. We are confident that all boards will be able to do everything that they can to start the programme as early as possible.

Jackie Baillie: I welcome that, because having adequate supplies of the vaccine and vaccinating as quickly as possible are essential. We should consider that, last month, Edinburgh was the worst Covid hotspot in the UK—not least because of the Edinburgh festival, I suspect. The number of hospital beds that were occupied by patients as a result of Covid was 200 in August—and winter has not even started yet. Wards are already closed down because of Covid outbreaks. A care home in Dumbarton had to close down part of its facility and to restrict visiting because of Covid, and other care homes are in a similar position. For the majority of people, vaccination has yet to commence. Experts including Professor Sridhar

and Dr Donald Macaskill are calling on the Scottish Government to extend vaccination to people over the age of 50, and others are calling for the reintroduction of free testing, as well as access to personal protective equipment for health and social care workers. Will the cabinet secretary agree to those measures to protect front-line health and social care workers and vulnerable people, in our continuing fight against Covid?

Michael Matheson: There was a lot in there. It is important that Jackie Baillie does not give the impression that there is significant concern at present, although there is a danger that she might do so. Although there has been an increase in infections, the risk of Covid and the impact on our healthcare system are still low.

It is also important to note that we are looking to implement what was set out by the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation, which is the expert group that set up the vaccination programme. The vaccination programme for those who are most vulnerable to Covid was due to begin in October. As a precautionary measure, following identification of the new variant, we have brought that forward into September.

The advice from our clinical advisers is that the existing approach to testing here, in Scotland, is proportionate. For example, we have retained testing for patients who are leaving hospital and going into a care home or hospice so that they are tested for Covid before being discharged. The proportionate approach that we are taking here, in Scotland, is the right one. I hope that people will be reassured by that, because anything that creates uncertainty or concern about the matter is misplaced.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Given the cabinet secretary's comments and the particular vulnerability of people in hospital, what guidance has the Government issued about the use of high efficiency particulate air filters and air sterilisation, particularly in hospitals, to prevent airborne transmission of Covid-19?

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Government expects all territorial health boards to follow the national guidance within the "Hierarchy of controls" section of the "National Infection Prevention and Control Manual", which sets out how to prevent airborne transmission of Covid-19 in hospital and clinical settings. NHS Scotland boards and health and social care providers should seek assurances that their ventilation systems are working effectively and delivering the recommended levels of air changes for which they are designed. They should also ensure that ventilation systems are well maintained. Those are all parts of the recommendations that are set out in the control manual.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Given the concerning rise in cases of Covid, would the cabinet secretary encourage supermarkets and shops to reinstate hand sanitisers and trolley wiping stations, many of which have been removed?

Michael Matheson: As I said earlier, given that we are no longer in a global pandemic, we are now taking a proportionate approach to dealing with Covid-19. It should be treated in the same way as other viral infections that occur throughout the course of the year; the monitoring and surveillance arrangements that we have in place are appropriate to that.

It is for individuals to choose whether to use hand sanitiser, and some establishments might wish to continue providing that, but there is no longer any direct requirement for them to do so as there was during the lockdown arrangements that we had previously.

Chinese State Surveillance

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has considered undertaking a comprehensive review into the reach of any Chinese state surveillance in Scotland. (S6T-01525)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Mr Cole-Hamilton has a long-standing interest in the issue of Chinese state surveillance and will therefore be aware that national security is a matter that is reserved to the United Kingdom Government. It is also the long-standing convention of successive Scottish Governments not to comment on national security matters.

As the First Minister made clear yesterday, we take any threat to our security or cybersecurity very seriously, and I assure the member that we are working very closely with the UK Government to understand the current situation and how we can work together to ensure that our security continues to be protected.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: We all remember how global security concerns were triggered by images of Chinese spy balloons above America and Canada at the start of the year. In March, members of the Scottish Parliament were strongly advised to remove TikTok from all devices, amid concerns about Chinese state surveillance. Any suggestion that our democratic institutions are open to infiltration by agents of the Chinese Communist Party should worry us all and should be treated with the utmost severity. What discussions has the Government had with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and the UK Government about the heightened risk, and

does it believe that a review of security and vetting processes is now required?

Angela Constance: I hope that I can reassure Mr Cole-Hamilton—notwithstanding the constraints on me with regard to the level of detail that I can share—that both I and my officials engage very closely with the National Crime Agency, the Ministry of Justice and the Minister for Security, and that Police Scotland works with justice partners across the UK and provides me, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister with briefings and appraisals of current and emergent threats. It might also reassure Mr Cole-Hamilton to be aware that other colleagues are also engaged in the agenda; Mr Robertson has had meetings at the Cabinet Office and with the Foreign Secretary.

Although we are somewhat constrained—in that it would not be appropriate to comment on the detail in and around security matters—I reassure Alex Cole-Hamilton that we treat those matters with the utmost seriousness, particularly where they impact on our devolved responsibilities. We are engaging positively and working on all emerging threats as they are assessed.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Again, I am grateful for that reply. Chinese national intelligence law requires Chinese companies to co-operate with China’s intelligence services, which leaves the data that companies hold open to potential intrusion and misuse. Hikvision is one such company. It makes closed-circuit television cameras that are spread across Scotland in large parts of the public sector. The UK Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner has likened their use to “digital asbestos”.

After we raised that, the Scottish Government undertook to remove Hikvision from its estates, and Lib Dem councillors in Edinburgh have persuaded the City of Edinburgh Council to do the same. In February, when I held a debate on the matter in Parliament, the Scottish Government admitted that its guidance was out of date and said that it would issue fresh guidelines and keep Parliament updated on progress. I ask the minister whether such guidance has now been written and issued.

Angela Constance: Mr Cole-Hamilton raises a number of very important and detailed issues. On CCTV, I advise him that the Scottish Government is in the process of a multiyear improvement programme that commenced back in 2018. That is about all existing CCTV kit and equipment, including Hikvision and other company products, being replaced as part of a new integrated system.

On the progress that has been made since the very useful and informative debate that Mr Cole-Hamilton led earlier this year, we have

commissioned research as part of the refresh of the public CCTV strategy. We are awaiting that final research report, which will inform our future considerations. Aspects of the matter are reserved—for example, data protection. I can advise Mr Cole-Hamilton separately from this question of some of the detail of how we are ensuring that we have the utmost resilience in and around cybersecurity.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Drug Deaths

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Elena Whitham on drug deaths. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:23

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy (Elena Whitham):

Last month saw the publication of the drug-related death statistics from National Records of Scotland, which confirmed that we lost 1,051 fellow citizens to drugs in 2022. Every person lost is a tragedy that is felt keenly by families and communities right across Scotland. I send my condolences to each and every person who has been affected by a loss from drug use. Those deaths are as preventable as they are unnecessary, and the collective loss of all that talent and potential from across the country is heart-breaking.

The NRS figures show a decline in the number of drug-related deaths in 2022. There was a reduction of 279 on the previous year, which is the largest year-on-year decline on record. Although that is, of course, welcome, the numbers are still far too high. We remain committed to delivering on our national mission to ensure that we continue to see further reductions in these tragic deaths.

Most of the decrease was seen in males, with a reduction of 26 per cent from 2021, down to 692 deaths. The number of female deaths was down by 10 per cent on the previous year. That further reinforces the need for us to deliver on initiatives that will be of benefit to women, while recognising that men remain at the highest risk of a drug death.

It is also encouraging to see drops in nearly all age groups. The number of deaths in the under-25s fell slightly, but the greatest reductions were in the age groups from 25 to 39, all of which reduced by more than a third. The only group in which there was a rise in the number of deaths was the over-55 group, which saw an increase of eight from 2021.

As in previous years, the majority of deaths involved more than one drug, with an average of three substances implicated or present in a death, which highlights that poly drug use continues to be a significant challenge for us to tackle.

Opioids were the most commonly implicated drug although, again, there was a slight reduction to 867 deaths. The number of deaths from benzodiazepines also remains high; they were implicated in 57 per cent of deaths. The prevalence of street benzodiazepines remains a

real concern. They are implicated in nearly half of all drug deaths.

The number of drug deaths involving cocaine reduced from 403 in 2021 to 371 in 2022 but they make up an increasing proportion of drug-related deaths. The implications of that make clear the need for more support to be available for people with problem cocaine use, and I will follow up with local areas to understand what provision is currently available and planned on that.

There was a fall in the number of deaths in two thirds of Scottish council areas. However, there is so much more to do, and I am clear that buy-in and accountability for implementing the national mission locally is a fundamental requirement for progress across the country.

Since taking up my portfolio, I have visited many parts of the country, seen the recovery and treatment services that are in operation and spoken to people who are benefiting from some of the transformational changes that have already taken place as a result of the national mission, whether through work to implement medication-assisted treatment standards, improvement in access to residential treatment services, or increased investment in grass-roots organisations.

I believe that the tireless effort that those on the front line continue to put in has contributed to the reduction in the number of drug-related deaths in 2022. I thank them all for their on-going commitment to that work. I include in that all the families on the front line and I say to them: "I see you."

However, I am in no way complacent about the work that is still to be done. That is borne out by the suspected drug death figures for the first half of 2023, which were published this morning. Those figures indicate that there were 600 suspected drug deaths between January and June 2023, which is an increase of 38 on the same period in 2022.

We need to do all that we can to continue the decrease in the number of drug deaths that we saw in 2022. Complex problems require multiple solutions, all of which are valid. That means continuing our work to deliver MAT standards, to increase treatment options, including residential rehab, and to push harm reduction initiatives.

Yesterday, the Lord Advocate set out her position on the proposal for a safer drug consumption facility in Glasgow. She stated that, if Glasgow authorities were to open a pilot facility, she would be prepared to issue a statement of prosecution policy to the effect that it would not be in the public interest to prosecute people for the possession of illegal drugs within the confines of that facility. I strongly welcome that position. Although the position of the Lord Advocate does

not sanction or approve the establishment of a safer consumption facility, it provides a necessary assurance to the Glasgow authorities, which will now take their proposal to the integration joint board for its approval. Although there are still limitations around what a facility that operates within existing legislation can do, that is fantastic news and represents a real step forward in establishing the first official safer drug consumption facility in the United Kingdom.

We have been clear in our commitment to establishing a safer drug consumption facility. Supporting evidence from around the world is extensive. Sixteen countries had legal and operational drug consumption rooms in 2022. Following the Lord Advocate's statement of her position, we will work closely with colleagues in Glasgow to agree the next steps and review options around implementation, including funding.

That is a significant step forward for us in Scotland. However, even given the Lord Advocate's helpful position, a safer drug consumption facility that operates in Scotland will still be restricted by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The best approach, therefore, would be for the UK Government to give approval for a safer drug consumption facility, so I repeat my call to the UK Government to work with us on the issue and either give approval for a pilot, or devolve the necessary powers to us.

The recess period also saw the publication of NRS's alcohol-specific death statistics, which recorded a rise of 2 per cent since 2021 to a total of 1,276 deaths in 2022. Again, I convey my sympathies to all those who have lost a loved one. No one should die as a result of alcohol consumption, and we are working with partners to continue to deliver a range of activity to ensure that people are able to access the correct form of treatment when they require it. We will continue to take a whole-population approach to tackling alcohol-related harm in line with the World Health Organization's focus on the affordability, availability and attractiveness of alcohol. The programme for government reaffirmed that commitment.

We will soon publish our report on minimum unit pricing alongside a consultation on its future—that is, on whether the scheme should continue and, if so, at what price. We are also reviewing the responses to the alcohol marketing consultation. No one should be in any doubt that we will take further action to reduce alcohol harm, particularly to protect children from its ill effects.

At the end of August, we recognised international overdose awareness day. Coming so close to the publication of our annual drug-related death figures, that is always a poignant day in Scotland. As part of that day, I was pleased to

spend time with Police Scotland colleagues, one year on from the roll-out of their national naloxone carriage initiative.

Police Scotland is the only national police force in the world in which every front-line officer is trained in the use of naloxone and carries a kit for use in the event of encountering an overdose. To date, police officers have administered naloxone on more than 300 separate occasions. One of the officers with whom I spoke told me that they had been trained in the use of naloxone in the morning and then had to administer it later that day.

Police Scotland hopes that having officers carrying naloxone in a highly visible manner will encourage others to learn about naloxone and consider carrying it themselves. That is a message that I would reiterate, and I encourage everyone here to get themselves trained and to carry a kit.

September is also international recovery month, and I am pleased to have been invited to take part in a number of events this month, with further events to come. As Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, I welcome opportunities to join with communities, not only to stand with them in support of the work that they do but to demonstrate our commitment to recovery and providing people with the support that they need, when they need it.

As we continue to deliver on that commitment through our national mission, I am delighted to see the publication today of a report from the Corra Foundation that provides an overview of the various projects that are funded through the national mission funds from April 2021 until March 2023. Following the recent funding round that was announced in May 2023, the Corra funding, which totals £65 million over the lifetime of this Parliament, now supports more than 200 grass-roots and third sector projects across Scotland. Vitaly, those funds are multiyear, which provides much-needed assurance to those funded organisations and is highly welcomed across the sector.

I recently visited one of the funded projects, Back on the Road, which is a unique employability project in Glasgow's east end that supports those who are in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. Through the restoration of vintage vehicles and training in workshop practices, alongside the development of the softer skills that are required in a work environment, they develop an individual's self worth, sense of belonging and feeling of self responsibility. In addition, they build trust with others, their workshop colleagues and tutors, thus further reducing the stigma around addiction.

That is just one example of what the funding can do. The Corra Foundation report provides

information on the outcomes and progress, along with the challenges and successes of all the funded projects that have supported more than 37,000 people across Scotland.

Despite the progress that we have seen to date through the funding that has been allocated and, more important, the number of lives that have been saved, I am in no doubt about the work that is still in front of us. We know that the most important thing is being able to offer people the type of treatment that works best for them, at the time that works for them. We know that there remain a number of challenges for us to address in order to get to that point. However, we also know that change is possible and that the reduction in our drug death figures shows that the work we are doing is making a difference.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): This morning, it was revealed that there have already been 600 suspected drug deaths in the first half of 2023, which is up 7 per cent on the same period last year. It is vital that the Scottish Government takes every practical step that it can to tackle the epidemic of drug misuse that is sweeping our country.

I have reservations about the effectiveness of consumption rooms. However, the Lord Advocate's decision yesterday tells us that there was always a way to take that measure, and the Scottish National Party now has one less excuse for its failures.

Annemarie Ward of drugs charity Faces & Voices of Recovery UK—Favour UK—has said that safe consumption rooms need to be underpinned by vital access to prescription programmes, detoxification and rehabilitation services, as laid out in the right to addiction recovery (Scotland) bill. It is now up to the SNP Government to demonstrate that safe consumption rooms can work, to back our crucial right to addiction recovery (Scotland) bill and to finally start tackling the drug deaths crisis that Nicola Sturgeon and now Humza Yousaf have presided over.

Following the minister's statement in June, I asked her about the recovery programmes for those suffering from addiction in our prisons. The answer referred only to those services provided to people after they leave prison. I will therefore ask the question again: can the minister tell us what is being done to break the cycle of addiction in prisons?

Elena Whitham: I recognise Sue Webber's intense focus on this area. Indeed, I welcome that focus from members across the chamber, as we all have to work together on this issue.

On justice settings and the medication-assisted treatment that we are pushing and for which we are providing support in local areas, including to healthcare teams in prisons, we need full implementation to be achieved by 2025, as previously announced. We know that there are specific challenges in justice settings, as was highlighted in the benchmarking report. However, we have already announced our intention to improve healthcare in prisons through new models of care. HMP Perth is now an improvement site for medication-assisted treatment standards, and the learning from that will be cascaded through the entirety of the prison estate.

Peer naloxone workers are working within the prison estate to cascade life-saving naloxone treatment to people in prison. This year, the MAT standards implementation support team will be supporting health teams in prison settings in embedding MAT standard 3, in particular. That involves assertive outreach, which can also happen in prison settings. There are a lot of recovery communities and recovery cafes in prison settings, which is important, too.

A lot of work is on-going in prisons, and I will be happy to have a meeting with Ms Webber to keep her updated on that.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Since the SNP declared the drugs crisis a public health emergency in 2019, more than 4,000 lives have been lost. In the past six months, the number of drug deaths has gone up to more than 600. I welcome the intervention by the Lord Advocate. Not prosecuting people for using safe consumption rooms is a pragmatic approach that allows progress to be made in the pilot scheme in Glasgow.

However, as others, including anti-poverty campaigner Darren McGarvey, have commented, the law has not changed. The constitutional fighting between the two Governments has, thankfully, not stood in the way of progress, but the shame is that the measure could have been taken ages ago, and perhaps more lives would have been saved.

Consumption rooms are only one part of the fight against drug deaths and drug use, however. We need to ensure that treatment and rehabilitation services are available when people need them. Why have there been cuts to the alcohol and drug treatment budgets? Why are facilities such as the Turning Point Scotland centre for women with addictions being closed down? Can the minister confirm when the medication-

assisted treatment standards that were promised 18 months ago will be fully implemented?

Elena Whitham: I thank Jackie Baillie for her question, but I will point out, before I answer the substance of the second part of her question, that the position that the Lord Advocate took yesterday concerned a very specific proposal that was placed in front of her by us and the Glasgow health and social care partnership. That varies hugely from the original proposal that went to the Lord Advocate previously. Although the law has not changed, we needed a very specific proposal for the Lord Advocate to look at.

Regarding the budget that we have in front of us, I must ensure that people understand that there are no cuts to the budget. Those claims are based on a misrepresentation of a recent answer to a portfolio question, not the total budget available to alcohol and drug partnerships or the third sector, and do not represent the full drugs and alcohol budget. In 2021, the total drugs and alcohol budget was £140.7 million; in 2022-23 the total budget was £141.9 million; and there has again been an increase in the budget, to £155.5 million, for 2023-24.

It is important to point out that no one has proposed any reduction in funding for our community justice response within settings, including in Glasgow and Turning Point Scotland's 218 service.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): We know that there is a wealth of international evidence supporting safer drug consumption facilities, so it is hugely welcome to have confirmation that, if a facility of the type set out in the Glasgow proposal were to open as a pilot, the Lord Advocate would be prepared to publish a statement of prosecution policy that it would not be in the public interest to prosecute users of that facility for simple possession offences committed within the confines of the facility.

Given that latest development, can the minister set out the Scottish Government's next steps in supporting Glasgow to establish this vital facility?

Elena Whitham: It is now for Glasgow's health and social care partnership to take the proposal to the next meeting of its integration joint board, which I understand is scheduled for 27 September. To proceed, the partnership will need to provide an update to its integration joint board and be instructed to undertake public consultation work, as requested by the Lord Advocate, to establish the evaluation framework for the pilot. That public consultation work is so important.

We have been clear in our commitment to establishing a safer drug consumption facility in Scotland. Following the position from the Lord

Advocate, we will continue to work closely with colleagues in Glasgow to agree the next steps and review options around implementation, including funding.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): It is clear from the statement that the Scottish Government always had the ability to act on a pilot of drug consumption rooms, if only the SNP had asked the right question, but it did not.

Implementation is key to any pilot, so my questions are on that. Where will the rooms be? Will local residents be consulted? Will addicts be expected to travel from local communities into town centres? What support and interventions will be available in the consumption rooms?

Elena Whitham: The proposals that the Glasgow partnership will put before its integration joint board will include some of the details that Dr Gulhane asks about. The consultation with the community will be vital, because we need to ensure that there is no stigma associated with it and that communities definitely feel as though they have been part of the decision making. We know that between 400 and 500 people are injecting in alleyways in Glasgow city centre, so I anticipate that the proposals will include a city centre location. That is for the Glasgow partnership to set out, and we wait to see what it takes to the integration joint board.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I, too, welcome the announcement yesterday from the Lord Advocate. Does the minister agree that Police Scotland's support and its commitment to work with partners to reduce the harms associated with problematic substance use are crucial in ensuring that policing is not a barrier to treatment?

Elena Whitham: Yes, absolutely. We are hugely grateful for the support that Police Scotland has provided. It would not have been possible to reach this point without its collaboration and partnership in the development of the proposal that was submitted to the Lord Advocate. That follows the appearance of the Lord Advocate at the Criminal Justice Committee, where she laid out the parameters as to the type of proposal that she would be willing to look at should something be put in front of her.

Police Scotland remains a key partner in our work to reduce drug deaths. It remains committed to working in partnership to reduce the harm associated with problematic substance use and addiction. In addition, it runs its own drug strategy board, which brings together key partners and stakeholders from a number of areas, including Government and third sector organisations. Part of the work of that board is to develop a public health approach to policing.

As I said earlier, I am grateful that all our police officers now carry life-saving overdose reversal first aid in the form of naloxone.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Yesterday's announcement from the Lord Advocate is a vindication for all those who have long said that such an approach was possible, particularly Peter Krykant, who I worked with on an unofficial overdose prevention pilot in Glasgow in 2020, saving eight lives, and who is in the public gallery today. In 2017, the previous Lord Advocate said that it was not possible, despite operating under the same laws and guidance as the current Lord Advocate. Over those six years, what exactly has changed in the latest proposal to make it possible? What does the minister have to say to the 7,127 families who have lost loved ones since the previous Lord Advocate rejected the original proposal, many of whom would still be alive today if there had not been such devastating intransigence from people in positions of power in this country?

Elena Whitham: We need to recognise that the proposal that was put in front of the previous Lord Advocate was much wider in its scope. That proposal asked the former Lord Advocate to change the law, which he was not able to do. In his response to that request, he set out the reasons why he could not do that.

That was why it was important for time to be taken to work through a proposal that would meet the parameters that the new Lord Advocate set out to the Criminal Justice Committee in November 2021. The proposal was worked on solidly by officials in the Scottish Government and partners in the Glasgow health and social care partnership and Police Scotland, to ensure that the information that was set in front of the Lord Advocate allowed her to come to the position that she came to yesterday.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Evidence tells us that overdoses occur when people take a combination of substances, including benzodiazepines or blue or street benzos, which account for 73 per cent of overdoses. Such incidents are particularly prevalent in rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway. There is a reversal agent for benzodiazepines called flumazenil, which I used when I worked in a perioperative department as a registered nurse. Will the minister provide an update on the research that is under way on the reversal agent, bearing in mind that it would only be part of a multipronged approach to preventing deaths?

Elena Whitham: The use of flumazenil can be an effective part of an overall strategy to tackle the harms that are caused by benzodiazepines. Flumazenil is an antagonist and antidote to

benzodiazepine overdose that has been studied fairly extensively. Given the risks from side effects that have been identified in studies, current UK clinical guidelines restrict the drug's use to trained clinicians, which means that there is little prospect of it being used outside of hospitals currently. However, the drug can be used in stabilisation services, so the Scottish Government has committed to supplying an extra £2 million every year of the rest of the current parliamentary session to ensure that we scale up stabilisation services to address the use of illicit benzodiazepines, which we know are so harmful.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Like the minister, I was pleased to read yesterday's update from the Lord Advocate on a safe consumption facility in Glasgow. I pay tribute to Peter Krykant, who is in the gallery, and our colleague Paul Sweeney for the groundbreaking and pioneering work that they did in this area.

There is still a drug deaths emergency—about 100 people a month are still dying—so there is not a moment to lose, but we are slipping backwards, as we saw from statistics today.

People hundreds of miles outside Glasgow could also benefit from such spaces, so how will the Government share learning from the pilot? Is the Government acting right now to build towards the establishment of a network of safe consumption facilities as soon as possible, so that everyone who needs help can access life-saving services?

Elena Whitham: I share and echo Alex Cole-Hamilton's desire to see a network of such facilities across the country, because that is how we will interrupt the most amount of harm and save lives. The Lord Advocate has set out the position that she is willing to take on the specific proposal that was in front of her, and we will have to evaluate the pilot in order to understand how such facilities operate. The Lord Advocate's statement does not give us the right to roll out other such facilities across the country. That is the limitation that we are operating under with the position that the Lord Advocate has taken, as opposed to our having the full powers to provide such services ourselves or the UK Government working with us to ensure that we have safe drug consumption facilities right across the UK.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I welcome the minister's update and the support that she is offering for the pilot of a safe consumption facility in Glasgow.

The UK Home Affairs Committee recently found that drug laws are outdated and in need of reform in order to support greater use of public health-based drug interventions. Does the minister agree that the UK Government needs to give proper

consideration to the Scottish Government's progressive proposals for reform and to start treating problematic drug use as a public health issue, rather than one of criminalisation?

Elena Whitham: I absolutely welcome the cross-party Westminster Home Affairs Committee report that was released last month, which recommends a review of current drug laws. Multiple committees, experts and independent organisations—including the independent drug deaths task force—have already called for an urgent review.

We have been clear that Scotland faces a public health emergency in relation to drug deaths, and we cannot rely on only one route to change. We are working hard with the powers that we have but, although there is more that we need to do, the fact remains that the legal framework in which we operate undermines our public health approach.

We are open to a full range of options and have set out policies that could be implemented through the devolution of further powers to Holyrood, including powers to change the criminal law on the use of drugs, or wider constitutional changes, such as Scottish independence. Clearly, the fastest and simplest way forward is for the UK Government to review and change the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to support a public health approach across the entire UK. The number of drug deaths is increasing across the whole of the UK, despite the welcome decrease that we saw in 2022, and we will experience the increasing prevalence of really strong synthetics and even stronger street benzodiazepines, so we need to have all the weapons in our armoury to be able to respond to that.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I echo the minister's condolences to all those who have lost a loved one. I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement, and I welcome the Lord Advocate's statement. I want to follow other colleagues by paying tribute to campaigners, particularly Peter Krykant, who have worked tirelessly on the issue.

What engagement has the minister had with the UK Government, and is she satisfied that it will work with the consensus here, in Scotland, to allow a pilot safe consumption room to proceed?

Elena Whitham: Last week, I met the UK Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, Chris Philp, and we discussed the possibility of the position statement coming from the Lord Advocate. Although it is within the UK Government's powers to prevent us from moving ahead with the pilot, I do not think that its colleagues in this chamber will stand in our way; they have said that they would welcome the evaluation that a pilot would provide. I urge the UK Government to listen to its

colleagues here and to the rest of the chamber and allow us to move forward with what I know will be a life-saving facility in Glasgow.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind the chamber that I am the vice-chair of Moving On Inverclyde, which is a local recovery service.

Although the number of drug-related deaths in Scotland as a whole fell, there was an increase in Inverclyde compared with 2021. Inverclyde has consistently been in the top three areas per head of population when it comes to drug-related deaths. I welcome the minister's commitment to me in writing that she will meet Inverclyde's alcohol and drug partnership, but can she confirm that, if additional resources are requested, she stands ready to seriously consider any and all proposals?

Elena Whitham: Following the publication of Scotland's drug deaths figures for 2022, my officials are developing a programme of targeted engagement in the areas where there has been an increase in drug-related deaths and, in particular, difficulties in delivery, which includes Inverclyde.

We should take a moment to reflect on the fact that people who live in poverty are 16 times more likely to experience a drug-related death. It is incumbent on me and all ministers in our cross-Government response to consider how we can intervene as early as we can. The whole-family approach that we have embedded is about getting alongside families at the earliest opportunity to try to disrupt any propensity for somebody to use substances.

In 2023-24, more than £112 million has been allocated to local areas for delivery partners and local alcohol and drug services to support them to tackle the challenges in their area. I look forward to engaging with the delivery partners in Inverclyde to better understand their challenges and requirements and to tackle any barriers that they have to improving services and the outcomes for people who use drugs.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): A few weeks ago, the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, Elena Whitham, was asked four times how many rehab beds there are in Scotland, and four times she could not answer. Campaigners and charities say that many people still cannot access residential beds. Can the minister tell us how many rehab beds are available right now and how many people have had to travel outwith Scotland for rehabilitation?

Elena Whitham: I confirm that we identified 425 beds from the "Pathways into, through and out of Residential Rehabilitation in Scotland" report that we commissioned in 2021. Since then, we have had two rounds of funding for the rapid capacity

programme, increasing the number of beds across the country by 172. That represents a 40 per cent increase on the figures that we started with. By the end of this parliamentary session, I anticipate that, through other means, including further money going to ADPs and third sector organisations, there will be an increase to the 650 beds that we have asked for. That will result in a 50 per cent increase in the number of beds available.

It is important to recognise that we need to think about the placements as well as the beds. We anticipate that the 650 beds that we will get to will allow us to have 1,000 publicly funded spaces available every year for people in Scotland to access residential rehab treatment. In the past year, 812 people accessed that service, and the past quarter saw the highest number of referrals to date.

It is important that local areas publicise their residential rehabilitation pathways, and they are on the majority of ADPs' websites. We are working with Scotland Excel to see whether we can create a directory that would give people choice and scope as to where they could go in Scotland to access the treatment that they need.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The drop in annual drug deaths is very welcome, but I am afraid that, in all the exchanges today, I do not get the sense that the Government knows why that annual figure has fallen. Drug workers and people living with addiction in Dundee tell me that there has been a significant rise in the number of people using crack cocaine, with all the associated impacts on violence and antisocial behaviour. What is the minister's view on whether the associated fall in deaths may be the result of substituting one drug for another, and can the minister and officials show where and how policy action is directly preventing deaths?

Elena Whitham: We have engaged Public Health Scotland to do an evaluation and to look at the national mission, where the moneys have reached, and the impact of that, because we need to have a clear picture of where resources are best having effect. I believe the policies that we have put in place, which are evidence based, are helping to turn the situation around, but I recognise the concern that Michael Marra shares with me about the increasing use of cocaine and crack cocaine.

It is interesting to see the rapid switch that has happened in Dundee. I have a close eye on that, because I think that that will mean that the services in Dundee will have to pivot to reflect that cocaine use.

In my travels across Scotland, I have met a number of young people who have presented to services for support and to reduce their cocaine

habit. Perhaps that will have started off as recreational and quickly spun out of control.

There are a lot of issues around cocaine. I will work with local areas for them to communicate to me what they are putting in place to ensure that we can respond to that.

Food and Drink Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10406, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on celebrating the resilience of Scotland's food and drink sector.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I am really grateful for the opportunity in this debate, which coincides with food and drink fortnight, to highlight to Parliament the enduring value of our vibrant food and drink sector in Scotland to our national and local economies and to our communities.

Scotland produces some of the best and most recognisable food and drink in the world, and we must all recognise how vital it is to protect that iconic industry.

To place the sector in context, food and drink is Scotland's biggest export—it is second only to energy. In 2020, the sector generated a turnover of almost £15 billion and £5.4 billion in gross value added. In 2021, Scotland had around 17,450 food and drink businesses employing around 129,000 people. We should all take a moment to reflect on the sheer scale of the sector and its contribution to our overall economy.

Vibrant and, at one time, seamless trade with the European Union has been extremely important for exporters as well as consumers, as approximately 23 per cent of the food that is eaten in the United Kingdom is imported from the EU.

We must also not lose sight of the fact that food is a fundamental need for all of us. Our farmers, fishers, crofters, food manufacturers and producers are at the heart of our rural, coastal and island communities, and they contribute to Scotland's £15 billion food and drink industry. They all play a vital role in keeping that dynamic, complex, at times fragile and highly interconnected sector operating to supply our food each and every day. They should be commended for their efforts as they continue to show admirable resilience in the face of continued shocks such as Brexit, climate change and the Ukraine conflict.

The value of the food and drink sector cannot be overestimated. Only in May, the Parliament debated the importance of our overall food security, including in the face of real and significant challenges. That debate highlighted that supply chains and sustainable food supplies are coming more to the fore in public consciousness and that disrupted supply chains—including as a result of climate volatility, for example—are

something that we are likely to see more and more of in the future.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Why does the cabinet secretary's party want to put a barrier between Gretna and Berwick that would be disruptive to 60 per cent of Scottish exports?

Mairi Gougeon: We are not the Government that is putting barriers to trade anywhere; it is the UK Government that has done that through its determination to pursue a hard Brexit.

I want to focus on celebrating the sector's successes, but it is not possible to do that without first highlighting some fundamental challenges and referring to some key facts. In and of themselves, they illustrate the sector's resilience, versatility and sheer ability to bounce back in the face of so many challenges.

It is a fact that the hard Brexit pursued by the UK Government and its lingering effects have weakened our food and drink sector in many ways. That has disrupted supply chains, helped to drive up food price inflation and led to trade deals that have failed to prioritise Scottish interests. It is a fact that Brexit has caused significant labour recruitment issues for the food and drink sector.

It is a fact that Brexit has impacted on our trading relationship with the EU, which is one of our most important trade partners and a major agrifood producer. Food imports from the EU into Scotland were down by 18 per cent in 2022 compared with 2019, and that slowdown is particularly acute for fruit and vegetable imports, which are down by 50 per cent, and for fish and seafood imports, which are down by 66 per cent. Many Scottish food exports to the EU are also down—including a 38 per cent fall in fruit and vegetable exports between 2019 and 2022. It is a fact that our world-renowned Scottish salmon sector—salmon is the UK's number 1 food export—is being hampered by the UK Government's continued delays to its digitisation programme.

It is a fact that recent research by the London School of Economics and Political Science suggests that UK households have paid £7 billion to cover the cost of post-Brexit trade barriers to food imports from the EU, which has increased average household food costs by £250 since December 2019.

It is a fact that our agricultural sector, which underpins much of our food and drink, has been directly impacted by the lack of long-term future funding certainty. Our seven-year EU common agricultural policy budgets have been reduced to yearly allocations from HM Treasury, which are guaranteed only for the current UK parliamentary session.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: Not at the moment.

The overwhelming majority of people in Scotland did not vote for any of this. The on-going economic damage of a UK Brexit-based economy demonstrates the importance of setting out an alternative, better future for Scotland. That is what the Scottish Government is doing through our “Building a New Scotland” papers. We will continue that work, which includes a forthcoming series of economics-themed speeches, to demonstrate how, with independence, we can build a stronger economy that takes advantage of key sectors such as food and drink.

I have repeatedly urged the UK Government to address the cumulative impacts on the sector that I just outlined. I have further highlighted my significant concerns about new free trade agreements with New Zealand and Australia. The UK Government’s own impact assessment highlighted that those deals would be detrimental to the agrifood sector. In stark contrast, an equivalent EU and New Zealand trade deal has been secured, but not at the same expense to domestic EU producers—in particular, beef and lamb are much better protected. That illustrates that better arrangements are possible.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): What is the cabinet secretary doing to protect the critical mass of beef production in Scotland?

Mairi Gougeon: The member will, no doubt, be aware of our commitments to supporting our livestock sector and to supporting food production, which we continue to do through direct payments. I have made that commitment clear in this debate and previous debates in the chamber.

On the impact of the trade deals that I just outlined, members do not need to take my word for it. An independent report by the Andersons Centre on the potential impact on Scottish agriculture of trade deals between the UK and Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Gulf Cooperation Council concluded that the current UK Government’s trade approach will adversely affect our beef and sheep sectors, which are vital to our rural and island communities.

We can only hope that the UK Government will begin to listen to the concerns of the devolved Governments, industry and consumers. For example, I have asked the UK Government to use the opportunity of the recent independent review of labour shortages in the food chain in England to work together with the devolved Governments on its response. The sector has long highlighted to the UK Government that urgent changes to the immigration system are needed to address post-

Brexit labour shortages. It is already disappointing that that review focuses only on England, but it presents us with a watershed moment to work together to support the sector. I have therefore urged the UK Government to take a collaborative and evidence-based approach to its response and to immigration policy in particular.

Although it is important to recognise those challenges, I do not want to dwell only on the negatives. As the end of food and drink fortnight approaches, I want to use the opportunity of this debate to celebrate the sector, highlight its value to us all and pay tribute to its successes.

Food and drink fortnight is a reminder to all of us that there is an entire world of flavours and stories to discover right here in Scotland, on our doorsteps, which is the theme of this year’s campaign. Scotland Food & Drink has worked closely with regional food groups and ambassadors to promote a line-up of regional events over the past few weeks, as well as spotlighting produce from across Scotland that is stocked everywhere from restaurants and bars to delis and markets. I have undertaken a number of engagements, from Leith to the Outer Hebrides, to witness that at first hand. I hope that the fortnight will help to encourage more and more people to explore the fantastic products that are available right on their doorsteps.

As I have highlighted, the fact that we have left the EU has caused significant problems for our farmers and food and drink industry. During the past five years, the industry has, of course, also had to deal with the pandemic and an on-going cost crisis. Yet, fundamentally, the food and drink sector is already a Scottish success story. As an employer and an exporter, it makes a major contribution to the Scottish Government’s missions of opportunity, equality and community.

The Scottish Government is determined to work with the sector to help it to succeed further. We have provided the industry with £15 million to support its recovery plan to tackle challenges posed by Brexit and the pandemic.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: I need to make some more progress.

Now, as markets reopen and the industry looks to grow in a changed world, we have added to that support with a further £5 million towards year 1 implementation of the new food and drink strategy, “Sustaining Scotland. Supplying the World.” That funding will, among other things, help us to showcase the industry to domestic and international buyers, support our efforts to train and reskill people, and enable us to share insights

and develop solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The new strategy outlines a vision of Scotland as the best place in the world to own, operate and work for a food and drink business—a vision for it to be renowned as a world leader in sustainable production and responsible growth, where resilient businesses across the entire supply chain can prosper.

The strategy has eight distinct enablers for growth, all of which are significant and worth while. I want to highlight two themes that I think are particularly important: the ambition that it shows and the emphasis on collaboration.

The strategy focuses on resilience, sustainability and growth, since it recognises that all three are essential to the future of the industry. It aims to ensure that the industry can withstand shocks and that it embraces and benefits from the journey to net zero.

In relation to growth, the strategy sees major opportunities for producers in Scotland to increase their sales here at home, in the rest of the UK and right around the world. It aims to ensure that the food and drink sector in Scotland grows more strongly than the sector does in competitor countries of similar size. The Scottish Government welcomes that level of ambition.

However, we recognise that the strategy, and the Government's support for it, will have the impact that we want it to have only if we continue to collaborate. We need to work together if we are going to attract a skilled workforce, improve productivity, reduce our carbon emissions and market ourselves globally. So, the strategy sets out short, medium and long-term goals that have been developed in collaboration with food and drink producers, and others such as research institutions, that have a focus on stability amidst global turbulence. Overall, the aim of the 10-year plan with industry is that our approach and funding will help to shift the dial on food and drink sector growth in Scotland.

In keeping with that collaborative theme, just last week, in our programme for government, we confirmed a range of measures through which we will be working very closely with the sector to enhance our support. For example, we will be developing our approach to future farming activity through engagement with key stakeholders to identify potential opportunities to increase sustainable production and markets for poultry and eggs, venison and seed potatoes. We have also said that we will host an international food summit that will help to bring much of our work together, including with industry, to support further the promotion of Scotland's food and drink.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sorry. I am just coming to a close.

I want to conclude by taking a moment to acknowledge—and extend my gratitude to—each and every business and individual who works to help drive the growth of local sourcing and to keep this country fed: producers large and small, from farmers and fishers to regional food groups and dedicated retail and food service buyers. It is their tireless efforts that encourage people to buy Scottish produce, and their dedication that helps us to build a brighter future for our rural communities and islands. Their passion for local produce and experiences inspires us all to take pride in our unique national heritage.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the value of Scotland's food and drink sector and the significant contribution that it makes to the national economy, as well as to local economies and communities; welcomes the plan, published by Scotland Food and Drink, to create stability, sustainability, resilience and innovation in order to support the sector to succeed and prosper over the next 10 years; further welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to invest £5 million to support delivery of this plan; acknowledges the challenges caused by Brexit, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and climate change, and the need for the sector to respond and adapt, and believes that the hard Brexit negotiated by the UK Government has created serious, long-term harms, including labour shortages and new barriers to trade, especially for Scottish food and drink exporters, while driving up inflation in food and supply chain costs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give a gentle reminder to those who have not already pressed their buttons but who wish to speak in the debate to press their buttons as soon as possible.

I call Rachael Hamilton to speak to and move amendment S6M-10406.2.

15:09

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests as a director of a small business in the Borders.

First and foremost, I join the cabinet secretary—although it took her more than seven minutes to get there—in celebrating our food and drink sector. We have world-class food and drink producers in our country, and we should champion the people who make the industry such a success and such an asset for Scotland. It is right that we take the time to celebrate them today. However, the industry requires more from us than just celebration; it requires support, certainty to plan for the future and a workable and practical

agriculture bill. As the cabinet secretary said, the food and drink sector has shown an enormous amount of resilience through global challenges such as the pandemic and the economic impact of Russia's war in Ukraine, so resilience is rightly the focus of today's debate.

Despite there being no mention of farmers in either the Scottish National Party motion or the Labour amendment, and barely a peep about them in the First Minister's programme for government, in recent years, farmers, who are the beating heart of the £15 billion food and drink industry, have overcome damaging outbreaks of livestock disease such as avian flu and have dealt with severe water shortages that have hit their crops hard. However, those who are charged with the task of feeding the nation continue to be left in the dark over future support. The dither and delay over the new agriculture bill is wreaking havoc in the industry. We must take our responsibility to them more seriously and quickly give them the clarity that they need. Overcoming natural difficulties is one thing, but the biggest challenge that farmers face is entirely of the SNP-Green Government's making.

Farmers are not the only ones waiting until the cows come home. We await the fate of Scotland's short-term lets sector, which faces death by SNP-Green red tape. That sector is entirely integral to providing good food and drink and supporting Scotland's important tourism sector.

Scotland's fishing communities have also faced a turbulent year at the hands of the Scottish Government, which failed to learn the lessons of an 11-week fishing ban that was imposed on Clyde communities without consultation or warning. The Government's headlong rush into banning fishing in almost half of Scotland's waters would have been a complete disaster for our fishing industry. Sustainable fishing practices in Scotland have resulted in stocks of many of our favourite kinds of fish rebounding in recent years. Hard-working fishermen are landing thousands of tonnes of healthy, high-protein fish every year—some of it even carbon neutral.

The industry is already squeezed for space in the marine environment. The highly protected marine area plans would have decimated the industry on which so many of Scotland's coastal communities have relied for centuries. We expected the plans to be scrapped, but in my view they have merely been postponed. Until those plans are scrapped completely and the Government has gone back to the drawing board, the fishing industry will continue to worry about its future.

Our drinks sector has faced an equally difficult period, having been forced to adapt to legislative changes such as minimum unit pricing and the

threat of an unworkable deposit return scheme and plans to prevent whisky distilleries from painting their names on their outside walls. For now, both the fishing industry and the drinks sector have been saved by the strength of their voice in opposing those plans and the legislative incompetence of the Government that is trying to implement such impositions.

However, today I intend not to dwell on where the Scottish Government has let down the food and drink industry but to talk about the opportunities that lie ahead if we start to get things right. At the Royal Highland Show this year, I launched my plans for Scotland's food future. The policy paper has been welcomed across the board. Its policy proposals have been talked about as a positive step by stakeholders, from farmers and wholesalers to vet suppliers and council officers. My plan would support Scotland's rural communities to secure jobs and livelihoods and a viable future for our food and drink producers, alongside farmers, crofters and fishermen. It would also place food production at the heart of the new agriculture bill while ensuring investment in producers to keep food prices affordable for consumers. It would allow farmers to produce more top-quality food right here, in Scotland, and would bring in more local jobs for processing, transport and abattoirs. It would bolster support for technology and innovation to help to improve the UK's world-leading standards on health, the environment and animal welfare.

My plans include key policy objectives such as helping councils to support local producers by introducing 60:60 targets: 60 per cent of food procured by every mainland local authority from within 60 miles of the local authority area. Buying locally means stronger local economies, healthier foods and fewer imports, leading to lower emissions, which is what we all want to achieve. The cabinet secretary missed an opportunity for that in the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. Key amendments that would have supported a lot of the policy were missed.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am not sure whether you have mentioned the word "Brexiteer" yet, but I wonder whether you will address how it has failed our farmers across the UK and Scotland.

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

Rachael Hamilton: Of course Emma Harper continues to talk down her constituency in Dumfries and Galloway. The SNP would do better to support farmers and give them clarity about their future. SNP members would do better to realise the opportunities that have been afforded by trade deals and what we are able to do now that we have left the EU. I would like Emma

Harper to go and ask her constituents whether the SNP is holding them back by aligning with Europe and not adopting new gene-editing technology.

We all share our food heroes. I am lucky to have many fantastic producers in my Borders constituency, from Hardiesmill beef to Peelham Farm. There are so many outstanding local businesses, from the Bread Maker in Coldstream and Hunters the bakers in Hawick to Selkirk distillery, the Borders distillery and Giacobazzi's ice cream in Eyemouth. I am biased and my colleagues might protest, but, in my books, the Borders produces the best food in the country. Would it not be great to see more Borders produce in schools, hospitals and council canteens? I am sure that members share that passion for their own constituencies.

The paper that I mentioned also discusses how gene editing could enable farmers to naturally improve the reliability and nutritional value of the food that they produce while reducing the resources that are required to produce it. That technology would cut emissions and boost yields. As my colleagues—in particular, Finlay Carson—will come on to say, it would make a real difference to people's lives every day. It would allow farmers to pass on their savings and efficiencies and be part of the solution to tackling poverty. The improved yields would reduce our reliance on costly foreign imports that are flown in from abroad and would help local businesses to expand, thus creating more jobs for local communities. The only thing that stands in the way of that innovation is ideological opposition from which even the EU has now moved on.

If the Government wants to show its appreciation to our food and drink population, I can think of no better way of doing that than supporting the Conservative plans. We have a plan, unlike the SNP and Greens, who have no plan and no clarity. They need to introduce a genetic technology bill and produce an agriculture policy.

Scotland's food and drink sector is pivotal to our national and local economy, despite enduring recent global challenges and economic mismanagement by this SNP-Green lot. Let us celebrate its resilience during Scottish food and drink fortnight by eating some delicious local produce from on our own doorsteps.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Hamilton. I ask you to move your amendment.

Rachael Hamilton: I move amendment S6M-10406.2, to leave out from "acknowledges" to end and insert:

"recognises both the challenges and the opportunities resulting from the United Kingdom leaving the European Union; acknowledges the challenges caused by the

Russian invasion of Ukraine and climate change, and the need for the sector to respond and adapt, and believes that allowing Scotland's food producers to adopt gene-editing technology would boost the sector's resilience, provide greater security against climate change disease and drought, and enhance crop yields, nutritional value and reliability."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rhoda Grant to speak to and move amendment S6M-10406.1.

15:18

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I move the amendment in my name—that saves me from forgetting later on.

I welcome the debate, because it underlines the importance of the food and drink sector to Scotland. We should have four pillars that underpin our production system. We need food security—60 per cent of our food is home produced; we are importing 40 per cent. The sector also needs to be climate friendly and provide a fair deal for workers. We also need to recognise it as the economic driver that it is.

With regard to food security, it is absolutely unacceptable that we have so many people who are dependent on food banks. The Trussell Trust told us that 259,744 food parcels were delivered in 2022-23, which is a 50 per cent increase from 2017-18. That is a disgrace. The bill that became the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 could have dealt with that. It should have enshrined the human right to food, and it should have empowered the Scottish food commission to implement that right. I am still determined to bring forward a bill that will do that, so that we can be freed from the scourge of food banks and food insecurity.

Food insecurity, food banks and food poverty are a problem for us all. We can see the health issues that arise from the lack of nourishing food. We are seeing obesity rates increase and the return of diseases such as rickets to our communities. That is a cost to us all, and it happens because people cannot afford good, nutritious food.

The Scottish Government talked about a plan to end food banks, but that was last year. We are still waiting for the promised plan—we hope to see it before this winter—so that we can end people's dependence on the dehumanising process of going to a food bank. I urge all MSPs who see the obscenity in a rich country having families dependent on food banks to join me to bring an end to that.

The war in Ukraine has also shown us how important our national food security is. We need to produce more than 60 per cent of our own food for

our national food security, as well as to cut carbon miles and help local economies. We also need to look at local procurement. Labour's policy is to ensure that 50 per cent of the food that is procured by public bodies should come from local procurement. We need to do that to support our farming industry and our food and drink sector.

With regard to the climate, we have a lot to offer. Our animals are grass fed, which sequesters carbon. However, putting higher standards on our own grass-fed animals in order to cut the number that we produce means importing others from elsewhere, perhaps from places that do not take their responsibilities towards the climate so seriously, so that is actually counterproductive.

We need to look at innovation, because we need to reach net zero, including in our food production, so we need to ensure that we have measures such as carbon recycling, which the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee looked at quite recently.

We also need to ensure that we have the right pipeline jobs, such as local abattoirs that allow us to make use of local produce as close to home as possible. That cuts transport, but we need to ensure that those pipeline jobs are there to support our industry.

With regard to fishing, we need to ensure that we are fishing sustainably. We need to use our powers over our seas to ensure that we have selective gear. We need to cut bycatch and, where there is bycatch, it needs to be landed and used, because we cannot afford the waste. We need to ensure that policies such as highly protected marine areas, which have targeted the most sustainable fisheries, are not going to come forward again.

We also need to look at the people who produce our food and drink. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union talked about many of its members depending on food banks. It is surely wrong that people who bake and produce our food are themselves having to go to food banks to eat.

Insecure working is also an issue. We need a new deal for working people that bans zero-hours contracts, outlaws fire and rehire and gives people security at work by giving them full rights from day 1. That is how we deal with our labour shortage. If we make jobs more attractive and ensure that they are better paid, we will get the workers to carry them out.

We must also remind ourselves how important food and drink are to the economy, amounting to £8.1 billion in exports. As many of us know, Scotch whisky is responsible for much of that. I am very lucky to represent the Highlands and Islands, which covers many—and certainly the best—whisky-producing parts of Scotland. We also have

quality food products such as Orkney cheese, Shetland lamb and Stornoway black pudding, to name but a few, that are protected because they are so important. The sector employs 48,000 people and indirectly supports another 300,000 jobs. It is of critical importance to our country.

I am disappointed that the debate seems to have come down to the question of Brexit or not Brexit. Of course, Brexit brought issues and problems, but we need to find ways through them. The Scottish Government cannot simply blame Brexit for its own shortcomings. We need to give consideration to gene editing as well and see what benefits it could bring for food production.

Rachael Hamilton: Will Rhoda Grant give way?

Rhoda Grant: I am in my final minute, I think.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you a little bit of time, but not an awful lot—enough for a brief intervention.

Rachael Hamilton: I agree with Rhoda Grant. The SNP would have us believe that Europe is closed to us, but, in the first half of 2023, Scottish salmon exports increased by 9 per cent. I totally agree with her on the SNP's arguments around Brexit.

Rhoda Grant: I do not think that I said that Brexit was a good thing—far from it. We need to be able to export, but at the moment we are importing without barriers and not exporting without barriers. We need to sort that out.

We need an all-round policy. Members have talked about the agriculture bill, we have the human right to food, and we have good food nation plans coming up. However, we need a joined-up policy. The Scottish Government does not use its powers to the maximum, and it missed an opportunity to join up food and drink policy and to enshrine the right to food in the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. It has also made no progress in dealing with food poverty. Opportunities have been squandered. The Government could have improved the nation's health and economy.

I move amendment S6M-10406.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises the plan set out by the Labour Party to stabilise the economy after the turmoil of the UK Conservative administration, reset the relationship with Europe, improve trading relationships and use the power of the Scotland Office to promote Scotland's excellent food and drink around the world; believes that it is unacceptable that so many people living in food poverty in Scotland are those who work in the food industry; considers that more action is needed to address low pay, zero-hours contracts and insecure work in Scotland's food and drink sector, and therefore welcomes the proposals in the Labour Party's New Deal for Working People; asserts that food production and a sustainable environment can work hand in hand for

the benefit of both, and believes that the right to food should be enshrined in Scots law.”

15:26

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): As other members have mentioned, Scotland’s food and drink sector deserves praise up and down the food chain, from field to fork, for its resilience. The situation has been especially acute in the past few years, with Brexit, Covid and the cost of living crisis, as well as the challenges of climate change, battering the sector from all angles.

A combination of the uncertainty after Brexit, the pandemic and, most acutely, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has pushed prices up. Worldwide, the cost of basic ingredients has shot up due to less availability, thanks to the disruption to growing in, and distribution from, Ukraine. Rightful anti-invasion boycotts of energy produced in Russia have impacted European farmers and growers, as well as the supply chain, through increased energy and fuel costs. The spike in fertiliser costs of up to 180 per cent year on year between April 2021 and 2022 is a stark figure that illustrates the challenge. Prices are beginning to fall, but not before the astronomically high profits in the fertiliser industry that NFU Scotland highlighted.

I agree with the Government’s motion that

“the hard Brexit negotiated by the UK Government has created serious, long-term harms, including labour shortages”,

and new barriers to trade for Scottish food and drink exporters and has contributed to inflation in food and supply chain costs. Ironically, it is due to its preparation for such a hard Brexit that the sector was able to be so resilient during the Covid-19 pandemic. We cannot overstate the success of the sector during the Covid emergency, nor can I appropriately convey the thanks of people across the country to all those who managed to keep food on the shelves during that fraught time.

The hard Brexit that was negotiated will continue to impact on the sector for many years. Labour shortages risk leaving food rotting in the fields, barriers to trade make higher prices more likely and more paperwork burdens fresh food exporters and slows down exports.

The sector has also held up against the stumbling of this Green-SNP Government. Self-inflicted uncertainty over the post-Brexit agriculture settlement is causing serious concern for a sector that faces bombardment from multiple angles. Seven years on from the Brexit vote, and two years after we formally left the European Union, the framework bill for the post-Brexit policy is still to go through stage 1 of the parliamentary process, and we will still have to wait for the final outcome once the framework is in place. Crofters,

farmers and growers need clarity and certainty so that they can innovate, diversify, take advantage of new technologies and generally plan for the future. The introduction of the bill is long overdue.

The highly protected marine areas policy caused distress among Scotland’s coastal and island communities. Those people and places rely on fish catching and processing for their livelihoods and they would see dramatic depopulation without those if disruption made its way through the supply chain. Thankfully, the hard work of individuals and organisations representing voices up and down Scotland saw off the original HPMA proposals. We await the next iteration of that policy, but the Scottish Government must work closely with coastal and island communities to ensure that, along with robust scientific evidence, the voices of those who will be most impacted are not only heard but listened to. A lot of damage was done by the Scottish Government’s pursuit of HPMA’s and it will take time to rebuild trust.

The Scottish bottle deposit and return scheme—the DRS—was a good idea botched and then abandoned. Working together on a UK-wide DRS will help Scottish businesses that sell products across the UK. Businesses had valid concerns that the DRS would be detrimental and feared forced closure, distraction from important day-to-day work and the expense of trying to adhere to the plan. The Scottish Government will have to rebuild trust with the food and drink sector and other businesses.

The ferry fiasco has highlighted the need for connectivity and the impact on businesses and communities when that is lacking. The northern isles are great exporters of seafood, shellfish, salmon, Orkney beef and Shetland lamb and we produce whisky and gin, too. Interisland tunnels in Shetland—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member accept an intervention?

Beatrice Wishart: If I have time.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I absolutely agree with the member. I come from the northern isles and appreciate what she says. Does she also recognise the importance of local abattoir facilities? I know that the Shetland Livestock Marketing Group operates one, but many of our remote, rural and island communities do not have access to abattoirs. Does she agree that they are vital for our producers?

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

Beatrice Wishart: I certainly agree with the member’s point.

Interisland tunnels in Shetland would help to speed up export times and allow fresh produce to catch the nightly ferry to Aberdeen and then go onward to make transport connections with the mainland and Europe. Some Shetland salmon finds its way to the far east and Scottish salmon's top three markets are France, China and the United States of America. We must balance that with more ferry freight capacity. Around this time of year, my colleague Liam McArthur and I speak about the pinch points in freight capacity for the livestock season, which are predictable but usually seem not to be prepared for by Transport Scotland. Shetland's contribution to the Scottish and UK economy is often limited by connectivity, both transport and digital, and national infrastructure investment could unlock much potential.

Crofters, growers, farmers, aquaculture, fishing, the seafood sector, whisky, the whole supply chain and even the corner shop—not to mention island and coastal communities—have all been put through the wringer by the Scottish Government in the past 12 months, which is not how a modern, progressive, representative Government should act. What comes next for our Scottish food and drink sector, of which we should all be very proud, must be better.

15:33

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Before I elaborate on the significance of the food and drink sector to the local economy in my constituency by giving examples of many small producers—and I will include hospitality, which plays a significant role by using local supplies and promoting Scottish produce through its food services—I will first mention the impact of Covid and Brexit on the hospitality sector.

The sector took a substantial hit from pandemic closures and then restrictions, notwithstanding the financial support at both UK and Scottish Government levels. Some providers, such as Stobo Castle Health Spa, which also serves food, closed completely and took the opportunity to refurbish, as did the Central Bar in Peebles. It is a very small pub and could not comply with the requirement to serve food, so it closed and underwent refurbishment. Some businesses have yet to see their bank balances recover, so we must not forget the substantial impact of Covid.

Brexit has also had an impact. Several local hotels tell me that they are unable to find staff, who formerly came from the EU, which limits their service to customers. There was not a cheep about Brexit during a very grumpy contribution by Rachael Hamilton.

Some businesses pride themselves on having as much local produce on their menus as is feasible—

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: As I mentioned Rachael Hamilton in dispatches, I will.

Rachael Hamilton: I am sure that Christine Grahame has forgotten that I have a glowing smile for her. However, does she agree that, to attract more people to Scotland, we need to ensure that there is sufficient rural housing for people? Does she agree that we need to make Scotland an attractive place and that that means not making it the highest-taxed part of the UK?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, Ms Grahame.

Christine Grahame: Perhaps the reason why Ms Hamilton did not mention Brexit is that, as an independent report has just shown, it is responsible for a third of UK food price inflation since 2019 and regulatory, sanitary and other border controls have added £7 billion to domestic household bills. That is why she keeps quiet about it.

I turn to the producers—the small and medium-sized enterprises that are the backbone of Scotland's food and drink sector. The independent, award-winning craft brewery Broughton Ales, which produces a range of beers, was established in 1979 in the village of Broughton. The first Scottish microbrewery to be initiated, it appealed to customers who were looking for a new craft beer experience. It celebrates and preserves traditional Scottish brewing techniques, with favourites including Old Jock Scotch Ale and Stout Jock. They are available in pubs in Edinburgh and elsewhere, and also online.

On the same topic, there is more beer to be had at Traquair. I say to Mr Mountain that I have a theme. Traquair House Brewery lies in the wing of Traquair house that is directly underneath the chapel. The house, which is extraordinary, is Scotland's oldest inhabited house and it was visited by 27 Scottish kings and queens. The brewery, which dates back to the 1700s, was originally a domestic brewery that served the house and the estate. It became disused but was never dismantled. It gradually filled up with family rubbish until it was rediscovered by Peter Maxwell Stuart in the early 1960s. Today, it continues to be run by the family, with beer names including the unsurprising Traquair House Ale and the also appropriately named Traquair Jacobite Ale, and it exports 50 per cent of its production.

I have had the pleasure of visiting both businesses—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: If I will get the time back, I will certainly take the intervention. I am not unhappy about doing that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can get most of the time back.

Christine Grahame: I do not have any samples for the member.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Jamie Halcro Johnston to be brief.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I apologise for interrupting the trip through Christine Grahame's Friday night pub crawl. I was just wondering how those breweries were impacted by the deposit return scheme proposals. How much preparation did they have to put in and how much future investment has that affected?

Christine Grahame: Well, they have not been impacted. The member will know that I raised the issue of these businesses during the discussions about the DRS. I am not unhappy to say that. I am glad that the scheme is being revisited. There were issues. I say to the member that he did not catch me out.

There are producers of honey, too, including large estates such as the Duke of Northumberland's Burncastle estate, where I passed a trailer-load of hives being taken back to Dumfries after the bees had finished feeding off the heather. I still have a pot at home—of honey, not bees.

Then there are the farms across my constituency, stretching from the Eildon hills to the Pentland hills. They are mostly involved in sheep farming, although there are some mixed farms such as Baddinsgill hill farm in the southern Pentland hills near West Linton. Its 4,000 acres of heather-covered hills are populated by 1,400 hardy Blackface sheep along with a small fold of Highland cattle. The family has farmed there since 1912 and it remains a family farm, with four generations currently living there. It is one of the many farms and, indeed, estates that I have visited in my years here. It was on one of those Pentland farms that I learned—I am going into dangerous territory here—that on some farms sheep congregate in hefts that defend their patch with vigour. I hope that I have remembered that correctly.

All the producers that I have mentioned above have accessible websites where people can place orders, although it seems that the whole beef and whole lamb at Baddinsgill are already sold out.

The important thing about those businesses is that they are embedded in the community and are committed to the community and to Scotland. They are not “here today, gone tomorrow” multinationals. They do not have to get £75 million to set up a car factory somewhere in England. They are family enterprises and they are the backbone of Scotland's economy.

I will conclude by going back to hospitality. I repeat that it endured a tough two years due to Covid and it is still on the road to recovery. Recently, I completed my annual summer surgery tour of villages. Apart from picking up lots of cases and local issues, I also had to eat, of course, and where better than the two places that I will mention? I had lunch at Burts hotel in Melrose—I recommend the kedgeree—and at Caberston cafe in Walkerburn, where people cannot resist the homemade soup and cake.

There you are, Deputy Presiding Officer. I have unashamedly promoted and publicised a sample of what my constituency brings to the table and, seriously, to the local economy and the Scottish economy, which we should support and celebrate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Grahame. I am sure that you will be welcomed back to both of those hostelries.

What time we had in hand has now been exhausted. I invite members to stick broadly to their speaking time allowances.

15:40

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of a family farming partnership that produces food—sadly, not drink—for the people of Scotland. It produces drink indirectly, through barley, but it does not produce drink. I also have an interest in a salmon fishery, which provides no food to the economy.

We often have these interesting debates in the Parliament. We talk about how wonderful the Government is in what it does and how everyone else is to blame for the failures, but that is the wrong way to do it. We should be talking about the challenges that the industry faces and how the Government will address those.

Agriculture has risen to the challenges of the past few years, and—by goodness!—it has had them. Beatrice Wishart mentioned that prices have gone through the roof. Fertilisers went from £265 a tonne to more than £1,200 a tonne, dropping back to £600 a tonne this year, and those prices have been reflected in seed, spray, fuel and labour costs, all of which have gone up. That has been a real challenge for farmers, who have been

hanging on by their fingernails to the businesses that they work in.

The problem is that the extra costs are not being met by farm-gate prices. We have not seen the increases that we should have seen. Perhaps that is a good thing for the consumer, because it has kept prices for food lower than they would have been if the increased prices had been passed on.

Beef prices have risen, but they are now falling, as are the numbers in the beef herd, a point that was made by my colleague. The question that was raised by Jim Walker, when he came to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, was whether that will be sustainable into the future. We need beef to be sustainable because we cannot eat trees. We need to consider that.

When it comes to working in the farming industry, we need to understand that the problem is not caused purely by Brexit. Finding labour has always been difficult. Working on the farm is not a four-day week but a full-time life. Who wants to be up at 2 o'clock in the morning trying to deliver a difficult cow and probably getting a kick for the privilege? Working a four-day week in another sector would be much easier. Those things put people off working in the farming industry, but they are what farming is all about. We need to encourage people to work in the farming sector by making it easier for new entrants. We have not done that. Instead, we have confused the marketplace by making it difficult through new tenancy legislation.

We should have had an agriculture bill last year. The chairman of the Climate Change Committee has said that, NFU Scotland said it and farmers have said it. The only one who believes that it is not required is the cabinet secretary.

Other industries have expanded. The whisky industry is a good example. It has really played its part. It has become bigger and is employing lots of people. However, it needs to protect its primary suppliers, who are wondering whether it is easier to produce rye to go into an anaerobic digestion system or to produce barley. If distilleries do not make it attractive for farmers to produce barley, they will not be able to source Scottish barley. I also believe that the Scottish whisky industry needs to address some of the net zero problems that it faces, not only with its cooling water but with the heat that it uses in its processes.

The industry that I find most disappointing is aquaculture. During my time in the Parliament, I have tried to be supportive of that industry. Its 205 farms across Scotland generate a huge income. It is, without a doubt, a big employer. When the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee considered all the things that it brought to the

economy, we were clear that it has a significant place in the Scottish food industry.

However, since 2017, the number of deaths of salmon in salmon farms has increased substantially. We are now at a stage at which 36,000 tonnes of salmon are destroyed annually. That is not acceptable and we should not allow it to be acceptable. This year, in June alone—I think—8 per cent of all the fish in the Loch Linnhe farm died and 9.2 per cent of all the fish in the Loch Kishorn farm died. In fact, 25 per cent of all fish that go to sea die before they reach our tables. Even worse, some of them are dying when they are harvested and they still reach our tables.

The aquaculture industry has a lot to do to rise to the challenges. The REC Committee report made 65 recommendations asking the industry to rise to those challenges. We were told in evidence by people such as Ben Hadfield that they were humbled by the problems that they faced but that they would rise to the challenge. The only rise that we have seen in the past five years since he gave evidence is a 168 per cent increase in the use of antibiotics in salmon farms. That, to me, is unacceptable.

My time is short. In conclusion, there is much that we can do, but there is much that we need to do. Let us concentrate on some of the failings so that we can get things right and make Scotland's food and drink industry the best in the world.

15:46

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): This year at the Royal Highland Show, an industry-led strategy that aims for a 25 per cent increase in turnover for Scotland's food and drink sector by 2028 was published. As an aside, I must mention that it was published on the seventh anniversary of the vote to leave the EU.

It is not the first time that the food and drink sector in Scotland has partnered an SNP Government. Although the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition did some encouraging work, it was the national food and drink policy that was created in conjunction with the industry and led by Richard Lochhead in 2008 that set out the ambition of making the industry worth £13 billion to the Scottish economy by 2013. For many years, food and drink was our fastest-growing sector, with an emphasis on ambition, innovation and a drive to promote the quality of brand Scotland.

That partnership helped to create a feel-good factor and an attitude that the sector was important, and that Government was listening and that it valued the industry. The rapid and visible success was at first celebrated and then viewed with just a hint of jealousy from down south.

The ever-rising tide of brand Scotland, in which the banner of the saltire was carried on our Scottish-grown and manufactured products, gave confidence and led to a huge growth in the numbers of small artisan producers and the diversification of farms. Their products were seized by consumers accessing them through the growing number of farmers markets and farm shops, and then they were seized by the ultimate marketing machines: the supermarkets.

I remember the days when the likes of Tesco had huge saltires painted on the outside of their walls and pictures of real farmers smiling into the camera hanging up in their stores. Tesco better than anyone recognised the marketing potency and power of that combination: the hard-working, quality-driven farmer for Scotland with a worldwide reputation for high standards of welfare and stockmanship. It was a marketing dream to be capitalised on. Multiple products were given the brand mark, including all our meat products, our game, our dairy products and even our tablet and shortbread. Scotland's food and drink spoke of provenance and quality.

That home-grown increase in output led to hugely increased exports. The quality of the products added to the branding of Scotland, and a successful food and drink sector was marketed as a land of mystery mountains, swirling peaty waters and misty hills, joined by a land of food and drink.

It is said that imitation is the greatest form of flattery. In 2015, we saw substantial imitation of Scotland's food and drink strategy emerging from the UK Government. That year, the UK Government launched its very own rule Britannia-esque, union jack-bedecked food and drink strategy. Arguably, it attempted to subsume brand Scotland into brand Britain. The problem for the UK Government was and still is that brand Scotland carries so much more weight than brand Britain. That is simply because post-Brexit Britain is not trusted on the global stage.

The Tory motion talks about

"the challenges and the opportunities"

of Brexit. I would ask the sheep farmers in Scotland to think of the opportunity with our borders now being wide open to unlimited volumes of much cheaper antipodean lamb.

The Labour amendment says that we should harness

"the power of the Scotland Office"

and "reset the relationship" with the EU. That means business as usual. We can forget about Brexit and just let Westminster call the shots and promote Scotland only if it suits its agenda, not when it suits our agenda.

If Scotland's biggest drink export, Scotch whisky, is to be taxed to the levels recently set by the UK Government, the phenomenal power of that taxation should be used right here, in Scotland, to help our industry to continue to drive innovation, resilience and ambition. It should be helping us to tackle the scourge of poverty, which blights so many communities, instead of being swallowed up in Brexit Britain's desperate attempts at international relevance.

I wish the strategy every success. It is clear that, working in partnership with the SNP Government, the industry has a massive role to play as a driving force for good as Scotland progresses towards regaining its independence.

15:51

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased that Scotland Food & Drink has made the theme of this year's food and drink fortnight "Discover what's on your doorstep". The summer recess has given me a great opportunity to do just that. I have had the privilege of visiting dozens of local producers and processors while, I hope, shining a light on the growing importance of local provenance.

I have visited Galloway Lodge Preserves, along with representatives of the Food and Drink Federation; I have been to numerous agricultural shows, country fairs, local farms, farmers markets, fishing ports and hotels; I visited a distillery or two, with representatives of the Scotch Whisky Association; and, this weekend, I will have the pleasure of attending the Stranraer oyster festival. It has been a delight, once again, to eat and drink my way across what is a wonderful region this summer, and I place on record my thanks to those working in the food and drink sector in South Scotland: farmers, fishers, shop workers, processors, wholesalers and deliverers. They are all part of the 18,000 food and drink businesses in Scotland that turn over £14 billion a year and employ more than 115,000 people. That is a real success story and we should be proud of it.

It is fair to say, however, there was no shortage of issues raised during my journey over the summer. Recruitment remains immensely challenging. The managers at one major hotel in the Borders that I visited told me that it was not running at capacity, not because of a lack of demand but because of a lack of staff, with skilled, well-paid posts remaining unfilled. Unquestionably, the wholly inadequate immigration policy that was put in place by the UK Government after Brexit is having an impact, including the short-sighted decision not to include chefs on the shortage occupation list.

Changing that policy will not be enough on its own, however. We need an end to the year-on-year cuts to colleges, which are eroding the skilled workforce; we need better reskilling opportunities for older workers; and we need more campaigns such as Hospitality Rising's rise fast work young campaign to highlight the often hidden but positive career opportunities that exist in the sector.

Unless we address the chronic housing shortage, especially in rural areas, I will continue to meet representatives of businesses, such as those in Dumfries and Galloway whom I spoke to during the summer, who told me that, even when they find staff who want to take up posts, the appointments often fall through because there is no affordable housing nearby. Continued cuts to bus services in those same rural communities simply add to the recruitment barriers that many businesses face. There is also a role for the sector in these post-pandemic times, when many people are re-evaluating their life choices. Any business that is still just offering the minimum wage and that thinks of zero-hours contracts as a positive destination will not be able to recruit, frankly.

On my many farm visits during the summer, I found that the uncertainty from the Scottish Government over future funding mechanisms and the lack of detail about what will be expected of farmers in order to secure that funding remains the main concern. There is still anger among our fishers over the shambolic handling of highly protected marine areas. Not surprisingly, the small producers whom I met—the backbone of the food and drink sector in my region—highlighted the impact of cost increases caused by spiralling inflation, which many of them had to absorb because of the lag between cost rises and price rises. That is why practical support from the Scottish Government, such as reinstating the food processing, marketing and co-operation grant, is more important now than it ever has been if we are to maintain the growth in the sector we all want to see.

Taking a more strategic approach to food and drink policy is vital. It is so disappointing that, 15 months since the Parliament passed the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill—now the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022—the Scottish Government has failed to publish a draft good food nation plan for consultation.

I hope that, in her closing comments, the cabinet secretary will tell us when we will see that draft plan. It needs to show how we embed farming and food production at every level of education and place a far bigger focus on procuring and promoting local food and drink. The Scottish Government, local authorities, the national health service and other public bodies spend more than £14.5 billion a year on services,

works and goods, including food, but, for too long, public procurement has focused too narrowly on price and cost reduction. We have failed to maximise the benefits of low-carbon local supply chains, which is why we should ensure that discovering what is on our doorstep is not just a slogan and instead have a clear target of 50 per cent for the level of local sustainable food that is bought by the public sector, as proposed by Labour. Local procurement not only supports local businesses; it reduces our carbon footprint and poverty.

The importance of food and drink goes beyond their crucial economic importance, as they impact on our health, our environment, our record on animal welfare, and on tackling poverty. For far too long, far too many people in Scotland have lacked adequate access to good, nutritious food, exposing the gross inequalities that we face today. Although our food and drink sector in Scotland has grown, so too has the scandal of food poverty. It is absolutely right that we celebrate the success of Scotland's food and drink sector and that we support the continued growth of what is a good success story, but we also need to rethink how we approach access to food.

The failure to enshrine in law the right to food when the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill was passed 15 months ago was a missed opportunity. The Parliament can change that by backing Labour's right to food bill, which Rhoda Grant will introduce. In a nation that provides so much outstanding food and drink, it is to all our shame that so many children in Scotland still go to bed hungry at night, that the use of food banks is at record levels, and that many of those who work to put food on the tables in restaurants struggle to pay for food to put on their own families' tables. That is a scandal that needs to end.

15:56

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this vitally important debate. I have been privileged to visit many stakeholders from across Scotland's rural and seafood industries, from catching to processing to trading and beyond. It was clear that their successes are essential to the Scottish economy and, of course, to the local economy of my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast. When the local sector thrives, so do local businesses. Families move in and support the population, and families provide labour to support education, health and many other critical public support roles. Indeed, it is not really far reaching to suggest that our food and drink industries sustain not just our physical bodies but our communities and give life to a wide range of other Scottish industries and sectors.

I love the visualisation that the story of our seafood industry is woven into the rich tapestry of Scotland's history. Without that industry, the coastal communities such as the ones that I represent simply would not exist. Each of them is a testament to local ingenuity and is a story of a human commitment to provide. Our seafood sector is a cornerstone of seafood not just here but globally. Peterhead, in my constituency, is home to the largest fishing port in the UK and Europe's largest white fishing port. It is the hub of Scotland's seafood industry. There has been a harbour at Peterhead for more than 400 years and, throughout the centuries, the success of the town has been closely linked to the level of maritime trade and activity.

When I met representatives of the Peterhead fish market, I witnessed at first hand—very early in the morning—the enormous undertaking and organisation involved. It is apparent that the fish market is no ordinary marketplace. It is a testament to Scotland's enterprise and its role in the global food economy.

On Saturday, I had a fantastic day out at SeaFest Peterhead, and it was great to see the cabinet secretary, Mairi Gougeon, there as well, enjoying the Blue Toon, as we call it. Given that it was the first such festival, it was an incredible success. It was not just a food festival; it was a showcase of what we have to offer. From the vast attendance numbers and the diversity of those who came to visit, it was apparent that there is a hunger—if members will excuse the pun—to celebrate what we have locally. From young to old, there was a true community spirit of pride and a desire to educate about what we have. That intergenerational conversation on issues concerning our rural communities is needed today more than ever.

At the Turriff Show in August, I met NFUS members and discussed how we can better incorporate the topics of fishing, farming and food security into our education system to entice our younger generations to continue that work and to—I am sure—improve what we have. I look forward to working with NFUS on that issue in the years to come.

Farming and fishing are rapidly evolving industries. It is abundantly clear that our food and drink sector—particularly our seafood sector—plays a leading role in supporting Scotland to thrive at home and abroad. On a local level, the opportunities that fishing provides are invaluable. From catching to processing and from packing to marketing, our blue economy offers those opportunities in abundance.

Although, first and foremost, we are talking about food, the Scottish fish sector is essential to Scotland's soft power on the world stage. What

does that soft power look like in numbers? Put frankly, fish and seafood are Scotland's primary food export. In 2021, Scottish exports of fish and seafood were valued at £1 billion, or 204,000 tonnes, and they accounted for 60 per cent of total food exports. They also accounted for 63 per cent of total UK fish and seafood exports.

Although I would love nothing more than to reel off success after success, I must spend a moment discussing the many concerns that have been raised with me by farmers and fishers since I was elected. If we are to ensure the security of good-quality Scottish food and drink, it is incumbent on all of us in the chamber to listen carefully to those concerns and to address them. Among them, Brexit continues to be the number 1 concern. The loss of freedom of movement and free trade has done untold damage to our rural economy. Our prized seafood industry has been hit with an estimated 50 per cent increase in the cost of packaging items that are sent to the EU. Some shellfish exporters have estimated that the new barriers to trade with the EU have resulted in additional costs of £500 to £600 per consignment, which makes some exports unviable. In fact, Seafood Scotland has told us that post-Brexit labour shortages are having a huge impact on the seafood processing sector, with many businesses “turning down growth opportunities due to a lack of labour.”

If the UK Government and the Labour Opposition in London will not listen, perhaps our colleagues could pass on the message of Mike Park, the chief executive of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association. Talking about Brexit, he said:

“We were the poster boys, we wanted out. But a lot have now reassessed their enthusiasm for Brexit because it has delivered nothing. It has left some very negative legacies and hasn't provided any of the positives we were promised.”

In conclusion—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Ms Adam, please resume your seat for a second. Could I have less chitchat across the benches? Please resume, Ms Adam.

Karen Adam: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I acknowledge the harsh realities that the sector faces, and I pay tribute to all those who have worked on and pushed ahead while bearing the weight of Tory political decisions. I thank them for sustaining us throughout it all, and we celebrate their resilience.

16:03

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands Green): I am delighted to speak in this important debate. I speak once again at a time when we are

still deep in a climate and nature emergency. We saw what a real emergency response looks like during the pandemic. Scientists say that the climate and nature crises will cause even more damage than Covid, so let us show the way and act like our future depends on it.

Of course, food and drink are inextricably linked to climate and biodiversity. Our farmers and crofters know better than most how changing weather patterns affect crops, how water scarcity can impact production and how heat stress affects livestock and dairy yields. We all noticed the veg shortages in February, which the British Retail Consortium put down to

“Difficult weather conditions in the south of Europe and northern Africa”.

Scotland’s farming, fishing and food and drink sectors are tremendous assets to our country. Much has already been said about their £15 billion contribution to our economy and the 120,000 people—many of them in rural communities—who are employed in those sectors. However, to continue thriving in a world in which the climate is changing while reducing its significant contribution to the climate and nature crises, our food sector must adapt, and it must be fully supported and incentivised to do so.

Change can be daunting, but not changing is not an option. The world is turning and we cannot stand still. We all have a stake in a food system that works for the public, for the planet and for producers. We need a national conversation about what we want our food system to look like. Do we want to produce more of our own food in Scotland? What is the right balance between imports, exports and self-sufficiency? Should we use more of our land to grow our food, or would we benefit more from producing crops for whisky and animal feed? How can we increase our resilience?

The coming years will provide a golden opportunity to shape and strengthen our food system, with the forthcoming agriculture bill and payment framework, just transition policies for the agriculture and marine sectors and, not least, the good food nation plans, which have been mentioned.

I am proud to have played my part in shaping the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, which enshrines principles such as the role of a sustainable food system, resilient supply chains and the right to food. The resulting public sector plans will be powerful tools for influencing what food is produced, to what standards, where it is sold, how much it costs and how it gets on to our plates. For example, local authorities could establish procurement contracts with local providers of wild venison, organic fruit and veg

and selectively sourced seafood. That would give smaller producers a steady income, increase the market for those sustainable products and encourage others to move into production, creating a virtuous circle.

I would also love to see good food nation plans include support for networks such as the Highland Good Food Partnership, which supports local businesses and encourages collaboration on community food growing, food banks and tackling food waste.

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention?

Ariane Burgess: I will keep going, thank you.

Networks such as those show how food can bring communities together.

I will now focus on some of the primary producers of our food, such as the fruit and veg growers, horticulturists and market gardeners who work hard to grow food for our shops, veg boxes and dinner tables. They are key workers in green jobs, but many do not receive the public funding that other farmers get if their farm is too small, if they do not keep livestock or depending on the type of land that they farm.

Fruit and veg growers deserve more support, and that should be reflected in the new farm payment framework that will follow next year’s agriculture bill. It is fantastic that the Scottish Government has extended funding for the fruit and vegetable aid scheme, providing up to £6 million over the next two years through producer organisations, but most of that will not make its way to small producers. More support for market gardens and large fruit and veg farms would create thousands of good green rural jobs and contribute millions to our rural economy. It would also ensure that public money delivers public goods: healthy and sustainable food for people in Scotland.

I thank everyone who works in Scotland’s food and drink sector—they all play an important role in feeding the nation and/or contributing to our economy. That is why we must use levers such as the good food nation plans, farm support payments and other public funding wisely to support the whole sector to adapt in a changing world, increase its resilience and thrive as we truly become a good food nation.

16:09

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on valuing Scotland’s world-class food and drink sector, particularly because it is taking place during Scottish food and drink fortnight. Scotland’s food and drink sector is one of the key drivers of

our economy. We are fortunate, particularly in my South Scotland region, to have some of the most amazing and delicious products and pure natural resources to be found anywhere in the world.

I know that it has been said already, but it is worth repeating that, with an annual turnover of £15 billion and overseas export sales of more than £6 billion, which represents nearly a third of all UK food exports, the food and drink industry is a major contributor to Scotland's economy.

There are more than 17,000 food and drink businesses, which employ around 129,000 people, many of whom are in remote and economically fragile rural and island communities, such as communities in Dumfries and Galloway. Exports of Scottish food and drink were valued at a record £8.1 billion in 2022. That is up £1.9 billion, which is 30.6 per cent, compared with 2021. However, despite the fantastic efforts of our food and drink producers, it is clear that Brexit continues to pose huge challenges to Scotland's food and drink industry due to the loss of free trade and the imposition of new obstacles to the movement of goods. Indeed, the Ethical Dairy, which is a producer in Galloway, stopped sending goods to Europe and Ireland altogether because of Brexit bureaucracy. It was just going to cost too much. No matter how innovative the industry is or how wonderful our produce is, if we cannot get that produce to markets, the sector will face challenges.

From attending the majority of the agricultural shows over the summer—including at Stranraer, Wigtown, Dumfries and Kelso—it is clear that numerous challenges are impacting the sector, and removal from the EU single market plays a big part in that. The food and drink sector has borne the brunt, particularly through the loss of freedom of movement of people and free trade. Now, with clear evidence of Brexit causing food bills to rocket, we are all affected. The Opposition likes to point out that many factors influence food inflation, but other countries and citizens do not have to contend with Brexit. It is really important that we speak about that.

The Scottish Government is doing all that it can within its resources and powers to help the sector. Supporting our local food businesses provides important markets for local producers. The Scottish Government has provided £17.5 million to businesses and groups in the food and drink sector, including the oyster festival in Stranraer. I am glad that Colin Smyth mentioned that, as I will be going there myself this Saturday. The oyster festival in Stranraer has received £15,000 of combined funding from the Scottish Government and Dumfries and Galloway Council. Again, I look forward to oysters in Stranraer this weekend. It is worth pointing out that Loch Ryan is home to

Scotland's only native oyster beds. I thank Stranraer Development Trust for all its efforts in organising the oyster festival, which is helping to shine a light on the town that I was born in and grew up in.

Scotland's ambitious 10-year collaborative food and drink recovery plan targets strong growth against Brexit impacts. "Sustaining Scotland. Supplying the World. A strategy for Scotland's food and drink industry" aims to mitigate the damage inflicted by the Covid pandemic and Brexit. The strategy aims to support the sector to grow faster than similarly sized competitors, such as those in Ireland and Norway. The Scotland Food & Drink partnership projects that it could support a 25 per cent increase in turnover for the sector by 2028, from a projected £16 billion to £20 billion. The actions include restoring promotional activity to pre-pandemic levels to reach new markets, and recruiting and retaining a highly skilled workforce to adapt and tackle skills shortages in the sector. That will support rural small businesses, such as businesses across Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders.

Scotland's food and drink sector lost many of the benefits that it once had in trading with the EU, and that makes me crabbit. Although the full economic consequences of Brexit are yet to be realised, businesses now face additional expense when trading, and some food producers have found that their goods can no longer be exported to the EU. Brexit also hampers domestic production, with labour shortages caused by the loss of freedom of movement.

Pre-Brexit, Scottish producers sold 20,000 tonnes of seed potatoes to EU customers each year. The Windsor framework allows seed potatoes to go to Northern Ireland, but the EU market is still closed to Scottish seed potatoes. That is 20,000 tonnes.

Many of Scotland's food industries are still suffering from lower imports and exports to the EU, including a 38 per cent fall in fruit and vegetable exports between 2019 and 2022. The Opposition might go on about how Brexit doesn't matter. It absolutely does matter, and we have to keep reiterating that, because the sooner we are back in the EU as an independent country, the better. Scottish firms are trying to export to Europe, but they face significant additional costs and bureaucracy at a time when their margins are already being squeezed.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: I think I have about 30 seconds before I close.

I hear what Karen Adam is saying about our prized seafood industry, which has been hit with a

50 per cent increase in the cost of packaging items that are sent to the EU. I know from a recent visit to a seafood company in Galloway that the new export health certificates are costing the salmon sector alone approximately £1.3 million a year.

I welcome the support that the Scottish Government is providing to our food and drink sector. I thank the south of Scotland producers for all their hard work, and I hope that Scotland will take its rightful place in the European Union to protect and enhance our food and drink sector.

16:15

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I recognise the world-renowned food and drink producers across Scotland. As we have heard, my constituency boasts amazing artisan cheese and ice-cream makers, and famous butchers in Castle Douglas—not to forget the oyster festival in Stranraer, which takes place this weekend and which I, too, look forward to attending.

I have listened intently to the debate. The one thing that we have yet to hear from the Scottish Government is what it ultimately wants our food and drink industry to deliver. Long before now, the Scottish Government should have been open and honest about what exactly its desired outcomes for a future agricultural policy are, which include how much food it wants Scotland to produce.

We need to know what level of food production is wanted in Scotland for the next few decades and beyond—how many litres of milk, how many kilos of beef, lamb and pork, and how many tonnes of fruit, vegetables and cereals we need. If we knew that, we would understand better the level of imports that the Scottish Government deems to be acceptable, given the potential additional carbon footprint and possible impact on biodiversity of imported food.

Given the current global situation, food security is of utmost importance. However, there has been a vacuum of information from the cabinet secretary when we should have been hearing her outline a future agricultural policy and explain how she hopes to achieve her desired outcomes.

Our food producers have been seeking answers for years and have—naturally—grown frustrated at the lack of direction. Our Scottish food and drink producers are among the best in the world, but they are still being kept in the dark about how much food they need to produce and even about basics such as the Government's definition of regenerative farming.

We need to know all that information to inform decisions about how much land will be needed

and to plan for the future with a degree of confidence. The food and drink industry needs clear direction on future farming policies.

Daniel Johnson: The member alights on an important point about decisions on land use. We have a finite amount of land and there are options—for example, the decision whether to use land for agriculture or forestry is critical. Do we need to be much more focused on such issues as we think about agriculture and land use?

Finlay Carson: Absolutely—I thank Daniel Johnson for his helpful intervention. It is critical to know how much food we need to produce and then to look at how much land we need to produce that food on. As the member said, we do not have an infinite amount of land and we have to make important decisions about that, but the position is still unclear.

We need clear direction on farm policies, including policies on the use of gene editing to create produce that is better suited to a climate-changing Scotland and to reduce any negative impacts on biodiversity. However, the SNP-led Scottish Government—almost certainly influenced by the coalition partners in the Green Party—has chosen to take the narrow-minded approach of opposing the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023. Sadly, and not for the good of our agriculture sector but for constitutional reasons, the Government will blindly attempt to keep pace with our European neighbours. The act simply diverges from outdated rules that were inherited from the European Union by removing more precise breeding techniques such as gene editing from the scope of restrictive genetically modified organism rules and adopting a similar regulatory stance to that in other countries around the world, including the USA, Canada, Japan, Australia, Brazil and Argentina.

Despite widespread appeals from scientists, farmers and breeders, who have all highlighted Scotland's remarkable world-leading research strengths in places such as the James Hutton Institute and the Roslin Institute here, in Edinburgh, the Scottish Government has remained tone deaf and has steadfastly refused to accept new technology that offers faster and more precise delivery of desired traits and, as a consequence, offers many opportunities to develop more sustainable, productive and climate-resistant farming systems, which would, in turn, add to Scotland's vibrant food and drink sector.

I do not want to see producers going into battle with one hand tied behind their backs when it is their ambition to protect the clean, green brand of Scotland's £15 billion food and drink industry. The Scottish Government needs to come clean over its misguided hostility towards gene editing technologies and provide proper justification for its

position, rather than just having a desire to remain aligned with the EU.

The EU is now changing its stance and is rightly recognising that the world is changing dramatically and that food security is now increasingly more important. Covid, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis, a more aggressive climate change shift and a growing population and a demographic shift across the world have all sharpened the minds of the EU and turned them towards gene-edited crops. Where will that leave the Scottish Government? Will we see a massive, late but very welcome U-turn on the precision breeding issue? Will ministers now listen to the science rather than the anti-science, anti-growth—indeed, anti-everything—Green Party?

The European Commission appears to be moving away from its farm to fork policy as it realises that it would be a prescription for disaster, as it would not only increase hunger but undermine climate and environmental goals.

Gene editing research has moved on, with amazing policies to reduce inputs of artificial fertilisers, chemicals and water. With the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions often incorrectly being laid at the doorstep of livestock production, GE is opening up major opportunities to improve the sustainability, productivity, health and welfare of farmed animals.

Should we be judicious and careful going forward? Yes, absolutely, but let us listen to the science, not ill-informed scaremongering, when it comes to setting farm production policy. We need a food system that is efficient, productive and environmentally sustainable to provide nutritious food with an increasingly small environmental impact. That can happen only if it is based in reality and not on wishful thinking.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pauline McNeill, who is joining us remotely.

16:22

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scotland's food and drink industry is vital to our economic growth. Food and drink is now Scotland's biggest employer and the industry is worth a mighty £15 billion. The food and drink that we produce from our abundant natural resources is revered around the world for its quality and history, and the production of Scotch whisky and other spirit drinks is of particular importance to Scotland. I have enjoyed listening to members promoting the produce in their local areas in their contributions.

Times have been tough for the sector. Many members mentioned Brexit, which clearly had an impact on the sector, the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequences that have flowed from that, and,

of course, the war in Ukraine, which has fuelled an unprecedented cost of production crisis. Few people foresaw that crisis, but it shows the global nature of how quickly food insecurity can arise and how important it is to keep an eye on geopolitics.

Relentless market pressures and changes to the regulatory environment have added to the many stresses in the sector. Scottish businesses are still navigating a difficult climate, which is likely to remain turbulent for the next few years. For many, the focus will be on stability and remaining viable.

I will talk about Glasgow, in my region, which is Scotland's largest city. The hospitality industry is critical to the supply chain of the food and drink sector and it has been hugely exposed to rising costs, including utility costs and many others.

There is a lack of confidence in public transport. There has been a huge impact on the taxi trade and a failure to properly support it, which has had an impact on cities such as Glasgow. The taxi trade is vital to keeping the beating heart of a city centre thriving.

Growth and resilience are important, as Colin Smyth mentioned in his contribution when he talked about the bus industry. Young people rely on the night bus service in Glasgow to get home from work in the hospitality sector. Many parents who were driving their sons and daughters home from a late shift were met with the introduction of the low-emission zone in Glasgow. The way in which that was done was a disaster. I fear the proposed congestion charges, simply because hospitality is so vital to a city such as Glasgow. If the public lack confidence to come into Glasgow or there is a perception that people cannot do that, and if we do not have the standard of public transport necessary to meet the city's needs, that will impact on recruitment and jobs.

In August, the owners of some of Scotland's most popular hospitality venues shared their concerns over the future of the industry in light of recent closure. Michael Bergson of Buck's Bar and Thundercat pointed to the lack of rates relief, which is still a big issue here compared to England. It creates the impression that Scotland is not doing enough for the sector. The issue is of great concern to me. I met leading members of the food and drink sector in Glasgow to discuss how to navigate the current inflationary pressures and impacts on customer spending powers that are making trading difficult.

I also host the cross-party group on hospitality, which is diverse and includes the wedding sector, the music sector and pubs and clubs. It meets in Parliament regularly. In a city region such as Glasgow, which is geographically important to the sector, it is important to make those connections. Emma Harper and others talked about the

connections with the oyster and salmon industries. As Christine Grahame mentioned local businesses, I will mention Cafe Gandolfi, which has been in Glasgow for decades. It is a great example of an iconic restaurant that serves fresh food from all over Scotland. I want to ensure that cafes and restaurants such as Cafe Gandolfi can continue to take advantage of Scotland's strong sector. We can take it that the sector is facing many issues in which it needs Government support.

Aside from economic growth, we must ensure that our food system in Scotland is contributing to the health and wellbeing of everyone. No matter where someone lives, what they earn or their personal circumstances, it is important that they get access to fresh and affordable food. Food is a basic human right. Members such as Rhoda Grant, Colin Smyth and those from other parties have championed that cause. It is to their credit that they have changed the attitude to the availability of food and the concept of the right to food security. Many Scots are going to bed hungry and relying on food banks and the kindness of strangers—that is an outrage in a country so rich in natural food resources.

I want to mention the work of Homeless Project Scotland, which is a wonderful organisation that is saving lives by feeding people on the streets of Glasgow. As we have heard from other members, one in three children in Glasgow is living in poverty. Food insecurity in Scotland is caused by too much poverty, not too little food. For better access to food, particularly for those who live in areas of multiple deprivation, there must be facilities offering a healthy choice of nutritious and fresh food.

I also know that there are plans to increase Glasgow's food growing capacity by scaling up allotments and community growing as the development of urban farming in the city. Data shows that 20 per cent of people who were referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in mid-2022 were in working households, which shows a rise in in-work food poverty.

The Scottish Government has promised a national plan for ending the need for food banks. We must focus on that and on giving people the right to food, alongside focusing on the viability and sustainability of our food and drink sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Gordon MacDonald will be the final speaker before we move to closing speeches.

16:28

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): In Scotland, our trade surplus in goods is driven by fantastic, world-class quality food and

drink, whether that is the abundance of seafood in Scottish waters, including top-quality salmon, or Scotch beef and lamb reared on our farms. We export soft fruits such as strawberries, raspberries and blueberries, alongside barley, wheat, oats and—of course—whisky. The sector delivers £8 billion of export sales, which adds to the trade surplus that is generated here, in Scotland. Our food and drink products are in high demand in markets across the world because we offer a diverse range of products with broad international appeal that have a reputation for quality, provenance and luxury.

Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Wales are the only countries of the UK that have a trade surplus in all goods and services. The most recent Office for National Statistics figures highlight that we had an overall surplus of £21 billion in 2021. We sell more to the world than we import—generating a surplus that benefits the UK economy—unlike the north-west of England, Yorkshire and the Humber, the East Midlands, the West Midlands, the east of England and south-east England, which all consume more than they produce and have an overall goods and services trade deficit.

Before I focus on the whisky industry, I should remind members that I am the co-convenor of the cross-party group on Scotch whisky.

In 2022, the value of Scottish whisky exports was £6.2 billion, which equates to 1.67 billion bottles of whisky—or 53 bottles of whisky every second—exported to markets all over the world. Scotland's whisky accounted for 77 per cent of Scottish food and drink exports and 25 per cent of all UK food and drink exports. The Scotch whisky industry exports to 174 countries around the world. The largest market is in India, which alone purchased the equivalent of 219 million bottles of whisky, followed by France and then the United States.

Those export sales help to support employment in Scotland, where 11,000 people are directly employed in the whisky industry. They also support 42,000 jobs across the UK. The number of Scottish people directly employed in the whisky industry is up from the 9,300 jobs estimated in 2008, as the number of distilleries has increased from 109 in 2009 to the 146 that we have today. The result is that we have more than 22 million casks lying maturing in warehouses in Scotland—the equivalent of 12 billion bottles of whisky.

However, the UK Government must be careful that its actions do not undermine investment in the industry. In the 2023 spring budget, the UK chancellor increased duty on whisky by 10 per cent, resulting in the duty and VAT amounting to 75 per cent of the average bottle price and widening the difference between the taxation of spirits and that of other categories of alcohol. In

2009, spirits duty per unit of alcohol was 23p. It is now 31.6p—up 43 per cent over the past 14 years.

We have a UK Government that takes 75 per cent of the cost of a bottle of whisky in tax but provides no support for energy costs despite distillation being energy intensive. The industry was also excluded from the energy bill relief that was offered by the UK Government.

The increase comes at a time when year-on-year growth and profitability are being undermined by the UK decision to leave the EU, despite the people of Scotland voting to remain. Analysis highlights that 44 per cent of businesses indicate that Brexit is the main cause of difficulties in trading overseas and attracting agricultural workers, particularly at harvest time, with high inflation and energy costs impacting on profitability and creating continued difficult trading conditions for the food and drink industry.

Brexit has also resulted in Scottish products losing their protected geographical indicator status, similar to the status that products such as Parma ham and champagne have. There is a new reciprocal agreement with the EU to give some protection to our products but that will not necessarily carry the same cachet as before with consumers.

I might not yet have any distilleries in my constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands, but I am fortunate to have the Scotch Whisky Research Institute. The institute, which is based at Heriot-Watt research park, conducts research covering the entire whisky-making process. The aim is to examine all aspects of the process from barley to bottle to improve sustainability and efficiency and to introduce new technology where appropriate.

On my visits to the institute, I have seen how it takes product safety and quality seriously. Another aspect of its work revolves around stopping counterfeiting and protecting the authenticity of Scotch whisky. Our whisky is a premium global product, and the work of the institute's product protection group ensures that only spirit matured in oak casks in Scotland for at least three years can be called Scotch whisky.

Given the importance of Scotland's food and drink industry to the Scottish and UK economy, I welcome the £5 million that the Scottish Government is investing in a new strategy and its ambition to support the industry's aim to grow turnover by 25 per cent by 2028.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Daniel Johnson to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:34

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

The debate might have been about the resilience of the food and drink sector, but if there is one theme that has genuinely united members across the chamber, it is this: we might be talking about resilience, but food and drink represents a real strength in Scotland and a huge opportunity for the future—of that there is no doubt.

It gave me great pleasure to attend the Scotland Food & Drink 2023 awards last Thursday at the Edinburgh international conference centre, and that was very much the theme: the innovation, and the real dynamism and entrepreneurialism, across the sector. I have to say that, even though the event was a dinner, there were so many categories that it made me feel very hungry no matter how much I ate.

It is clear to me that the food and drink sector is part of Scotland's future. A number of members rightly mentioned the whisky industry, but it is worth putting some of those facts into context. Yes, whisky is one of our top exports, but it represents 25 per cent of all UK food and drink exports and 1.5 per cent of all UK exports full stop.

Whisky is a real global success story; what is more, we have the real benefit of having a category of drink that is synonymous with this country. That is something that countries around the world would give their right arms to achieve.

However, there is still more that we can do. While there is a success story here, we might look at other countries such as France. In this country, food and drink are worth some 5 per cent by employment; in France, they are worth 15 per cent. That is a good example, because France has delivered both quality and scale in its food production.

Our challenge is, how do we do that? How do we achieve that sort of scale of economic contribution from the food and drink sector? How do we get other categories such as whisky to the level at which they are synonymous with this country and are seen as a real strength? I will focus on that as we look at the future of the industry.

However, it is also important to reflect on some of the other points that have been made. In particular, my colleagues Rhoda Grant and Colin Smyth were absolutely right to concentrate on security and the links between food and poverty. While we are in the midst of a cost of living crisis, we have to focus on the fact that there are many in this country who cannot afford to eat.

We should consider the fact that 40 per cent of our food is imported, as Rhoda Grant pointed out. Setting targets for food procurement in local

authorities would do a great deal to address that, because we cannot ignore the links between food, poverty and health. At a time when we see obesity levels rising and life expectancy reducing, thinking about the quality of food and ensuring that it is affordable is absolutely key, as Colin Smyth pointed out.

I highlight the contribution from Edward Mountain, who said something quite important. He said that, although we may focus on our success, we also need to be realistic about the context and the challenges. Salmon is a major export that is right up there with whisky, but we cannot ignore some of the real issues that the industry throws up, such as wastage.

Edward Mountain was right to highlight the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's recommendations, and I encourage people in the industry to look at those. Our aquaculture industry is a strength, but we need to find a way of making it sustainable so that we can be truly proud of it and ensure that it continues to make a contribution.

On the subject of realism, however, much of the debate seemed to lapse into some of the usual confusion around borders that we see from members on both the Conservative and SNP front benches. We heard the slightly absurd assertion from Rachael Hamilton that somehow gene editing was the cure to all the border issues and the delays that exporters are facing. To be frank, that is absurd.

Likewise, however, we heard from the SNP the assertion that all the problems with delays and bureaucracy that are experienced at the south coast would somehow disappear if we took those problems and placed them in Gretna. That is, equally, nonsense.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: In a moment.

In order to be credible on that, one has to face the fact that exporting has become a hugely more difficult proposition, especially for small and medium exporters. In a recent *Financial Times* reportage on that, I listened to one tea producer stating that the length of time that it takes to get goods to Europe has gone from two days to 21 days. If Rachael Hamilton can explain how gene editing solves that, I give way to her now.

Rachael Hamilton: There are many benefits of gene editing. Daniel Johnson was clearly not listening to the message about it in my speech. I would like to know whether Scottish Labour members agree with the Scottish Conservatives on bringing forward a gene editing bill or whether they would like to align with Europe.

Daniel Johnson: On that, we absolutely have to be led by the science. There are a great number of things to be looked at around gene editing, particularly on sustainability and ensuring that we have crop yields. However, to say that it is an answer to border problems is, frankly, absurd.

What is more, I am deeply concerned by any proposition that we deviate from keeping pace with Europe. Ultimately, food products need to be exported to countries that are close to us. If we increase the barriers to exporting to Europe, we will make that task more difficult. We only have to look at the DRS and the very real issues that were thrown up by those proposals to see the problems that borders cause. We were facing the proposition of Scottish brewers not being able to sell their products in Scotland because of having differential labelling between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Do not pretend for a second that issues that are caused by borders are solved by creating additional borders; they are not. Instead, they are compounded. That is nonsensical thinking by both front-bench Conservatives and front-bench members of the SNP.

Food and drink is a huge strength of Scotland and is genuinely part of brand Scotland, as Michelle Thomson said. If we are to make good on it, we need a joined-up plan that is integrated with the rest of our economic policy, and we need a comprehensive industrial strategy. Perhaps for next year's food and drink debate, the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy will join his colleague on the front bench.

16:41

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as a partner in the farming business J Halcro-Johnston & Sons, and as a member of NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates.

I am pleased to close the debate for the Scottish Conservatives. It is a debate on a subject that is close to my heart, obviously, as well as being so vital to my Highlands and Islands region.

As my colleague Rachael Hamilton rightly said in her opening remarks, although MSPs might disagree on today's motion and amendments, we all recognise that Scotland is blessed with a world-class food and drinks sector, with people and communities right across our country—from Selkirk to Shetland to Stornoway—producing the highest-quality food and drink, which are enjoyed all round the world.

In a previous role as an advisor to various MSPs, I was never prouder than when one of them would visit Orkney—my home—and enjoy at first hand the fantastic food and drink that is on

offer there. Jamie McGrigor, in particular, would wax lyrical about the quality and variety of produce that was available at the Orkney county show. Folk from communities right across the Highlands and Islands, and across Scotland, can boast the same of their local areas.

We are right to celebrate Scotland's food and drink sector—which at least the first few lines of the Scottish Government's motion do. However, disappointingly if not unexpectedly, we then get into the politics of the matter—politics that mean everything to Scottish nationalist ministers and absolutely nothing to Scotland's farmers, fishermen and food and drink producers. Although it suits the Scottish Government to take that line, and factors such as leaving the European Union and the impact of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine cannot and should not be ignored, SNP ministers cannot ignore their role in creating, through their policy platform, increased uncertainty for Scotland's farmers, fishermen and other workers from across the food and drink sector.

As Rachael Hamilton and other members have rightly pointed out, we still do not know the details of the agriculture bill, and those of us who live on and work Scotland's land are wondering how our sector will be supported in the future. Farming in places such as Orkney can be hard enough—as it is in many communities across my region—without a Government in Edinburgh that still will not tell us what hoops it wants us to jump through. Perhaps the cabinet secretary will tell us how we should invest in our farms when we still do not know how that will be funded.

However, as important as it is, the problem is not just about funding. Too often, it is because of the Scottish Government's policy agenda that businesses are forced to adapt. As I said earlier, farming communities such as mine in Orkney have been left without abattoir facilities on the islands. Many of those who farm on Scotland's islands are left to rely on increasingly unreliable ferry links to get produce to markets. Some are limited in their ability to sell online because the SNP's reaching 100 per cent—R100—broadband programme has not reached them, and probably never will. Even farm diversification, in particular agritourism, risks being hit by damaging plans to introduce short-term lets licensing, which could, having been designed to deal with a problem in Edinburgh, have the biggest impact in rural Scotland.

Agriculture is just not a priority for the Scottish Government. I can give an example to highlight that: £6 million is being spent in Orkney to eradicate stoats. I support that initiative; we agreed early on to allow traps to be sited on our farm. Does the cabinet secretary understand, however, why many local farmers are frustrated when millions are spent on the stoat problem while

funding to control the greylag geese that cause serious damage to agricultural land, and are a problem to many farmers on many of our islands, runs to only tens of thousands of pounds?

Farmers, are facing challenges head-on, as we always have done, but we are doing so with a Government whose coalition partner is a party that sees agriculture as the enemy, that demonises our fantastic red-meat sector and that, instead of promoting a brilliant and healthy home-grown product, would rather talk it down, restrict its consumption or even see it being banned. It is little wonder that so many farmers have lost faith in this SNP-Green nationalist Government.

It is not only our farmers who have lost faith, because the Scottish Government appears at almost every turn to be working against the interests of rural and coastal communities and the local businesses that support so many jobs and livelihoods. The plans for highly protected marine areas were ill considered and were rejected by coastal communities, who recognised the damage that they would do. Those plans have been dropped for now, but given how readily the Greens accepted that U-turn, it is understandable that many people feel that it was simply a case of beleaguered nationalist ministers kicking the can down the road so that the scheme could be reintroduced at a later date.

Speaking of kicking cans down the road, how many millions of pounds and how many hundreds of thousands of hours have been wasted because of the Scottish Government's determination to push ahead with its ill-thought-out plan for a deposit return scheme? We know that that has left the taxpayer millions of pounds out of pocket, but how many small businesses were forced to prepare for a scheme that was then dropped? They paid out thousands—sometimes hundreds of thousands—of pounds to make changes to their businesses but will not see any return on that money any time soon, if ever. Millions of pounds from across the sector are now lost to future investment.

After the events that we have experienced in the past few years, no one should need an explanation of the importance of securing and enhancing food security. That is why our amendment highlights the benefits of gene editing. The UK Government has led on gene editing, recognising the opportunities that it brings for food health and security, and for the economy. As colleagues have said, even the European Union now appears to be moving slowly towards that position. Scotland, which has a fantastic research and innovation base, is well placed to take advantage of that new approach, but the Scottish Government must get behind it.

I appreciate that the Scottish Greens will not support our position on gene editing: their increasingly isolated views and position on the subject are well known. However, people in the SNP who are from agricultural backgrounds, or who represent rural Scotland and our farmers and crofters, should recognise that there is nothing in our amendment today for them to disagree with. I hope that they will support our amendment at decision time, although they probably will not.

Although Scottish Conservatives are putting Scotland's rural and coastal communities at the centre of our policy agenda by placing food production at the heart of the new agriculture bill, investing in producers to keep food prices affordable for consumers, and boosting support for technology and innovation, SNP members will follow their whip and vote with their Scottish Green colleagues, because they are now beholden to their anti-business and anti-rural nationalist bedfellows. Rural Scotland sees that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Mairi Gougeon to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. Take us to decision time, please, cabinet secretary.

16:48

Mairi Gougeon: I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions to the debate. The range of interventions that we have heard shows the level of challenge that the sector faces, but, of course, it continually rises to meet those challenges with energy and ambition.

I will start with the positives of the debate. Any time we debate food and drink, one highlight comes from the many examples that members showcase from their own constituencies as they talk about the great work that is happening right across Scotland. In her opening contribution, Rachael Hamilton gave the examples of Hardiesmill and Peelham Farm, two farms that I am very familiar with and both of which I have visited. They are fantastic examples, not only because of the amazing quality of their produce but because of the sustainable and regenerative farming practices that they showcase. We also got a nice little tour of Christine Grahame's constituency.

It was fantastic to hear Karen Adam talk about the importance of the fishing industry and Peterhead SeaFest, which took place at the weekend. She is right: it was the Blue Toon at the weekend, and it was great to see such a fantastic turnout for the event, which is a real celebration of what Peterhead has to offer.

It was also really good to hear from Colin Smyth, Emma Harper and Finlay Carson about the cross-party delegation that we are going to be

sending to Stranraer at the weekend. I look forward to our impromptu cross-party group there.

As ever, many important points were raised during the debate and I want to make sure that I cover as many of them as possible. First, I turn to the discussion on the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. A few members raised the act in their contributions and there were some key points that I want to cover. We have a vision of Scotland as a good food nation, and I am really looking forward to launching our consultation on the national good food nation plan. That plan is going to be wide ranging and cross cutting, and it will reflect the spectrum of food-related issues that contribute to our nation's social and economic wellbeing, the environment, people's health and physical and mental wellbeing, economic development, animal welfare, education and child poverty.

I remain fully committed to Scotland being a place where everyone takes an interest in their food, where the food sector workers are committed to serving and selling good food, where everyone has ready access to healthy and nutritious food, where dietary-related diseases are in decline and where we produce our food in a way that is sustainable and works for both the climate and nature.

Colin Smyth: When will the draft plan be published? It is 15 months since the bill was passed.

Mairi Gougeon: We are still on time and on schedule in terms of the timescales that we set out for publishing that. I will set out the detail on that in due course and it will be coming forward shortly.

The good food nation goes hand in hand with our commitment to local food for everyone. That is about supporting locally based production and circular supply chains, cutting food miles and enabling more people to enjoy food that was grown locally, while also delivering on our "A Trading Nation" export strategy as well as the visions that we have published for agriculture and sustainable aquaculture.

Rachael Hamilton and Rhoda Grant referred to what they saw as missed opportunities in the 2022 act. However, the act created the overall framework. Where we will really make the difference across many of the points that have been raised today and bring together the key areas of food policy is in the good food nation plan. That was always the intention. As I have outlined, I really look forward to launching the consultation on the draft plan and getting the feedback.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sorry—I need to make some progress.

I want to return to Rhoda Grant's contribution. I very much agree with a lot of the points that she, Colin Smyth and Daniel Johnson covered in the debate and most of what is covered in her amendment. However, I want to touch in particular on the right to food, which Rhoda Grant mentioned. As she will be aware, we had many discussions on the subject during the passage of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill. The right to food is a fundamental human right and this Government has committed to incorporating that right into Scots law, but to doing that through the forthcoming human rights bill.

That bill is the appropriate place to do that because of the complex interrelationships between rights and obligations across the four treaties. That is why we want to bring that together in a single coherent and integrated framework. I am happy to reaffirm that commitment today, because we want to strengthen domestic legal protections by making those rights enforceable in Scots law.

Rhoda Grant: Will the cabinet secretary empower the Scottish food commission to bring a right to food into reality? We have a right to food now—it is a human right—but actually, when we look around, we see so many of our citizens not being able to access food. Will she charge the food commission with making the right a reality for people?

Mairi Gougeon: That is where we also set out, as part of the passage of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, recognition of the right to food and the fact that, through that plan, that is what we are ultimately giving effect to. However, I am more than happy to continue that conversation with Rhoda Grant, given the member's bill that I know she is proposing. I know that it is a vital topic, so I am more than happy to follow it up in discussions with her.

I will continue to focus on the contributions of Rhoda Grant and Colin Smyth, given the number of important points that they highlighted. I agree with much of what was said, particularly about poverty and the fact that so many people are dependent on food banks in a nation that is rich in so many ways, not least in the quality of the food that we produce. Taken together with our figures on food waste, which are truly shocking, those are problems that we must address.

I will clarify one point. Rhoda Grant requested more detail on the plan to end the need for food banks. The first plan was published on 5 June this year. I would be happy to follow up and provide more detail on that.

Procurement is another hugely important area that was raised by several members. It is an area

in which there is agreement between us all—ultimately, we all want the same thing. However, at the same time, it is a very complex area. The legislation that governs procurement is complicated and it prohibits any discrimination against imported produce. That is why we have provided broad support measures to ensure that local producers can access public sector contracts, including the supplier development programme, with up to £150,000 being available over the course of this financial year, and the food for life programme, which now operates across 17 local authorities to support more locally sourced and healthier food in schools. We also have a Glasgow-based pilot on expanding the food for life principles across the public sector. We have provided that with £490,000 of funding this year.

Further, we have committed to updating “Catering for Change” to set out the principles that relate to the sustainable procurement of food and catering services in the public sector to align procurement behind sustainable, low-carbon farming and food.

Rhoda Grant and Rachael Hamilton mentioned what they would propose in relation to targets. We will investigate that. More detail will follow, alongside other work on the good food nation plan.

To touch on another point that Colin Smyth raised about some of the concerns that he picked up from his region, I know how important the food processing, marketing and co-operation grant is to businesses. I have heard those concerns directly. Unfortunately, we had to put a pause on that scheme due to pressures on the Scottish budget this year. However, we have taken the opportunity to carry out an independent review of the scheme, through Scotland Food & Drink, to identify how it can best meet the needs of Scotland's food processing sector within the new reality of single-year funding. That review has concluded, and we will carefully consider the recommendations that have come about.

Another important point that I want to touch on, which has been raised by quite a few members, is the focus on our primary producers—our farmers, crofters and fishers—without whom we would not be having this debate. On the calls for clarity and detail in agriculture, I know that members will be well aware—because we have discussed it at length in previous debates—that we are working closely with our farmers and crofters to co-develop our work in agriculture to make sure that we have policy that works, is deliverable and does what we need it to do for food production, climate and nature. As I have set out previously, that co-development takes time.

However, we have set our direction and the future direction of travel, which we published in “Delivering our Vision for Scottish Agriculture” last

year. We have published our route map, which outlines when the key decision points are, when information will be available and what support is available now. With that, we published a definition of regenerative farming, which Finlay Carson asked for in his contribution. We have announced the conditions for support that will be implemented from 2025.

In her contribution, Ariane Burgess raised an important question and made important points about how we support small producers. We are committed to doing that.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: I need to make progress, as I am approaching my closing comments.

I also want to address the points that Jamie Halcro Johnston made in his interventions on the importance of abattoir facilities across Scotland. We have been doing work on a small producers pilot, which has included a survey of abattoirs, to better tailor our support. That work is continuing. I highlight that those are very important points that we are considering because we know that supporting our small producers is hugely important.

I have one final point to make. Edward Mountain normally makes considered contributions. Unfortunately, his speech today did not feel quite so considered—there was some utter nonsense in it. That also applies to Jamie Halcro Johnston's comments about our commitments to a future agriculture bill. In line with our published commitments, we will be introducing that this year.

We have touched on aquaculture, which, as has been identified, is a significant contributor to our rural economy, providing well-paid jobs. Our vision for sustainable aquaculture addresses some of the concerns that the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee has previously raised, and we see a strong future for the sector in Scotland.

I reiterate that our food and drink sector is a Scottish success story, but we cannot stand still. Yes, there are challenges, but the industry strategy rightly shows that resilience, sustainability and growth can go hand in hand. We have a fantastic larder on our doorstep—in our waters and on our land—and fantastic local producers to make the most of it. I call on each and every member to join me in celebrating them, which they richly deserve.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of a business motion. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-10419, on a change to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 14 September 2023—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Debate

and insert

followed by Scottish Government Debate: The Role of Football in Scottish Society and Communities—[George Adam].

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-10406.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-10406, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on celebrating the resilience of Scotland's food and drink sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access digital voting.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-10406.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. [*Inaudible.*] I would have voted no.

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

For

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

Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-10406.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, is: For 29, Against 84, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-10406.1, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S6M-10406, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on celebrating the resilience of Scotland's food and drink sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Colin Beattie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Once again, the app failed to perform. I would have voted no.

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

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-10406.1, in the name of Rhoda Grant, is: For 16, Against 97, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-10406, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on celebrating the resilience of Scotland's food and drink sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dorman, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-10406, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on celebrating the resilience of Scotland's food and drink sector, is: For 83, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the value of Scotland's food and drink sector and the significant contribution that it makes to the national economy, as well as to local economies and communities; welcomes the plan, published by Scotland Food and Drink, to create stability, sustainability, resilience and innovation in order to support the sector to succeed and prosper over the next 10 years; further welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to invest £5 million to support delivery of this plan; acknowledges the challenges caused by Brexit, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and climate change, and the need for the sector to respond and adapt, and believes that the hard Brexit negotiated by the UK Government has created serious, long-term harms, including labour shortages and new barriers to trade, especially for Scottish food and drink exporters, while driving up inflation in food and supply chain costs.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Child Poverty

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10068, in the name of Bob Doris, on tackling child poverty. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament strongly supports all measures to tackle child poverty; understands that 32% of children in Glasgow were estimated to live in relative poverty in 2022, compared with the wider Scottish rate of 24%; condemns what it sees as harmful UK Government policies such as the benefit cap and two-child limit, which it understands have forced as many as 20,000 children in Scotland into poverty; acknowledges that Glasgow city is reportedly the Scottish local authority worst hit by the two-child limit with, it understands, 3,990 recipients, or 54% of the households in receipt of Universal Credit or Child Tax Credits, not receiving financial support for at least one child in April 2023; considers that the Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn constituency is among the areas most seriously affected as, it understands, it contains the highest proportion of deprived postcodes in Scotland, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation; believes that the two-child limit causes disproportionate harm to low-income families and women survivors of domestic abuse or sexual assault, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to increase representations to the UK Government to reverse the benefit cap and the two-child limit, which it considers undermine the work done to lift children out of poverty, and to introduce its own equivalent of the Scottish Child Payment in support of low-income families.

17:12

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I thank all those members who have supported my motion on tackling child poverty in Scotland.

My motion outlines the deeply damaging impact of United Kingdom welfare policy on low-income families in Scotland. UK Government policies impact on some of Scotland's poorest families—that includes appalling policies such as the benefits cap and the two-child limit, not forgetting the UK Government's notorious rape clause. It is estimated that those UK policies have pushed 20,000 Scottish children into poverty in the past year and that, this year, 25,000 children in Scotland are affected.

We all, in all parties and at all levels of government, have a responsibility to do all that we can to reduce and ultimately eradicate child poverty. The Scottish Government's action to tackle child poverty, including our £25-per-week Scottish child payment, has lifted 90,000 children out of poverty. However, the UK's two-child limit directly undermines that progress.

As Citizens Advice Scotland has put it, the two-child limit is actively working against welcome

action to meet the Scottish child poverty targets, such as the introduction of the Scottish child payment and the mitigation of other UK social security cuts, by driving up poverty rates for families and groups identified as being at greater risk of poverty.

Glasgow North West Citizens Advice Bureau stands in solidarity with those families who are impacted every single day. I thank the staff for all that they do, and for sharing the voices of lived experience with me in advance of the debate, some of which I will now share with members.

The bureau supported a lone parent to four children aged between 14 and four months who needed help with energy debt and support to progress a child maintenance claim. No one plans to be in financial difficulty. The parent found herself in financial difficulty when she separated from her husband and became reliant on universal credit, and she was entitled to support for only two of her four children.

Just imagine—a UK benefits system that financially punishes a lone parent for a marital breakdown with a financial penalty that targets and removes money that is intended to support children in need.

Such cases are not uncommon. Glasgow North West Citizens Advice Bureau also assisted another lone parent to four children who ranged from 12 to three years old. The CAB assisted in applying for health-related benefits for two of the children, who had severe additional support needs.

The parent had found himself in financial difficulty when his wife died and he gave up well-paid work to care for his children. In claiming universal credit, he was entitled to support for only two of his four children. Imagine experiencing such a bereavement and facing severe financial hardship under a UK benefits system that simply dismisses the financial need to support two of your children. That is the current UK benefits system—that is the reality of the two-child limit in practice.

It is the reality for almost 4,000 people in Glasgow, which is reportedly the council area worst hit in Scotland by the two-child limit. In Glasgow, 54 per cent of households in receipt of universal credit or child tax credits were not receiving financial support for at least one child.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Would Mr Doris like to address the issue of my constituent, who is disabled and poor and needs his money? He put in an application to Social Security Scotland back in January this year, and he is still waiting for his first inquiry to be acknowledged by the department.

Mr Doris would surely acknowledge that Social Security Scotland is failing people in Scotland who are disabled. Will he apologise for that?

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

Bob Doris: Mr Balfour, I have come to respect much of your comments in the chamber, but that was an appalling contribution. Of course Social Security Scotland must do all that it can, in a dignified way, to reach out to disabled people. We must do our best, and we will do that. However, Mr Balfour, to make that representation in the chamber this evening, when your party is plunging families into poverty by design, is just disgraceful.

It is the reality for 20,000 children across the country. My constituency of Maryhill and Springburn is among the worst affected. The two-child limit causes disproportionate harm to low-income families and women survivors of domestic abuse or assault; I do not pretend to know what that is like.

On that front, I make it clear to the Labour Party: you cannot make a rape clause fairer—there is nothing fair about rape.

I am not surprised that the Conservatives did not sign my motion, which condemns the current UK Government for its punitive benefits regime that impacts on the most vulnerable families and which

“notes the calls on the Scottish Government to increase representations to the UK Government to reverse the benefit cap and the two-child limit”.

However, I am genuinely deeply disappointed that none of my Labour colleagues in the Scottish Parliament backed my motion, which takes a stand against the current UK Conservative Government. Labour has failed to do that—I will just let that sink in.

We are all well aware that Sir Keir Starmer and the UK Labour Party have flipped on this issue and that the Labour Party would now retain the deeply damaging and unjust UK benefits regime. However, I know—I do know—that there are Labour colleagues in this place who are disgusted, as I am, at the benefits cap, the two-child limit and the rape clause. This debate is an opportunity for MSPs in all parties to raise their voice in solidarity against a UK benefits regime that, by design, chooses not to support our most vulnerable—a discredited benefits regime that is now set to be adopted by Labour should the party take power.

I ask members, therefore, to show solidarity not with the SNP but by joining us in solidarity with those families who are impacted and driven into poverty by a UK benefits regime that undermines Scottish efforts to tackle child poverty and wilfully

denies adequate financial support to children and families who are living in poverty.

I look forward to the rest of the debate and I hope that other members, across all parties, will raise their voices in support of a benefits system that should show respect, dignity and fairness.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given the nature of the debate, I remind members that comments should be made through the chair.

17:19

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am happy to be involved in the debate. Social security benefits are an incredibly important part of governance, and I often feel that they do not get enough airtime in the Parliament. Unfortunately, however, Bob Doris, instead of dealing with the failings of his SNP Government or debating issues that we, in this Parliament, can change, is simply deflecting attention from the woeful record of his Government on social security over the past six years.

We are five years on from the devolution of social security and the setting up of Social Security Scotland. We should be up and running by now and seeing the fruits of a uniquely Scottish system of benefits that works to meet uniquely Scottish needs.

We had an opportunity of a lifetime, which very few Governments ever get—a blank slate and a clean piece of paper. What did the SNP do with it? It has created a shambles here, in Scotland.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Mr Balfour talked about deflection, but the deflection in the debate tonight has come from him when we are discussing child poverty and the unfair and cruel practices of the Conservative Government.

Social security was always supposed to be a safety net, but that safety net has been removed with the benefit cap and the two-child policy. Does Mr Balfour think that it should be put back in place and that we should do our level best to help children across this nation who are in poverty?

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

Jeremy Balfour: With regard to that intervention, I thank the member for his speech. We have seen, during and since the pandemic, that the UK Government has put that safety net in place. It is there, and—more to the point—it is working, unlike the system that his Government has introduced.

Five years on from the devolution of social security, the Department for Work and Pensions is still administering key benefits in Scotland that should be devolved. Those include severe

disability allowance, which the Scottish Government handed back because we could not deal with it.

Five years on, we have seen a 350 per cent increase in the number of complaints being made against Social Security Scotland, each one representing an individual and a family who have had to fight harder for the support and access that they require. To crown it all, there is the small detail of the £1.3 billion black hole in the finances that will open up in 2028.

Bob Doris: I thank Mr Balfour for giving way. He is making an interesting and flawed contribution to a different debate—it is not the debate that we are here to have. We are here to debate whether or not it is fair or just that the UK Tory Government, by design, will not meet the basic needs of 20,000 children across Scotland, including 4,000 children in the city of Glasgow, which I represent, because of the two-child cap. Does Mr Balfour agree with that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members to make their interventions a little bit briefer, please.

Jeremy Balfour: No, I do not agree with Mr Doris. We should be debating in this Parliament the powers that we have and that we are simply not using due to the incompetence of his Government.

The SNP has managed to so grossly mismanage the roll-out over the past five years that it will have to come up with a shortfall that is roughly the equivalent of the entire gross domestic product of the Solomon Islands.

In the next few years, the SNP will have a choice: to cut social security, cut education or cut health. That is the choice that it has to make because of its incompetence. That will leave more people in my area and across Scotland in poverty.

We have to ask, how did we get here? We can be certain that the situation is not helped by the lack of accountability and reporting from Social Security Scotland. During recess, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee got a letter in which David Wallace proudly announced that Social Security Scotland was unable to report on the times taken between the submission of relevant documents and a decision being made on a benefits application. With that lack of oversight, it is small wonder that we are seeing so many complaints.

Members should not be mistaken—this is a mess. It is a wonder that the member has the nerve to bring forward his motion to this Parliament, passing comment on the performance of other Governments—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Balfour, could you resume your seat? We have a point of order from Emma Harper.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not participating in the debate, but I am sitting here listening. Bob Doris's motion is about tackling child poverty, not attacking Scotland's social security system, which is doing a great job. I am curious about how the issue that Jeremy Balfour is speaking about relates to the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Harper, for your point of order. There needs to be relevance. I think that Mr Balfour has been linking the comments that he has been making to the motion in relation to poverty, and I am satisfied that he is within standing orders.

I ask Jeremy Balfour to wind up if he can.

Jeremy Balfour: I am grateful, and I seek to wind up by concluding in this regard.

Maybe we need to focus more on our own responsibilities in the social security system to ensure that those who, for whatever reason and wherever they live—

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Balfour give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I am afraid that my time is gone.

This is the thing: the SNP members do not want to focus on the Scottish Government's shameful record. They want to blame everybody else, whether it is the UK Government, other parties that challenge them or individuals who have the strength to stand up and say, "This is not working for me." They want to throw mud at others rather than clean up themselves and clean up Social Security Scotland so that those who are in poverty can get their money—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Jeremy Balfour: My advice to the Government would be: get your own house in order, then you might have some credibility to speak.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Balfour.

I remind members that the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, who is responding to the debate, will do so remotely. Interventions may therefore be sought remotely too, which will be indicated on the screen.

17:27

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Bob Doris for bringing the debate to the chamber. There are few issues as pressing and important as

tackling child poverty, and it should be the focus of far more of our time in the chamber and far more of our collective energies in working on the solutions to tackle it and all its root causes and facets. The life chances of our young people are crucial to how we thrive as a society and as a world, and it is clear to me that we need a change of approach at UK level and Scottish level to lift more children out of poverty.

I am proud that the previous UK Labour Government lifted 2 million children and pensioners out of poverty, including 200,000 children in Scotland alone, through fundamental reform of the social contract, introducing the national minimum wage and tax credits and revitalising support for families with children across the UK.

The next Labour Government will focus on doing the same: growing our economy, spreading wealth to all parts of the country and fixing the economic carnage that has been unleashed by the Tories. It will deliver a new deal for working people by strengthening workers' rights, ending zero-hours contracts, delivering a proper living wage and ensuring that everyone is paid enough to live on without having to rely solely on benefits to supplement poverty wages—

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr O'Kane give way?

Paul O'Kane: I would like to make some progress.

The next Labour Government will fundamentally reform the universal credit system and introduce a child poverty strategy that will ensure that driving down child poverty runs through every aspect and policy area of Government, delivering a proper safety net for those who need it. It will ensure that people can pay their bills, particularly their energy bill, and not fall into a debilitating cycle of debt. I will come on to speak about debt in more detail, including the crucial work that is done by organisations such as Aberlour Child Care Trust in that regard.

I give way to Kevin Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Mr O'Kane for giving way. He talks a great deal about what a future Labour Government might do. Can he comment on Sir Keir Starmer's statement that he wants to make the two-child benefit cap and the rape clause fairer? What does Mr O'Kane think could be done to make those policies fairer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul O'Kane.

Kevin Stewart—because I do not think that the rape clause could be fairer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Paul O'Kane.

Paul O’Kane: The member will have heard me refer to the fundamental reform of universal credit that is required. We need to fundamentally change the current policy, because it does not work. The social security system does not work and it needs to be changed. Forty per cent of claimants are in work, which is why we need a new deal for working people. We need better wages and a national minimum wage that is a real living wage that will lift people out of poverty. Crucially, we need to get people back into work—

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will give way in a moment if Mr Doris will allow me to make a little more progress.

The Parliament unanimously backed the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which set legally binding targets to reduce the number of children experiencing the effects of poverty by 2030. In the past decade, however, 40,000 more children in Scotland have been pushed into poverty. Thirty-nine per cent of children from an ethnic minority household now live in relative poverty, and the percentage of babies in poverty has gone from 27 to 34 per cent. Mr Doris’s party has been in government, so I will give way to him if he has something to say in that regard.

Bob Doris: The nub of the debate is whether any future Government—Labour or Tory—will abolish the two-child limit, the rape clause and the benefits cap, which are pushing 4,000 children in Glasgow and 20,000 children across Scotland into poverty. My constituents and the people of Scotland deserve a straight answer to that question.

Paul O’Kane: I talk about fundamental reform of universal credit because that is what I believe in. However, unfunded spending commitments cannot be made, because working people will pay the price.

Let me remind Mr Doris of the Scottish National Party’s position on the abolition of the two-child cap. Shirley-Anne Somerville said—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Would you resume your seat, Mr O’Kane? Mr O’Kane has taken interventions from Mr Stewart and Mr Doris. They owe him the courtesy of listening to the response and the remainder of his speech. Mr O’Kane should begin to wind up shortly.

Paul O’Kane: Shirley-Anne Somerville said:

“It’s not our policy to alleviate the two-child cap.”

Perhaps that is a straight answer for Mr Doris’s constituents.

I had more to say about debt. Aberlour Child Care Trust’s excellent briefing for the debate points to the vicious cycle of debt, which is pushing people into more and more poverty. We

need to take action. All members need to take action to support our local authorities and national institutions to alleviate that debt and ensure that people can get out of poverty.

I will draw to a close and go back to where I started. Lifting children out of poverty must be a relentless focus. Tinkering at the edges will not do. We need to fundamentally change how we approach our economy, work and our social security system to ensure that those systems once again improve the life chances of all our people, as they have in the past.

17:32

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am grateful to Bob Doris for bringing this important debate to the chamber. It follows on well from last week’s programme for government debate, in which Humza Yousaf reiterated his mission as First Minister to tackle poverty and protect people from harm.

Right now, child poverty is way too high in Scotland and across the UK, although Scotland is the only part of the UK with statutory income targets for tackling child poverty. Recent statistics show that 22.6 per cent of children in Scotland live in poverty. *[Interruption.]* I would like to make progress.

In Labour-run Wales, the figure is 24.4 per cent and, under the Tories, more than 30 per cent of children in England live in poverty.

Social security has, of course, an important role to play in tackling child poverty and, thankfully, the Scottish Parliament now has powers over social security, albeit that they are limited. The Scottish Government has introduced 13 new benefits, seven of which are available only here, in Scotland. That includes the game-changing Scottish child payment, which is worth £25 per week per eligible child, and a supplement payment for unpaid carers. Backed by investment of more than £400 million, it is estimated that the SNP’s bold Scottish child payment will lift around 50,000 children out of relative poverty this year. However, in the past five years, the Scottish Government has also had to spend more than £700 million to mitigate the effects of cruel Tory policies, such as the bedroom tax. With that money, we could increase the Scottish child payment by more than £7.50 per child per week. The Scottish Government’s missions are being held back by its having to protect people from the worst of Westminster’s policies.

I would argue that the Scottish child payment is also a mitigation, because it protects people from the UK Government’s poor minimum wage—which is well below what is required for people to live—and its cut to universal credit of £20 per week.

Labour says that change is coming, so let us consider its track record. When it was in the better together gang with the Tories, Labour told Scotland to vote no. It said that it would keep Scotland in the European Union and that Labour would, one day, become the UK Government and build a fairer society. We are now nine years on from the referendum, and what has happened? We have had four more Tory Prime Ministers and Scotland has been dragged out of the EU against our will. With a UK election on the horizon, Labour's offer to the people is nothing but a continuation of cruel Tory policies such as the benefit cap and the two-child limit.

The Scottish Government's measures to tackle poverty are bold and ambitious, and they are lifting children out of poverty. However, it is clear that, whoever is in Downing Street, some things will never change. Scotland will have to put up with abhorrent policies and mitigate where we can. That is no way to run a country. If anything, that is a prime example of why Scotland must become independent. By getting rid of the broken Westminster system and equipping the Scottish Parliament with the full powers that it needs, we can eradicate poverty once and for all.

17:36

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I appreciate Bob Doris's personal commitment to this issue, and I share his view that child poverty is a moral affront. The shape of our economy in Scotland determines that a quarter of children in our country grow up in grinding daily poverty. That is an affront to every one of us.

Those children are not saved by social mobility, which has collapsed in Scotland in recent years. It is still significantly more difficult for young people from the poorest backgrounds to access higher education, particularly university courses that lead to professions with the highest earnings. If we are to address that, we have to build an economy that ensures greater equality instead of accelerating divisions.

The truth is that we have had no transformative Government of the left in the past 13 years. Instead, we have had middle-class populism and right-wing ideologues. There is no greater example of the consequences of making accelerated unfunded spending commitments than the Truss Government's economic vandalism, which crashed the economy, with working people across the country paying the costs. Public services and the benefit payments that we require rely on that economy.

As political parties, we have a responsibility to maintain public support for tax and social investment. In recent days, SNP ministers on the

front bench have been keen to twist the words of Anas Sarwar when he said that, during the devolution era, we have spent our time being preoccupied with how to spend money rather than with how to generate it. To me, that is a statement of the obvious, and it is partly a function of our legal responsibilities, which have now expanded, but it is also because the Government has a narrow view of the political economy.

The outcomes for a huge proportion of the population will always be determined by what the Government allocates rather than what people can achieve. We have a sclerotic economy in this country, with many of the challenges that predated the current Scottish Government still unaddressed, let alone the headwinds of economic change and net zero and some of the opportunities that that might present.

Mr Doris's speech was, in part, firmly aimed at Labour, and I can understand why he took that approach. I am happy to address what he said head on. The scourge of child poverty that holds back this country is a malignant legacy of collective moral failure, and addressing it will be a defining purpose of any Labour Government, just as it has always been a defining purpose of any Labour Government. A Labour Government will work to lift children out of poverty; it always has done. The previous Labour Government lifted 2 million children and pensioners out of poverty, and 200,000 of those children were in Scotland.

Bob Doris: I appreciate Michael Marra giving way and his comments regarding me, but I am deeply frustrated. The motion, at its heart, seeks to do something very simple. It aims to put pressure on a UK Conservative Government that is wedded to the rape clause and the two-child limit, and it asks Labour to join the SNP in defending the 4,000 children in Glasgow and the 20,000 children across Scotland who suffer because of those policies. Can you do that this afternoon?

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

Michael Marra: I associate myself entirely with the contents of the motion. There is very little in it—if anything at all—that I disagree with.

The challenge that is faced by any incoming Chancellor of the Exchequer in this country is that we have to have the money to be able to pay the bills. Mr Doris wants to talk about a hypothetical future Government, but his party's manifesto—line 1, page 1—would cut £13 billion out of Scotland's yearly budget. Goodness only knows how we could address child poverty with such a cut. That is a fact that is presented in the "Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland" figures. If you are talking about a hypothetical situation that will

be faced, you must take responsibility for your party's policies in that regard—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Michael Marra: It is incredibly difficult to see how those issues could be addressed under the SNP's proposals.

Kevin Stewart: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

The fact that child poverty has soared again since Labour left office in Holyrood and at Westminster is a bitter reminder to us all of how important it is to have a Government that is focused on having a better economy and a fairer country. That reminds us of the regrettable truth, which is far too often neglected, that progress must be re-won every day and every year; there is no final battle for social justice. As a country, we have retreated in recent years. Frankly, I would take no part in any political party that did not take the issue of child poverty incredibly seriously, but we must base our approach on the allocation of resources that we have, not on the allocation of resources that we might wish to have.

The horror is that the ideological fantasies of the Tory Government have crashed us out of Europe, have crashed our economy and have crashed our public finances on the rocks of economic reality. There is nothing in the motion that is wrong, but there is only one way of making progress.

17:41

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I express my deep thanks to Bob Doris for securing the debate and to all the third sector organisations that have provided us with such wise and helpful briefings.

The issue of child poverty is clearly an emotive subject, and it ought to be—there is no more heartbreaking sight than that of a hungry child, a homeless child or a child who is excluded from opportunities to play, to learn and to explore the wonders of a world so new to them. However, it is not enough for us to stand and weep or to shout at one another and point fingers. We can and must look with clear-eyed honesty at what we know about child poverty, its causes—however hard it might be to hear about some of those—and its solutions.

One thing that we know is that most children are not in poverty alone—they are part of families. As the cabinet secretary reminded us last week, women's poverty and children's poverty are inextricably linked. Women make up the vast majority of single parents, barriers to employment

limit their family income and they overwhelmingly act as poverty managers for their families, going without basic meals so that their children can eat.

Growing up in a family that experiences poverty can have lifelong effects on children's mental and physical health and on their relationships, education, livelihoods and wellbeing. Recent research by University College London describes the relationship between poverty and adverse childhood experiences. The trauma of those experiences can and often does stay with a child for the rest of their life and is passed down to generations beyond.

Children are part of communities in which poverty is shared and commonplace. Bob Doris referred to those in Glasgow. In my region of North East Scotland, too, we have areas of very high multiple deprivation. Those include parts of Dundee, Buckie, Peterhead, Fraserburgh and Arbroath, as well as Torry in Aberdeen, where health professionals have testified to the vital importance of St Fittick's park in alleviating the heartbreaking effects of poverty and exclusion. For those children, yesterday's council decision to lease that park—their only green space—for development was a terrible blow.

I do not forget, either, that the standard indices are not so efficient in identifying rural poverty. Children in Aberdeenshire and Angus know poverty, too, often in particularly difficult ways, and they need our attention and our commitment.

What do we know about solutions? There are three broad categories, the first of which consists of policies that directly benefit children by increasing their family's income and reducing its costs. Those policies include, of course, the Scottish child payment, the access to affordable childcare and the provision of effective help for families in debt and those who are struggling to cope. They also include free school meals, free bus travel and rent controls, and they must include help for families and unaccompanied children who are seeking asylum.

The second category includes policies that improve the physical and social infrastructure of children's lives, education, housing, transport and environment, and also, as others have said, the economy and finance. We have tools to test how well those policies are working to reduce child poverty, and it is essential that we use them at the right time, that we pay attention to their findings and that we make changes where changes are most needed.

The third category involves measures to change the political and legal environment in which children grow up. The incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the proposed Scottish human rights bill and the

mainstreaming of human rights and equalities all have the potential to be transformative and bring about a situation in which children in poverty are not simply objects of charity but subjects of dignity, with robust and enforceable rights.

Of course, we face barriers that are not of our own making, such as Westminster hostility, the limits of devolution and the issue of lowest common denominator politics. So, I implore all members here of Westminster parties to do all that they can to influence those parties' policies, most urgently the cruel two-child limit and the bitter benefit cap, because Scotland's children deserve and need not only compassion and care but solidarity, justice and action.

17:46

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I congratulate Bob Doris on securing this important members' business debate.

Child poverty is holding back too many in Scotland, so we must do everything that we can, within our powers and resources, to reverse that position. I welcome measures that were set out in the programme for government and its focus on tackling poverty. Some £405 million will be invested in the Scottish child payment this year, helping more than 300,000 children across the country. We know that that is a lifeline for many families, especially during the Westminster-imposed cost of living crisis. It is now paid at £25 a week for eligible children, and we need to seriously consider how it can be increased in future budgets. The expansion of universal free school meal provision for all pupils in primaries 6 and 7 will also help many families with the cost of the school day.

Jeremy Balfour: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Marie McNair: I have quite a lot to cover. Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can get a bit of time back, yes.

Jeremy Balfour: I agree with the remarks about the importance of free school meals, which Maggie Chapman also mentioned. Would Marie McNair agree that it has been disappointing that there has been a long delay to free school meals being rolled out to primaries 6 and 7, which has affected many vulnerable children? Can she explain why the Scottish Government has delayed the roll-out?

Marie McNair: You know the reasons for the delay. Obviously, the infrastructure is not there, although it will be soon. However, I really thought that you would be standing up to tell us why you

support the two-child policy, with its abhorrent rape clause. Defend that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Marie McNair: Increasing eligibility for best start food payments will mean that around another 20,000 people will access that benefit when the income thresholds are removed, in February. However, as always, the programme for government has to deal with the consequences of damaging Westminster decisions.

Since 2017, the Tories' cruel two-child benefit cap has cost families in Scotland £340 million, and the Scottish Government's mitigation of cruel and incompetent UK Government policies has made a real difference. Indeed, an estimated 90,000 children have been lifted out of poverty as a result. The two-child policy and its rape clause deny children the basics and humiliate and traumatise women. It is no wonder that the Scottish Association of Social Work describes it as inhumane. Recently, we witnessed the sad spectacle of one of the lapsed Corbynistas trying to airbrush it out of debate, but we will not allow that, especially not when debating child poverty.

The rape clause is abhorrent—it is disgusting, it is cruel and it is Labour policy. That is an extremely sad state of affairs and evidence that nothing much will change in the area of welfare policy if Labour replaces the Tories. After all, Labour has U-turned on many previous pledges to reverse Tory policies. Previously, we had new Labour, but Labour is now behaving like new Tories. It is now planning to keep universal credit, abandoning its previous pledge to scrap it, but it does not seem keen on the First Minister's call for Westminster to use its reserved powers and introduce an essentials guarantee to the value of universal credit, a move supported by the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Universal credit is flawed and its design is keeping many families in poverty. Aberlour Child Care Trust has highlighted work by Professor Morag Treanor of Heriot-Watt University, which sets out the scale of the DWP direct benefit deductions from low-income households. The DWP makes at least one deduction to the monthly allowance of more than half of those in receipt of universal credit to cover their debts to public bodies, and it makes multiple deductions to more than a quarter of those people. Overall monthly income is reduced on average by £80 to cover those debts. I back Aberlour's calls for a moratorium on those deductions, to help give struggling households a chance. I hope that its call can get support across this Parliament.

The Resolution Foundation has said that this Westminster

“parliamentary term is on track to be by far the worst for living standards since the 1950s.”

It cannot go on. A more just and compassionate path must be taken. Given the abject failure to achieve that by all political parties that aspire to govern at Westminster, it is clear that only with the full powers of an independent Scotland will that path come to fruition.

17:52

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I thank Bob Doris for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

Tackling child poverty was outlined as the national mission of the Scottish Government, yet the most recent figures show that one in four children continues to live in poverty. Children who grew up in poverty will continue to experience the far-reaching consequences of a childhood lived below the poverty line.

For many children, growing up in poverty will impact on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. It will affect their education and ability to learn and develop. It can significantly reduce their life opportunities and experiences. The Scottish Government needs to address that and ensure that support for children is available across all areas where poverty might have affected their lives.

Children who grow up as part of minority groups, such as disabled households, black and minority ethnic households and single-parent households, are disproportionately affected by poverty. Thirty-nine per cent of children from black or minority ethnic families live in poverty in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* No, I will not give way to members, as my colleagues have taken enough interventions and I have a lot to cover.

A recent report by the cross-party group on poverty outlined that those from black and minority ethnic communities will also face greater poverty-related stigma than other groups. The Scottish Government's approach to tackling child poverty must address that.

Children born into an impoverished area will eventually face significant hurdles in their lives. In 2019, it was reported that the life expectancy of a boy born in Muirhouse was 13 years less than a boy born in neighbouring Cramond. That is still the reality for many children living in poverty, and we have yet to see the Scottish Government make any significant improvement to that situation.

Inequality of access is also a major issue affecting children living in poverty. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry—I will not be taking any interventions, as I have a lot to get through.

In several communities in the Lothian region, there are incredibly long waiting lists for council-run swimming lessons due to demand outstripping the supply of swimming pool facilities and teachers. Private lessons are very expensive and are simply beyond the budget of many lower-income families. That means that children are losing out on vital water safety skills and opportunities to have fun and to socialise with friends. Once again, it is lower-income families who are losing out.

The Scottish Government must do more. When such high levels of children with parents under the age of 25 are living in poverty, the Government must do more to support those young parents and to ensure that the welfare system does not fail them. It must do more to combat the disproportionate effect that poverty has on BAME and other minority groups. It must do more to achieve its national mission and to eradicate child poverty.

17:55

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I congratulate Bob Doris on securing the debate and thank all the members who have contributed to it. It is fair to say that the debate has been very passionate. I can assure members that taking part remotely has not prevented me from hearing what they have been yelling across the chamber. I am speaking as a Government minister, but, as an MSP I know that our case loads are full of people who are struggling with the impact of the cost of living crisis. Not only has the crisis entrenched poverty for people who are already struggling, but people who never expected to be in dire financial straits are now begging us for help.

That is why it is right that tackling poverty and protecting people from that harm is one of the Government's three critical and interdependent missions, alongside our focus on the economy and strengthening public services. The Parliament unanimously agreed Scotland's ambitious child poverty targets in 2017, and the Government continues to drive forward the action that is needed to deliver a fairer future for the children of Scotland. Both last year and this year, we allocated almost £3 billion to support policies to tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible during the on-going cost of living crisis.

Earlier, Mr Balfour claimed—quite incredibly, in a debate on child poverty—that the UK's social security system is functioning and that Scotland's is not. The Scottish child payment has lifted 50,000 children out of poverty, while welfare cuts from Mr Balfour's party are keeping 30,000 children in poverty. I do not know what his definition of functioning is; the UK system is

certainly having an impact, but it is not one that I want to see.

Jeremy Balfour: Would the minister acknowledge that most of the benefits in Scotland are still being paid for and run by the DWP and that, in fact, it is the DWP that is keeping money in people's pockets, not Social Security Scotland?

Emma Roddick: I agree that the DWP is keeping children in poverty in Scotland. I hope that what I heard from Jeremy Balfour was a call for further benefits to be devolved to Scotland, where we can manage them more responsibly. I am sad to say that, if the UK Government had matched the Scottish Government's ambitions, we would be in a different place and having a very different conversation now. It is sad because I can see no clear route to any UK Government matching our ambitions now or in the near future. From trying to mitigate the harmful welfare reforms to watching as the UK fails to implement helpful measures such as the Scottish child payment, we are fighting against the tide.

In the past five years, the Scottish Government has spent £711 million mitigating the impact of Westminster welfare cuts alone. The two-child limit is affecting 80,000 children in Scotland and it has removed more than £341 million from Scottish families since 2017. The latest statistics confirm that the families of almost 2,600 children across the UK were forced to disclose details of rape in order to receive support for a third or subsequent child.

I cannot get my head around the position that Scottish Labour has taken since we returned from summer recess and following some visits from Keir Starmer. Colleagues who have spent two years telling us to do what we are already doing, but to do it faster and with more money, are now excusing and apparently adopting U-turns on welfare, climate change and more from their leader in Westminster who took an interest in getting Scottish Labour in line as soon as it looked as though there might be some success in London. It is clear that UK Labour is now the party of continued austerity, keeping the two-child cap and scrapping free school meals. The Labour Party has completely abandoned plans to address child poverty, never mind eradicate it.

Mr O'Kane's comments about not making unfunded commitments, which Michael Marra repeated, might carry more weight if his colleagues did not show up every week demanding unfunded commitments. I also point out that we know exactly how many people are impacted. We know that the two-child limit has cheated Scottish parents and bairns out of £341 million since its inception. Numbers are not what is missing here; it is political will and consistent principles from Labour.

Paul O'Kane: The minister has said that a future Labour Government would do nothing to lift children out of poverty. Would she agree with me that raising the national minimum wage to the level of the living wage, banning zero-hours contracts, ensuring rights for workers from day 1, increasing sick pay and carrying out a fundamental reform of universal credit and the entire UK benefits system would fundamentally lift children out of poverty? It would lift children out of poverty just as the previous Labour Government lifted a million children out of poverty—200,000 of whom lived in Scotland.

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

Emma Roddick: I cannot get my head around Scottish Labour standing there and claiming that a Labour Government would fundamentally change universal credit while failing to get rid of the most horrible and disgusting parts of it, such as the two-child cap. I do not believe that all my Scottish Labour colleagues—many of whom I know share the drive to tackle child poverty—are happy with their policies being overridden and shouted down in the media, which is what is being done. They truly have my sympathies for that, because that is exactly the sort of imbalance between where power lies and where it should lie that the SNP has been highlighting throughout our history. If anything can demonstrate to unionist parties the need for Scotland to have the ability to make its own decisions about its own issues, it should surely be this bizarre and disgusting challenge from their London bosses.

I turn back to what the SNP is doing. Modelling estimates that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty this year as a result of this Government's policies, with our poverty level 9 percentage points lower than it would have been otherwise. That includes an estimated 50,000 children who have been lifted out of relative poverty by the Scottish child payment.

However, we cannot fall into the trap of simplifying not just the drivers of poverty but the things that are keeping people trapped in poverty and prevent them from getting out of difficult cash-flow situations. Scotland already has the most generous childcare offer anywhere in the UK, supporting families and helping to give children the best possible start in life. Our programme for government sets out ambitious commitments to delivering a significant expansion of targeted childcare provision, which is focused on tackling child poverty and supporting more parents to take up or sustain employment. The inquiry that is being led by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee will provide real insights from the type of necessary, lived-experience input that Bob Doris described in his opening remarks.

This year, we are investing £752 million through our affordable housing supply programme, and we will introduce a housing bill to deliver a new deal for tenants. We are also making £108 million available for the delivery of employability services. We will continue to use all the levers at our disposal to promote fairer work practices across the labour market in Scotland.

Of course, we also recognise the wider, less tangible drivers of poverty. We know that poverty is generational, that it affects minority groups to a greater extent than others and that it is cyclical. We know that opportunity is more limited for some than for others, and that the cost of living—the cost of literally remaining alive—is different for different people. Maggie Chapman made this point well: children are not in poverty alone, and tackling gender and disability pay gaps and entrenched inequalities is necessary to tackle child poverty.

That is not as simple as launching a fund or creating a new payment; it needs societal change. That is what we in the Scottish Government are attempting to lead, with work on an immediate priorities plan for disabled people, by launching an anti-racism observatory that can provide an evidence base for making policy that is actively anti-racism, and by incorporating international human rights treaties, as far as possible within devolved competence, into Scots law.

We know that there is hard work to do in overhauling attitudes as well as public sector policies, and that is the hard work that we are committed to doing. The Scottish Government will continue to do everything within the scope of its powers and limited budget to tackle poverty and to support those who are in greatest need, strengthening that support where we can.

Meeting closed at 18:03.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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