



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 31 October 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Tuesday 31 October 2023

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Delays on A9 (SGN Works)	3
Industrial Action (Schools)	7
BUSINESS MOTION	10
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam]—and agreed to.</i>	
RURAL AND ISLANDS HOUSING	11
<i>Motion moved—[Paul McLennan].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Rachael Hamilton].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Mark Griffin].</i>	
The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan)	11
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)	17
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)	21
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	25
Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)	28
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	30
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	33
Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)	36
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	39
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)	41
Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	43
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	45
Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)	48
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	50
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)	53
Paul McLennan	56
COVID-19 INQUIRIES (SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S PROVISION OF INFORMATION)	61
<i>Statement—[Shona Robison].</i>	
The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison)	61
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	78
<i>Motions moved—[George Adam].</i>	
DECISION TIME	79
FIRE SERVICE	87
<i>Motion debated—[Katy Clark].</i>	
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)	87
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	89
Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)	91
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	93
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	94
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)	96
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	98
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)	100
Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)	102
Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)	103
Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)	104
The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown)	105

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 31 October 2023

[The Presiding Officer 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 Micheal Matovu, commercial director of Radiant and Brighter.

Micheal Matovu (Radiant and Brighter):
Presiding Officer and members, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

My wife and I founded Radiant and Brighter community interest company in 2012. That year, a young woman who had graduated with a master's degree but who could not find a job came to us to seek support. She wanted to start a business but had come to a dead end with that, too. We shared our own experience and what we knew, and a year later, she launched a natural skin care product business.

In 2016, an organisation that was seeking to diversify its workforce came to us. We developed a programme that brought together more than 90 candidates and 25 senior managers. At the end of it, people who previously had not been able to find work were working within months. On the other hand, the managers had learned about diversity and the gaps in their systems.

Like the young woman in the first story and the people in the second, my family and I had our own challenges. We moved to Scotland 15 years ago with two toddlers and a baby on the way. For five years we were not able to work due to our immigration status. When we were finally granted leave to remain in 2012, we could not find work because, being black migrants, we were different.

The purpose of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, was to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination. The first major international human rights law, which was adopted in 1965 and ratified by 176 states, was the result of that declaration. Yet racism remains, and human rights are sometimes so far removed from their foundation.

The Bible says that we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made" and that we are created in God's image. None of us has the same fingerprint, yet all of us bleed the same.

Difference often leads to innovation and solutions to many world problems. Why, then, do we focus on what divides us when we could focus on what binds us? Why do we hate when we could love? Why do we hurt when we could heal? Why do we create hopelessness when we could create hope?

We are all bound by our humanity, and each of us has been created with greatness within us. Could we use our greatness better, or perhaps more often? Could we use it to transform and enhance one another's lives? Could we celebrate one another more and be more loving, kinder and more united?

Be great. Be different. Choose love.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Delays on A9 (SGN Works)

1. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the extreme delays reportedly being encountered by users of the A9 north of Dunkeld due to SGN gas pipe replacement works. (S6T-01602)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I understand that, regrettably, the works have caused significant disruption for communities and businesses in the region. That point was made forcibly to me by the local constituency member, John Swinney, with whom I have had a number of related discussions.

I met Scotia Gas Networks senior management yesterday to impress upon it the seriousness of the situation. SGN has given a commitment that it will reassess its road works strategy. As part of that, it will pause its works for the weekend of 3 November until Sunday night. That will see A9 lanes reopened and SGN issuing increased communication and stakeholder updates.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the minister for her response. She will be aware of the extreme delays of up to two and half hours or more on the A9 north of Dunkeld, which have been devastating for those using the road to travel to and from the Highlands; for those making local journeys in Perthshire, for example to take children to and from school or to go to work; and for the tourist economy, including events such as the Enchanted Forest.

SGN told me yesterday that it is making changes to mitigate the delays, but there is a high degree of scepticism locally as to whether that will be enough. The roads authority here is Transport Scotland, which is an agency of the Scottish Government. How confident is the minister that we will not see a repeat of the unacceptable events that we saw just last week?

Fiona Hyslop: I trust that the member takes reassurance from the fact that I have been dealing with the matter personally over the past few days and that I met SGN yesterday. Since our intervention, some of the actions that SGN has taken are to have manual traffic lights, particularly at key times, and to make sure that there is vehicle recovery. The member may be aware that the incidents that caused the excessive delays involved a breakdown of a bus in particularly difficult circumstances and an emergency medical situation. Those would cause difficulties at any point in time.

The pause is to enable SGN to reassess whether there are better ways in which it can deliver the work in terms of timescale, in relation to both days and some of the issues around that, and where it completes the work.

On the responsibility, the utility company clearly has rights under United Kingdom legislation, which I am sure the member will be familiar with, but I have ensured that Transport Scotland will work with it to deliver the changes that it is making, and also with BEAR Scotland, which is the operating company.

Murdo Fraser: It has, of course, not escaped the notice of many of those who were stuck in the road works that, had the Scottish National Party Government kept its promise to dual the A9 by 2025, we would not be seeing these delays. The previous Minister for Transport promised us a statement by the end of this year with an update on the dualling project. When can we expect that?

Fiona Hyslop: We are committed to the dualling of the A9. There will be a statement, but I would also reflect that the particular emergencies that I talked about would have caused disruption on the road anyway. I note that the changes are being made to meet what is, I think, a genuinely essential need. We have to make sure that the gas works are done so that, in SGN's words, a "catastrophic loss" of gas supplies to towns in the area is not realised.

I reassure the member that the plans are still in place for that statement to be given, and I am sure that time will be given in Parliament when it is ready to be given.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I welcome the direct, personal involvement of the Minister for Transport on this significant constituency issue for me, which has resulted in huge economic and social damage to the people whom I have the privilege to represent.

During my years in this Parliament, I have had many calls with many leaders of corporate organisations. I have never had one quite so disengaged as with the chief executive of SGN on Friday. Will the minister take every opportunity to impress on SGN the importance of understanding that, although there may be legitimacy for the repair that it has to undertake, that cannot be at the expense of everybody else who is using the A9, and particularly the communities that I represent?

Fiona Hyslop: I reiterate that John Swinney is probably one of the most hard-working and assiduous MSPs in representing the interests of his constituents, who have clearly been severely impacted in the past week.

I share the concerns about SGN's approach to the project and the level of engagement and communication. I think that it can be and should have been far more proactive. I think that it did reach out and try to consult, but it is one thing to try to let people know what you are doing and another to proactively engage to understand the issues.

I emphasise that the work is not a repair; it is a relocation of gas works that need to be moved because of the fast-flowing Tay and previous flood incidents exposing gas piping.

I understand the importance and the imperative nature of doing that work, but there is a right way of doing it. A corporate organisation may have the right under UK legislation as a utility company to do that work, but it also has a responsibility to the communities and individuals that John Swinney has the privilege to represent.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have listened with interest. Having been one of the people who were caught in those delays—two hours and 30 minutes coming down and two hours and 23 minutes going north—I know how much those road works are strangling the Highlands. The sign says that it will take 18 weeks—there will be 18 weeks of this. The minister suggested that there will be a pause in the middle. Will the minister confirm that delays of two and a half hours are not acceptable and that she will not accept them because of the economic impact that they are having on the Highlands—in fact, on the whole of Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: I am sure that the member has understood from my responses how seriously I take the issue. I want to reflect that the severe delays were due to specific circumstances, and that actions have been taken in the meantime to try to address those issues. The pause will allow SGN to rethink timescales. It was advised, and, understandably, we ensured, that the work would not be done during the summer, so it was refused in the summer. This is the quietest period for any such work on the A9.

The pause will allow SGN to reassess timescales and where it can do the work to try to alleviate the pressures that individuals and businesses have faced because of the utility works.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I refer to the previous point on how the situation impacts the whole of Scotland. Constituents from Fife have contacted me about the matter and mothers have told me that they have had to rearrange getting their kids picked up from school and so on. The A9 is an important road for the whole of Scotland.

I noticed that, in response to Mr Swinney on Twitter, SGN talked about a minibus and an abnormal load causing delays. Any other company doing that kind of work would factor in such things and have support in place to ensure that they do not stall traffic. If the company does not react to what the minister has said, what powers does she have to do more about it? Will she confirm that there will be a statement on the A9 in this calendar year?

Fiona Hyslop: As I said, the statement on the A9 will proceed as planned. Existing legal powers give statutory undertakers—that is, public utilities—powers to place their apparatus in public roads. They have to co-ordinate that with road authorities. There may be limits to what we can legally do to prevent them from doing such work should we want to do so, but I understand the rationale for the works on the A9, which are essential.

Messaging on vehicle recovery issues and the manual traffic light system will be communicated earlier en route to ensure that drivers with passengers such as schoolchildren will know further down the line how long the delays are taking. All those things have happened in the past few days as a result of Transport Scotland's intervention and as stimulated by the elected representatives, such as Mr Swinney, who contacted me.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I welcome the Minister for Transport's intervention on the issue. It is clear that recent flooding has destroyed pedestrian access between Inver and Dunkeld, forcing people to cross the A9 on foot. Coupled with the extreme traffic delays that were caused locally by the SGN works, that is causing real danger at that part of the A9.

For many years, the community has called for improved lighting at that junction to improve road safety. Does the minister agree that, more than ever, Transport Scotland must introduce emergency floodlighting at local junctions to keep everyone safe?

The Presiding Officer: That question is not wholly on the substantive point.

Fiona Hyslop: The impact of storm Babet has had knock-on impacts elsewhere along the A9 and elsewhere in Scotland, which has affected the routing of extra-wide loads, which themselves cause issues. That point was also raised with me yesterday.

The River Bran goes under the A9, and I know that flooding has caused issues for a local pathway, which Mr Ruskell contacted me about.

Transport Scotland is working with Perth and Kinross Council to see what can be done to

mitigate. It has met the local community and, indeed, it met councillors yesterday, I think, to identify the issues. I will leave it to Transport Scotland and the relevant authorities in Perth and Kinross to determine what form the operational response will take, but I am very aware of the issues.

As a consequence of recent storms—not just storm Babet, but storm Agnes, too—there have been further disruptions elsewhere on the A9, including on the slip road to Pitlochry south.

All of those things compounded make the situation very difficult, and everybody is working hard to resolve it.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

As well as the extreme economic damage to businesses locally and in the whole of the Highlands—if that goes on until February, it will be on a devastating scale—is there not a further risk to human life? If drivers who plan the journey to expend three hours normally find that it takes six hours and not three hours and are fatigued, the risk of driver error and therefore fatalities surely increases exponentially. Will the minister therefore instruct the highly paid executives at Transport Scotland, who cannot subcontract responsibility, to get out of their plush offices in Glasgow and get to Dunkeld and supervise the matter being sorted out?

Fiona Hyslop: SGN is responsible for the works, and it is working with BEAR Scotland. It has had, and it will continue to have, co-operation and advice from Transport Scotland.

On the delays, I think that I have said that the issues around the excessive delays were caused by specific incidents, and mitigation to support people should those incidents happen in the future has already been undertaken. I can relay that, yesterday and today, the normal pattern, as predicted from the planning, from looking at figures from October last year, has been taken. However, I take the point that there has been a significant impact on individuals and the excessive times cannot be acceptable going forward. That is precisely why I asked to meet the senior management to impress on it its responsibilities to ensure that the reset of the programme is fit for purpose for the whole economy along the A9 and specifically the communities of Dunkeld.

Industrial Action (Schools)

2. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to resolve industrial action in schools. (S6T-01599)

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): Negotiations on local government pay are rightly

between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is the representative of the employer, local government and the trade unions that represent the workforce. As recently as last week, COSLA re-emphasised the importance of the Scottish Government respecting that negotiating arrangement.

We have worked constructively with COSLA to find a solution, provided £155 million at stage 3 of the budget to support a meaningful pay offer, and provided funding assurances for 2024-25. We have also worked with COSLA to identify an additional £80 million for the improved offer of 21 September, which was accepted by two of the three local government unions.

Katy Clark: The First Minister made it clear that COSLA is not in control of its own budgets. Will the minister meet Unison to discuss how the dispute can finally be resolved?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is important to recognise the appropriate negotiating forums. The Scottish Government frequently meets COSLA to continue to consider what more we can do to support it in finding a resolution to the dispute, which no one wants to continue. Obviously, it is important that we respect the trade unions' right to withhold their labour—that is absolutely a right, which the Government supports—but we cannot overstate the impact of the closures on the children affected and their parents.

Katy Clark: Will the Scottish Government set out a timescale to get to a minimum of £15 per hour pay for all local government workers?

Joe FitzPatrick: That is one of the interesting aspects of Unison's ask. One of the challenges that COSLA is reflecting to us is that, although two trade unions have accepted the offer, it is not 100 per cent sure what the ask of Unison is. There is talk about the rate of £15 an hour. The Scottish Government and COSLA are certainly keen to look at language that might help. If that is what it takes to get a settlement that prevents more disruption of our children's education, we should definitely sit round a table and discuss that.

Work is on-going across the Scottish Government on a much wider approach. It is important for the discussion of £15 an hour for local government workers to be part of that. We are agreeing to look at that, but it is clear that Unison is looking for something more.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To fund the teachers' pay deal last year, the Government cut £155 million from elsewhere in the education budget. Does the minister expect further cuts in the education budget when the Government inevitably intervenes to resolve the current dispute?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is important to emphasise how hard COSLA and Scottish Government officials worked to identify the £80 million—which, to be fair, everyone thought was the ask of the unions to settle the dispute—in a way that did not impact on front-line services. That was not easy to do and it took a huge amount of work. It feels as if we have pushed that envelope to the end, which is why COSLA will be keen to talk about the road map to £15 an hour, because there could be a cost this year. This year is particularly difficult; we cannot change the income this year.

If there is a suggestion that that is where Unison is going, I hope that it articulates that clearly so that COSLA can discuss that with Unison. COSLA is working hard to discuss with Unison what the asks are, because no one wants the dispute to go on for any longer than it has to.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes topical question time.

Business Motion

14:21

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-11042, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 31 October 2023

after

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government's Provision of Information to the COVID 19 Inquiries

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.10 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 2 November 2023

after

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Early Childhood Development Transformational Change Programme

insert

followed by Appointments of the Chair and Commissioners of the Poverty and Inequality Commission—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Rural and Islands Housing

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11027, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan".

14:22

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan):

I am pleased to bring this debate to the chamber and to have the opportunity to provide an update on our approach to delivering the right homes in the right places for our rural and island communities. Providing access to high-quality homes that are affordable and meet the needs of people in the places where they want to be is central to the Scottish Government's ambitions and is critical to supporting the First Minister's three overarching and defining missions of equality, opportunity and community.

Housing of the right type, in the right place, can have a powerful and generational impact. It supports people to access the housing that they need, enables young people to stay in the communities in which they grew up and supports local businesses to retain and attract employees.

Our long-term housing strategy, "Housing to 2040", has at its core our ambition for everyone to have a safe and high-quality home that is affordable and meets their needs, in the place where they want to be. That applies as much to rural and island areas as it does to urban areas.

Following the publication of "Housing to 2040", we committed as part of the Bute house agreement to developing a rural and islands housing action plan. Over the summer, I met organisations including the Scottish Land Commission, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry. I thank them for their input and I thank everyone who participated for sharing their views. The groups and individuals who are part of rural and island communities know what works and what does not and have seen at first hand the difference that the right home in the right place makes. They have all shaped the content of our plan.

When I met some of those organisations, a key issue was the challenges of Brexit. It would be remiss of me not to talk about that, as it was mentioned on numerous occasions. We know that there are challenges ahead. Years of the United Kingdom Government's economic mismanagement, coupled with a hard Brexit, have had a long-lasting and devastating impact on our rural and island communities. However, that will not stop our ambition, which is set out in the plan, and nor will it blemish our record of delivering

thousands of affordable homes in rural and island areas.

The "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan" provides a vital opportunity to take forward key actions to support housing and local economies and to help to accelerate inclusive economic growth. We are making available £3.5 billion over this session of Parliament to support delivery of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, 70 per cent of which will be for social rent and 10 per cent of which will be in our rural and island areas. As part of our £752 million programme this year, we have also committed to invest £60 million in a national acquisition plan to help to increase the pace of delivering affordable homes.

A lot of good work has already been achieved through joint working and co-operation, which is delivering good housing outcomes for rural and island communities. Since 2016, the Government has supported the delivery of more than 10,000 affordable homes across our rural and island areas. During the summer, I visited housing projects in Gairloch, Fort Augustus, Shetland and Kelso and yesterday I visited a new affordable homes development in Guildtown, Perthshire, and I have heard first hand about the difference that those affordable homes have made to local communities.

Let me share some examples of how strong collaborative working has delivered more homes for our rural and island communities. Working with North Ayrshire Council, we have delivered the first new council homes on Arran for more than 20 years with 34 affordable homes in Brodick. North Ayrshire Council has let some of the homes to key workers, which helps them to live and work in the local area.

Working with Argyll and Bute Council and the Link Group, we have contributed to the delivery of a new development of more than 300 affordable homes in Dunbeg. All the homes have air-source heat pumps to provide affordable energy and to tackle fuel poverty in an off-grid area.

I have also seen first hand the 12 homes that the local community company in Fort Augustus has completed. The company is looking to deliver more community-led homes. I will touch on that later. I heard directly from a tenant what the homes meant to him: they allowed him to stay in his own home in his local community.

We have also supported Eildon Housing Association to deliver 57 energy-efficient affordable homes in Chirnside in the Scottish Borders.

Through our affordable housing supply programme, our affordable housing investment benchmark levels recognise the differential in costs to deliver affordable housing in rural and

island locations, as opposed to city and urban areas. We are trying to be as flexible as possible.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I noted the minister's point about finance. Will he share with me what activities he has been doing to ensure that the right finance with the right risk profile is available for small and medium-sized businesses, given that we want that breadth and diversity of providers?

Paul McLennan: I have been doing a number of things. About two weeks ago, I met 25 institutional investors in London to talk about opportunities to invest in housing in Scotland. The meeting was positive, and we are meeting them again very soon. That includes mid-market rent, build to rent and social housing.

I also met Scottish Financial Enterprise recently, and I have a round-table event coming up with it to talk about the opportunities to help to finance rural housing in particular and housing in general. Again, that meeting was positive, and I am happy to feed back on the round-table event.

Our demand-led rural and islands housing fund, which has been described as a game changer, has now become a recognised feature of the affordable housing supply programme, and is backed by up to £30 million funding in this session of Parliament.

I have tried to meet as many local authorities as possible since I have been in this role—I have probably met more than two thirds of them. Again, this issue is raised when I talk to councils.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): On 1 September, I wrote to the minister suggesting that, in order to meet the laudable aim of delivering 11,000 affordable homes by 2032, he should work closely with farmers and landowners, and that he should use permitted development of up to five new homes per farm unit. I am not talking about simply converting existing homes but about building new homes. Given that farms cover 71 per cent of the land mass of Scotland, and that the average farm has equity of around £1 million, is that not a sleeping giant desperate to be woken up by the Scottish Government? Why is the Government not including that proposal in the plan?

Paul McLennan: That is something that I think would be considered. In terms of engaging stakeholders, we met NFU Scotland and the Crofting Commission, and I also met Scottish Land & Estates to talk about those issues. Again, those things are mentioned in the plan and we will try to develop them. I agree with Fergus Ewing that there is a great opportunity to work with landowners and farmers in that regard. The discussions with them will continue as the plan moves forward.

I return to the rural and islands housing fund. I mentioned that there will be up to £30 million funding for that in this session of Parliament. The fund continues to play an important role in helping community organisations and others to deliver affordable homes, while complementing delivery through our mainstream programme by councils and housing associations in rural and island areas.

We have a strong track record, having delivered more than 10,000 affordable homes since 2016. However, we recognise that we need to do more, and the rural and islands housing plan sets out our next steps. We know that providing affordable housing in rural and island areas can be complex and that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Many of the actions that are included in the action plan seek to address key challenges and put in place the systems and support for the delivery of the right homes in the right places so that our rural and island communities can thrive.

I will highlight some of the key actions that are included in the plan. Issues relating to key workers have been raised by a number of members in correspondence with me. The plan recognises the importance of employers being able to attract and retain key workers in rural and island areas, not only to support service delivery in communities but to support economic growth and prosperity. I have met a number of employers to talk about some of the schemes that have come forward, and we continue to work in close partnership with them in that regard.

The plan includes an action to allocate up to £25 million from our affordable homes budget over the next five years to fund the purchase or long leasing of properties, including empty houses, so that they can be turned into homes for key workers and others who need affordable housing.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): There are 67,000 unoccupied properties in Scotland right now, and we all know from our constituencies that they are unsightly and a blight on Scotland. Does the minister agree that compulsory sale orders should be introduced to ensure that such properties are given to people who need a home?

Paul McLennan: Rachael Hamilton makes a good point. A report by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which was sent to the Scottish Government, touched on that issue, and it is being considered. The Empty Homes Partnership and the Government are working on the recommendations that have been made not just in rural areas but right across Scotland. It would be good to come back to Rachael Hamilton on that key issue, and I am happy to discuss it with her after the debate.

That issue is really important in relation to key workers. We are seeing economic development opportunities, but we cannot expand or maximise such opportunities without housing. When I visited Nigg and Invergordon, I heard about the number of houses that will be required to accommodate workers there. What we need to do is incredibly important. The plan recognises that employers, including those in the public sector, have a role to play in that regard, including through the better use of resources, properties and land that they own in order to meet our shared interest of supporting the provision of homes for key workers.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I am conscious of the time, but I will take one more intervention.

Finlay Carson: I thank the minister for taking the intervention. Given that 17 per cent of Scotland's population live in rural areas, where we are seeing depopulation, should people in rural areas be satisfied with getting only 10 per cent of the 110,000 homes that have been promised for Scotland?

Paul McLennan: We have talked about 10 per cent being the minimum. That is key. I meet local authorities and economic development partners in that regard. We need to identify the right houses in the right places. We would like to deliver a minimum of 10 per cent, but if we can achieve more than that, that is fantastic. That will require closer working, as is mentioned in the action plan. The target that has been set is realistic. We have proved that through our delivery. However, if we were to deliver more than that, that would be great.

I talked about the land for housing. We know that the availability of suitable land in the right locations is vital to enable the delivery of more homes where they are required. Building on the range of activities that are already under way, the plan commits to working with public sector agencies in considering the land and building assets that they hold that might be appropriate for housing. About two or three months ago, we held a round-table meeting in Perth with about 10 stakeholders, and we discussed that key issue.

Our national planning framework 4 sets out policies that provide strong support for sustainable rural development. That includes a new national planning policy for rural homes, which will encourage, promote and facilitate the delivery of more high-quality, affordable and sustainable rural homes. The plan recognises that, alongside delivery of new homes for our rural and island communities, it is important that local authorities have the tools available to allow them to make the best use of existing housing.

I want to touch on second homes and short-term lets. I know that such issues are emotive and that we have debated them previously. Second homes and short-term lets can bring benefits to those who own and use them, as well as to the tourism businesses and local economies that they support. However, where those kinds of ownership patterns impact on the availability of homes to meet local needs and on community sustainability, we are considering what additional powers could support local areas to take action. That issue was mentioned to me on numerous occasions during the tour that I undertook in the summer. We intend to introduce legislation that will give local authorities the power to charge up to a 100 per cent premium on second homes.

There is now a new legal requirement for short-term lets to be licensed, which provides assurance to guests that short-term lets meet safety standards and that the people who provide them are suitable. That has brought the regulation of short-term lets in line with the regulation of other accommodation sectors such as hotels, caravan parks and houses in multiple occupation. The regulations also provide local areas with the option to apply additional conditions to address local issues when short-term lets cause problems for neighbours and residents.

Touching on the point that Rachael Hamilton made, I want to say a wee bit more on empty homes. We know that every empty home that is brought back into use can make a big difference to the sustainability of communities, and we are committed to working with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, local authorities and owners to bring more empty homes in rural and island areas back into use. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and local authorities' dedicated empty homes officers continue to deliver great results, with more than 9,000 homes returned to use.

The plan recognises that community-led housing plays an incredibly important role in our broad approach to deliver more affordable homes in our rural and island communities. The enabling role of organisations such as South of Scotland Community Housing and the Communities Housing Trust—both of which I have met, among others—continues to be vital in supporting communities to bring forward housing projects. The plan includes a joint funding package with the Nationwide Foundation of almost £1 million over three years to the Communities Housing Trust and South of Scotland Community Housing to enable them to continue to support rural and island communities, to grow their knowledge and capacity and to deliver more affordable homes to meet the needs of communities.

The action plan touches on what we need to do, but it is all about collaboration and partnership.

The delivery of the ambitions in the action plan cannot be achieved solely by the Scottish Government; it will require commitment, collaboration and dedication by a wide range of organisations, including Government agencies, local authorities and others. Private sector organisations also have a vital role to play, as employers and businesses with land and assets, and I have met Homes for Scotland on that issue. I know that some businesses are already engaging in providing quality homes for their employees.

The Presiding Officer: Please begin to conclude, minister.

Paul McLennan: I believe that the delivery of the commitments in the action plan will further enhance our commitment to addressing the key challenges and will enable the delivery of more homes across our rural and island communities, supporting them to thrive. I look forward to seeing progress on that.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan that will support the Scottish Government's ambition to deliver 110,000 affordable homes, of which 10% will be in rural and island areas and help attract people to, and retain people in, these communities; recognises that the action plan complements a range of other vital work being taken forward to support sustainable economic growth and to deliver for rural and island communities; considers that it marks an important step in tackling challenges to deliver and retain more homes of all tenures and puts in place the systems and support for the delivery of the right homes in the right place, and believes that achieving delivery of ambitions will require the Scottish Government to work collaboratively with a wide range of partners, including local authorities, registered social landlords, community organisations and Scottish Government agencies, to deliver committed and coordinated action that will support thriving rural and island communities.

The Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton to speak to and move amendment S6M-11027.1.

14:36

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Less than one week on from the revelation that our former First Minister could spare just one slot in her diary for the whole of rural Scotland over the past two years, I start by saying that I am pleased to see rural affairs back on the agenda, firmly and squarely, here in Holyrood today. Scotland's towns, villages, rural communities and islands will be paying attention and listening to what the Parliament can do to tackle the challenges that they face.

I know that there are few greater challenges for them than stemming the tide of rural depopulation, which poses a threat to the sustainability of so many of our communities. Rural depopulation has been driven by years of neglect and years of not

using devolved powers in this place, not just by the former First Minister but by a Scottish National Party-Green coalition that has shown time and again that it does not understand the needs of rural communities.

The minister is right that housing is an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to solving that issue. Setting out a plan to support the delivery of affordable homes and homes for key workers, and to address supply chain issues in building homes in rural areas, is a genuinely positive step. A one-size-fits-all approach does not always work and is not always progress but, too often, the Government has taken a copy-and-paste approach by using urban solutions to fix rural problems.

The rural and islands housing action plan is a welcome departure from that approach, but although it is a start—and is no doubt hard won, in the face of a Government that has shown little interest in rural communities or solving the issues around rural depopulation—the facts and figures that underpin the plan show that the Government remains as out of touch as ever with rural Scotland.

Before I go into the details of that, it is important to set the debate in the right context. We must not forget that the plan is being launched on the back of a £170 million cut in Scotland's housing budget. It is also being launched against a backdrop of damaging rent controls that have done nothing other than drive up rents, drive away investment and place a greater burden on people who want to rent a home than is the case anywhere else in the UK. The private rented sector will be key to resolving housing shortages, but the Government's rental measures have undoubtedly had a negative effect on the market. Increasing input costs have forced landlords to put up prices between tenancies, while the disinvestment driven by the policy has reduced stock and increased competition.

Paul McLennan: I have a couple of points. On the budget, at the start of this parliamentary session, the budget was £3.5 billion, and that has not been cut.

I recognise the role of the private rented sector. I have met John Blackwood on a number of occasions to talk about that and how we work with the sector in moving forward. I agree that that is an important area.

On rent controls, the longer-term issue around that will be addressed in the forthcoming housing bill. We are working closely with the private rented sector, not only in rural areas but in other parts of Scotland. I recognise the importance of the point that the member raises.

Rachael Hamilton: I am looking at the Scottish Government figures for 2022, in which there is a cash-terms cut in the housing budget. That has done nothing to help the rural allocation, as highlighted by my colleague Finlay Carson.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the member give way on that point?

Rachael Hamilton: I will make some progress and perhaps take an intervention later.

Against what the minister has just said about the Government working with the private sector, it is key that we take forward the actions that we take away from rural organisations such as the Scottish Association of Landlords and Scottish Land & Estates, which have provided a briefing for the debate. It is important that we work with them and that we listen to the voices of the people who are integral to providing houses in the private rented sector. They have argued strongly that arbitrary rent freezes and eviction bans harm landlords and tenants.

That is important because, alongside making it harder to solve Scotland's housing crisis, there is a huge impact from the red tape and bureaucracy. We have seen a £12 million underspend in rural and islands housing funds. We have also seen repeated failures to meet targets for building affordable homes, with approval rates at their lowest level in 10 years. We have seen a 25 per cent reduction in the delivery of social housing and a staggering 48,000 empty homes across the country, which the minister addressed in his response to my intervention. In my constituency in the Borders, 1,000 properties have been empty for over a year. That does not go unnoticed by my constituents. They cannot understand why those properties cannot be brought back for integral homes for them and their families in the next generation.

Kenneth Gibson: I am not sure how the member expects the Scottish Government to be able to deliver more homes with a £500 million cut in its capital budget, which is 9.7 per cent in real terms this year, with 7 per cent to 2028. If the Scottish Government is doing so badly at delivering affordable homes, why are we delivering 13.9 homes per 10,000 population when the UK Tory Government is managing only two thirds of that?

Rachael Hamilton: What a shame it is that Kenny Gibson has to devolve his responsibilities to another Government. Scotland has two Governments. This Parliament has huge devolved responsibilities and the Scottish Government has a record block grant. Unfortunately, all that the SNP has is criticism. People watching the debate will look at that and think that the party does not understand how to deal with the issues in rural

Scotland, particularly around the lack of housing. It is such a shame.

It is important that we consider the housing action plan in that context. The reality of the plan is that, regardless of the context, rural areas are being short changed. As my colleague Finlay Carson said, rural Scotland accounts for 17 per cent of Scotland's population but it has been promised only 10 per cent of the affordable housing development budget. That falls hopelessly short of its fair share.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention on that?

Rachael Hamilton: If the minister can tell people who live in rural communities why they are being short changed, I will.

Paul McLennan: I come back to the point that I made to Mr Carson. The 10 per cent is a minimum target. It is not around a budget. We continue to speak to local authorities on that. The 10 per cent is a minimum—it is not a budgetary spend—and, if we can get more than that and there are opportunities to deliver that within the wider programme, we will deliver more than the 10 per cent. If we have opportunities to work with local authorities, development groups and local communities on it, we will deliver more. It is not a budget impact; it is a 10 per cent target.

Rachael Hamilton: I am delighted to hear that the minister wants to be more ambitious, but why are we not transparent and clear about what those ambitions are, rather than misleading people and short changing rural communities?

The result for rural Scotland of the deficit that we are talking about is that it is embedding inequality and widening the gap between the SNP's aspirations for delivering for the central belt and what it is failing to deliver for small towns, villages, rural communities and islands.

How many more ways is rural Scotland being let down by this coalition of SNP and Green members, on access to healthcare, road upgrades, broadband connectivity and ferries to name but a few? Housing is key to tackling the problems that rural Scotland is facing, but as I said, it is only one piece of the puzzle. If we cannot even tackle that with a fair allocation of resources—although we have hope for that because of what the minister has just articulated—what hope is there for tackling the rest of the challenges that people face in rural communities? We cannot keep treating rural Scotland as an afterthought in policy making or its people as second class citizens. That is why we will be bringing forward the Scottish Conservatives' plan to bring rural Scotland to the heart of our decision making.

We will be pragmatic in our approach to housing by encouraging investment rather than stymieing its flow. We will cut red tape and bureaucracy to speed up housing delivery, and we will ensure that disincentivising legislation is assigned to the circular file. We will announce plans to overhaul the planning process to make it easier to build new homes in the right places. We will do a lot more, but first and foremost, we will ensure that at least 17 per cent of the housing budget and the building of affordable homes will be delivered in rural areas.

I move amendment S6M-11027.1, to leave out from “of which” to “marks”; and insert:

“but regrets that only 10% of these homes will be delivered in rural and island areas to help attract people to, and retain people in, these communities, which comprise 17% of Scotland’s population; recognises that depopulation has been a longstanding problem for Scotland’s rural and island communities, due to a consistent lack of government action; notes that the current rural development programmes, despite being extended, have not been fully utilised; recognises that the plan must deliver on its objectives and promote rural and island areas as good places to live and work; acknowledges that the plan is”.

14:46

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Before I begin, I draw members’ attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests, which shows that I ceased to be a landlord this summer.

Today’s debate is as much about housing as it is about the future prosperity and existence of rural communities. Although the debate is welcome, the fact that it has taken the SNP Government 16 years to produce a rural housing action plan speaks for itself. People in rural communities have waited for far too long for workable solutions to the Government’s housing crisis, and yet the Government’s motion offers little that is new. We cannot support a motion that does not face up to reality or an action plan that is short on action. It is a missed opportunity.

It is no overstatement to say that housing is a lifeline to rural communities. The shortage of rural, remote and island housing is having a devastating impact on local economies. Just like the ferries fiascos and creaking transport infrastructure, the housing shortage is both a symptom and a cause of depopulation. It is driving people away from their local areas, their families, their support networks and the jobs that they want to do.

I appreciate what the minister had to say in his opening speech, but I want to ask him whether the Government will admit that, as the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has put it, we have a rural housing emergency. I ask that because there seems to be little urgency to address rural Scotland’s needs or the package of policies and

funding that is fundamentally needed to stem the decline.

The rural housing strategy is built on a crumbling foundation. It is tacked to housing targets that the Government’s own risk register warns might be at a high risk of being missed altogether.

Paul McLennan: I have a couple of things to pick up on because they are key to give a bit of context. Kenny Gibson touched on the fact that we deliver about 40 per cent more affordable homes per 10,000 population than are delivered in England, but we also deliver 70 per cent more than are delivered in Labour-controlled Wales. I have already mentioned that the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership produced a report, and we are working closely with it. I wonder whether Labour would support that. Our budget is £3.5 billion. If I could increase that budget—if we had the authority from the UK Government to increase that borrowing to £10 billion—we could move a lot quicker. Would Labour support us if we went to the UK Government and asked for additional borrowing? Alternatively, if Labour won the next election, would it increase the borrowing powers of the Scottish Government to allow us to build more homes?

Mark Griffin: I would absolutely support more capital spending on housing, and I will come on to talk about some of the policies that we have been suggesting in the chamber for years that the SNP Government is dragging its heels on.

The reason why I talked about the numbers and about the Government’s risk register’s warning that there is a high risk that those targets might be missed is because the Government’s house-building programme is now defined by decline, with starts and approvals in 2023 being at their lowest point since 2015.

We need a renewed commitment that those homes will be delivered. Rural communities need to know that the Government is focused on securing homes for them. Labour’s amendment calls for the Government to cement its ambition and to set an interim target of 5,500 rural homes to be delivered by 2026. It is just not credible to say that it will do it by 2032—when it might be long out of office. That is just kicking the can down the road.

Regardless, the Government proposes to undercut rural communities, which could in itself accelerate the depopulation that the action plan is meant to tackle. As Rachael Hamilton and Finlay Carson pointed out, rural, remote and island communities comprise 17 per cent of Scotland’s population. In 2021-22, a sixth—that is, 16 per cent—of the affordable homes that the Government supported were built in rural

communities. Given that the Government said that it has delivered 10,000 rural homes since 2016, why will it take almost a decade to deliver almost the same number? To judge from the minister's contribution, it seems that the 10 per cent target is just a figure plucked out of the air so that the Government can say, "We hit our target" when, in fact, it has performed better than that in 2021-22 and in the past seven years. It seems that it is just an easy target to hit—paying lip service to our rural communities rather than delivering the real ambition that they deserve and need.

More can be done to raise funds directly for rural housing and give those communities a chance to grow and succeed. I recently met Salmon Scotland, not to talk about salmon but to hear about how badly wrong the basics of the housing market are. The lack of affordable housing is stopping the Highlands and Islands from becoming a northern economic powerhouse. Workers are unable to live near their work and their families, which causes depopulation.

If ever we needed an example of how bad something is for business, jobs, growth and the economy, it is the housing crisis that we are experiencing in rural Scotland.

Paul McLennan: I, too, met Salmon Scotland, and discussions are on-going about the proposals that it made, which Mark Griffin knows about. I think that it met us on the same day. I remember having that discussion.

Obviously, I have seen the amendment. I fully recognise the importance of housing and the role that it plays in economic development. I mentioned the visit to Nigg and Invergordon, where I met employers to talk about what we can do to work more closely in that regard. Of course there is that contact, and we will continue it.

We are encouraging local authorities to apply to the key workers fund. At the moment, there are some discussions, but no proposals have come forward. Again, we are working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on that and we are asking it to make sure that proposals come forward for that fund.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Mark Griffin, I can give you the time back.

Mark Griffin: It is good to hear that the Government is doing some thinking. I submitted written questions about what the Government was doing with the estimated £20 million in additional funding that Crown Estate Scotland expects to raise from increased fees from finfish tenants. It seems to have no plans. That is an example of a pot of funding that could aid rural house building.

Our amendment also calls for a council tax surcharge escalator on long-term empty homes. We estimate that giving councils the powers to increase council tax for each year that a home is empty could raise up to £30 million. Better still, it could be a catalyst to help owners of empty homes—of which there are around 28,000—to bring those properties back to the market so that they are lived in as homes and are valued again. As the plan says, it is better to use the stock that we have. I endorse the points that have been made by Conservative members about the need to introduce compulsory sale—and compulsory rental—orders to get those empty homes back into use.

The Government's recent consultation backed increasing the council tax on empty homes, and a stepped approach. Again, that is another revenue stream that the Government could have put to good use, but it seems to be dragging its heels on that, whereas urgency is key.

Although we welcome the Government's backing for our call to give councils the powers to apply a surcharge on second homes, had those powers been introduced when the First Minister came out in support of those proposals, councils could have raised £35 million this financial year.

I return to the minister's initial intervention. A package that abolished small business rate relief for short-term lets and included powers for surcharges on empty homes and second homes could have raised £85 million per year. That is a substantial sum of money that could have gone towards addressing the housing market failure that affects rural areas.

The depopulation of rural areas should not be seen as the status quo, and economic prosperity should be at the front and centre of ensuring that rural communities can survive and thrive.

Today has been a missed opportunity—and worse—for us. The long-awaited "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan" is desperately short on action.

I move amendment S6M-11027.2, to leave out from "welcomes" to end and insert:

"notes the publication of the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, which aims to support the Scottish Government's ambition to deliver 110,000 affordable homes, of which 10% will be in rural and island areas; believes that an interim target should be set for 5,500 houses to be completed in rural areas by 2026; is concerned that, without sufficient economic support from the Scottish Government, the strategy will not provide the infrastructure needed to allow local authorities, registered social landlords, community organisations and Scottish Government agencies to successfully attract people to, and retain people in, these communities; considers that the depopulation of rural areas should not be seen as the status quo, and notes the Scottish Labour Party's commitment to put economic prosperity at the front and

centre of ensuring that Gaelic-speaking communities can survive and thrive; notes that this rural housing crisis is, in some part, due to local people being priced out of the area by the acquisition of second homes; calls on the Scottish Government to take further action to ensure that houses in rural areas are affordable and good quality, and that existing homes are a vital part of the housing stock; agrees that the Scottish Government should give local authorities powers to introduce an escalating council tax surcharge on empty homes in the next Budget, to be launched in 2024-25, as was supported by the responses to the Scottish Government's recent consultation on Council Tax for Second and Empty Homes, and calls on the Scottish Government to take decisive action to tackle fuel poverty and damp, poor quality housing in rural areas, to improve transport infrastructure, and to support the economic lifeblood of small rural communities by delivering skilled workforces, supporting small businesses and ensuring a just transition that delivers community energy benefits."

14:55

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It gives me great pleasure to speak for the Liberal Democrats in the debate on this important subject, and I am grateful to the Government for making time for it.

Between March 2023 and March 2022, construction began on just more than 6,900 affordable homes, which represents a decrease of 15 per cent on the previous year. It is the lowest annual figure since 2015, which was before I was in Parliament. Those disappointing figures come amid what is undeniably a housing crisis in Scotland right now. It is a crisis that is well documented—we have heard about it already today. It is deeply felt across this country but no more so than in our remote, rural and island communities. I see the impact of housing issues every day in my Edinburgh Western constituency. In fact, the bulk of my casework relates to that. That is why, next week, I will convene a summit in the Parliament on the housing issues that affect people who live in the capital. However, the learning points from that will also have ramifications for remote and rural communities.

Paul McLennan: I will provide a couple of points to give us a bit of context. First, completions were at a 20-year high just recently. Secondly, not just in rural areas but in Edinburgh and other parts of the country, the biggest barriers to house building at the moment are the cost of borrowing and the cost of construction inflation. I speak to housing associations, developers and Homes for Scotland, and I hear that the biggest barriers that we face are the cost of borrowing, due to where interest rates are, and the cost of construction inflation. We cannot do anything about that, because we do not have the powers here to do so.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I hope that I can get some of that time back.

The minister is not wrong. The cost of borrowing has increased, but there is still a competitive development market out there. Indeed, in my constituency, many applications come in all the time. The issue is about developers choosing to put their investment in places other than where the need is greatest. We need to reset and recalibrate that urgently.

As I have said, there are serious issues right now across the country. We have accumulated a shortfall of 114,000 homes since 2008, which was before the credit crunch, the cost of living emergency and the increase in interest rates to which the minister alludes. Nowhere can that shortage be felt more acutely than in our rural and island communities. In those areas, it is leading to extreme pressures on affordability, which the figures bear out. In 2007, more than 8,500 new homes were delivered. By 2022, the annual number had fallen to 6,500, which is a fall of 24 per cent. Some local authorities have it even worse than others—it is a postcode lottery. There has been a 39 per cent decline in Shetland, and the shortfall of new housing in the Borders has reached a staggering 65 per cent. Our rural and island communities are further suffering from a lack of new, high-quality, energy-efficient homes, which is impacting on their long-term sustainability and marketability.

Although I am grateful that the Government is finally giving the issue the attention that it so desperately needs with the publication of the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan", which we are discussing today, I am concerned by a lack of focus on the quality of new housing. Liberal Democrats would like more attention to be given to fuel poverty, which is an issue that has an outsized impact on rural and island communities but gets only the very briefest of mentions in relation to the existing housing stock.

Fuel poverty is a major issue. It exacerbates poverty and stretches tight incomes. Apart from the lack of rural and island housing, which threatens depopulation and the viability of those communities, fuel poverty is perhaps the most persistent and pernicious issue when it comes to discussing rural and island housing.

The latest local authority data shows that our rural and island communities consistently top the list for fuel poverty, sitting way above the national average. In the Deputy Presiding Officer's constituency of Orkney, and in Shetland, fuel poverty is at 31 per cent. It is at 32 per cent in Argyll and Bute and 33 per cent in Highland and a whopping 40 per cent of homes in the Western Isles are in fuel poverty.

Those figures are not even up to date: they are from 2019. The Scottish Government does not actually know how many people in our rural and

island areas are currently fuel poor, but, if national modelling released earlier this year is anything to go by, and coupled with the cost of living emergency and the energy crisis, the figures can only be far higher.

It should go without saying in the 21st century that heating your home should not cause or exacerbate poverty. Scottish Liberal Democrats therefore want to see a programme of Scottish Government support for emergency home insulation that would reduce energy costs by improving efficiency and would have a positive impact on our climate targets and our objectives for the climate emergency in the process.

Paul McLennan: Will the member accept an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: If I have time.

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

Paul McLennan: The member makes a really important point. Each local authority, including the authorities that the member mentions, must produce a local heat and energy efficiency strategy by the end of the year. I am working closely with Patrick Harvie and with local authorities on that particular issue. I am cognisant of that incredibly important issue and I give the member that reassurance. That issue has not been forgotten in the action plan, which goes broader than just rural housing. I reassure the member.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Cole-Hamilton, I can give you back the time for both interventions.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful for the intervention and take the minister's remarks in good faith. That said, his predecessors have not measured up to the task. This Government has been in charge for 16 years and in all that time we have not seen the mitigation measures that we need to address remote and rural fuel poverty. It is high time that we took that seriously. I am glad to hear the minister's rhetoric, but that must be met with action.

We also want to see a new and substantial Scottish housing standard that would be a proper Scottish equivalent to the Passivhaus standard for environmentally friendly buildings made using climate-friendly materials and design. This Government must listen to the concerns that have been raised and must ensure that the standard does not impede efforts to build the number of houses that we desperately need. My colleague Willie Rennie has met with the Donaldson Group in Fife to discuss its work on a standard that uses lower-carbon materials and leads to lower running costs than for houses made to the original

Passivhaus standard. I encourage the Government to look in detail at that work. It goes without saying that, as we tackle this crisis, it is absolutely critical that we do so in a sustainable and environmentally coherent way, by building homes that will remain affordable and are designed and built to last.

We must also consistently highlight the negative impact of planning delays on housing delivery, because delays to planning often result in increased costs and fewer housing sites being opened. Last year, the average processing time for major housing applications was more than 42 weeks, while the statutory target is just 16. That is nowhere near good enough and it is getting in the way. If the Government is to take meaningful action on rural and island development, we must improve that now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:03

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): In the interest of transparency, I draw members' attention to my declaration in the register of members' interests regarding my ownership of privately rented properties.

I am delighted to speak in this debate on the importance of housing supply to rural and island communities, not least because housing supply is critical to realising our economic ambitions. We cannot grow the economy without people and we cannot grow the population—or our tax base—without housing. It is necessary for Scotland's rural economy to meet its potential if we are to deliver the potential of Scotland's economy as a whole, whether that is in our tourism sector, in renewable energy, food and drink, aquaculture, fishing or our rapidly growing and potentially world-leading space sector. For all those reasons, the supply of housing stock is absolutely critical, not only because of its social impact but because of its economic impact. That is particularly true in rural and island communities, but it is true across the whole country.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does Ivan McKee agree that any proposals have to be the right proposals for the right location?

Ivan McKee: That is absolutely true. Scotland is wide and varied and each location will have a different emphasis and focus on what is required to tackle the problem. I welcome the rural and island housing action plan, but much of what it proposes applies right across the country.

There is a focus on affordable housing, but I believe that there needs to be a broader focus

right across all tenures. The only sustainable way to keep housing affordable is to have significant build across all tenures and not just in what is traditionally defined as affordable housing. If the supply is there to meet or exceed the demand it helps to keep all prices affordable.

As I said, the economy needs people, and Scotland has had success in attracting talent from the rest of the UK. We are an attractive location to come to live and work in. The Scottish Government has made it clear that we want more inward migration into Scotland, and has argued for powers to do that. However, we need to face up to the reality that, at the moment, even if we had those powers, we would struggle to house everyone who might want to come and live and work here. I ask the Government to be ambitious, to get ahead of the curve and to ensure that supply is ahead of not just current demand but potential future demand, which is absolutely critical to our population and economy ambitions.

It is good to hear that the minister is having discussions with SFE and investors on expanding investment, particularly into build-to-rent housing. I would be interested to know how much of that potential lies in rural areas. I welcome the focus in the action plan on identifying land for housing in the context of NPF4, the work on land reform legislation to increase transparency around ownership, and the work that is happening to look at the public sector estate and understand how much of that can be used to address local housing needs.

Local housing assessments are important to enable us to improve understanding of housing requirements, but I say again that we need to get ahead of the curve. Population trends can be driven by policy, and it is not just a question of responding to them, whether they relate to Scotland's population as a whole, or the drift from west to east and from rural to urban.

The focus on local economies is hugely important, and it is good to see effective engagement with local employers. However, working with potential inward investors to align housing supply with skills supply in those key rural and island sectors is hugely important. I know that employers are very much up for that conversation. The plan identifies the critical work to be done to address skills, capacity and supply chains—particularly for small and medium-sized builders in the rural economy.

The plan mentions modern methods of construction, and I am delighted to see the close working that is going on with what was Construction Scotland Innovation Centre, and is now Built Environment—Smarter Transformation or BE-ST. I urge the minister to make sure that we have a thorough look at the potential for off-site

factory-build units that could be dropped into place to help to tackle labour shortages in rural areas, at least initially.

The focus on bringing more empty homes into use or, indeed, second homes into residential use, is hugely welcome. It is good to see the 100 per cent premium on second home council tax, but my question for the minister is: why have a cap on that at all? Why not just leave it to local authorities to decide how high that premium should be, to suit local circumstances? .

I am glad to see the important work on compulsory purchase orders, alongside work on compulsory sales orders, which have an urban as well as a rural applicability. That will make the process clearer, fairer and faster, as defined in the action plan.

Planning times have already been mentioned, as has the fact that, for major projects, the time lag is 42 to 43 weeks, versus a 16-week statutory timeframe. Even for smaller projects, it can be a 14-week lag versus a 12-week statutory timeframe. That absolutely needs to be addressed. I know that the minister understands that, but I would be interested to know what work is being done to address those excessive times.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McKee is just winding up.

Ivan McKee: I am indeed.

My colleague Fergus Ewing raised a point about permitted development rights to enable farmers and others to build small numbers of houses on land where that is required, and that absolutely needs to be looked at.

I would like to ask the minister whether work on other tax levers—such as land value tax and capturing land value uplift—will be considered in the land reform bill. Progressively broadening out that tax base and ensuring that communities benefit from the uplift in land value could increase the scope for delivering more homes as a consequence.

15:10

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am the owner of a croft, a partner in a farming partnership that owns a rental property, and a member of NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates.

Today's debate, which I welcome, is on an extremely important subject for my Highlands and Islands region and for rural and island Scotland

more generally. Housing and the lack of its availability is an issue that we can all agree impacts on those whom we represent, our local economies and the delivery of local public services, so I give a cautious welcome to the Scottish Government's "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan". I do so because I question, as does the amendment in the name of my colleague Rachael Hamilton, how ambitious it really is.

The action plan makes promises on delivering new affordable homes but, as Finlay Carson rightly highlighted, only 10 per cent will be built in the rural and island areas where 17 per cent of Scotland's population actually live. One might ask, as do many of my constituents, who regularly raise housing concerns with me, why the new plan, coming as it does after 16 years of SNP Government, will be any more successful than the previous efforts. Is it just that SNP ministers are finally recognising the seriousness of the situation and the failure of those previous efforts to rectify it?

When the Scottish Government announced that £30 million would be made available for the rural and islands housing funds that were originally planned to run from 2016-17 to 2021, it suggested that the funds would help it to hit its 50,000 affordable homes target. Well, it missed that target.

When questioned by my colleague Miles Briggs, the Scottish Government claimed that the rural and islands housing funds play

"an important role in offering support to community organisations and others to deliver affordable homes".—
[Written Answers, 31 January 2023; S6W-14348.]

Yet, because of poor uptake, the application period for both funds had to be extended and they were still being allocated in 2022-23. Despite that extension, between 2016-17 and 2022-23, the Scottish Government had spent less than £18 million of that combined £30 million funding pot.

Surely, with what I hope the minister will accept are serious pressures on housing availability in our rural and island areas, the lack of uptake of those funds clearly demonstrates that there were issues with how they were delivered. In 2018-19, two years into the scheme, they funded only one property in the whole of Scotland. In 2020-21, the last year that the schemes were originally intended to run, they funded only 20 properties. That is despite millions of pounds of available funding still sitting in Scottish Government coffers in Edinburgh, when it should have been used to deliver much-needed homes in rural and island communities.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I will be happy to take an intervention from the minister to answer these questions. What went wrong with the rural and islands housing funds? What lessons has the Scottish Government learned to ensure that those mistakes, whether they were to do with eligibility issues or a lack of awareness of the schemes, will not be made again with any new schemes? Is the £45 million that the Scottish Government has claimed will be allocated to the new remote rural and island housing fund all new funding, or will it include reallocation of unspent funds from the existing rural and islands housing funds? Finally, why should we have any confidence that any new schemes will deliver the homes that are needed, when the old one clearly did not?

Paul McLennan: I am happy to pick up on the questions that Mr Halcro Johnston asked, and I will write to him on the specific points that he raised.

I cannot comment on the past. The funding was always there. When I was going around the Highlands, one of the key things that was raised with me was infrastructure, which is incredibly important. We need to look at how we can use infrastructure to bring housing forward. I was also up in Shetland, for example, where we provided £30 million of infrastructure funding that will deliver 300 homes, which will make a real difference. It is about getting down to that level of detail.

Looking at the context, the issue was not about funding; it was about working with local authorities. One of the key things for me is how we link broader economic development opportunities to housing. In discussions with employers and local authorities, that is a key point that comes across.

I will be happy to address Mr Halcro Johnston's more specific points if he writes to me on those matters.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am grateful for that. I think that the minister said that he could not comment on matters from the past, but if proposals are to work in the future, we must surely listen, learn, find out what went wrong in the past and comment on that.

The SNP has had 16 years to get things right on this issue, and it has failed. On its website, the party still boasts that the funding will help

"young people and families to stay or make their lives in rural, remote and island communities."

However, in a survey conducted by Ipsos for Highlands and Islands Enterprise, nearly half of the young people from the area who were questioned said that they planned to move away in the next five years, with 76 per cent saying that there were not enough affordable homes to rent or buy.

I would genuinely love to believe that finally, and belatedly, although many years too late, the SNP has recognised the need for action, but I cannot. This still does not feel like a revolutionary new approach to delivering what it has failed to deliver for so long. It feels like more of the same, but a revolution is what is needed. That is why the Scottish Conservatives would create a Scottish housing delivery agency to work with local authorities and developers to deliver and build new houses, and why we would allow permitted development for rural homes, giving more freedom to farms and other businesses to play their part in addressing rural and island housing shortages, as well as helping to accommodate workers. I am glad that it sounds as though we have some support from SNP back benchers for that.

As Mark Griffin highlighted, employers such as Salmon Scotland have said that the lack of affordable housing is preventing my Highlands and Islands region from becoming a powerhouse. Scottish Land & Estates has said that the SNP's "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan" is not ambitious or radical enough to deliver the step change that is needed to meet rural housing needs. Housing charity Shelter has said that the Government's approach does not indicate that it recognises the severity of the situation.

Getting housing right is vital for my region, but not enough homes are being built. Such a lack of housing, in both the public and private sectors, seriously impacts on the delivery of public services, the ability of local businesses to thrive and people's ability to stay in the communities in which they were brought up. A lack of homes threatens the very future of some of our most fragile communities. Our rural and island communities cannot afford the SNP to get this wrong again.

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

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is winding up—in fact, he has wound up.

15:17

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests as someone who rents out a property, albeit that it is not in rural or island Scotland.

I welcome the publication of the action plan and the dedicated support that is being provided to tackle the lack of affordable housing in rural and island areas. I have no doubt that my Arran and Cumbrae constituents, and the businesses that operate on those islands, will welcome it, too.

In 2021, 18 affordable, energy-efficient council homes were built on Cumbrae, supported by a Scottish Government grant of £1.32 million. Last year, a mix of 34 general needs amenity bungalows and accessible council houses was built on Arran, backed by a £2.38 million grant. That represents £70,000 per council house, which is three and a half times the grant that is available for council housing in England.

That is in stark contrast to the mere six council houses that were built by the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration across all Scotland over four years. Despite the financial crash, Tory austerity and the pandemic, in the past financial year alone, 1,947 council homes were completed across Scotland, as the minister strives to ensure that everyone has a warm, safe and affordable home.

Despite the Scottish Government's ambitious targets, it is evident that our rural and island communities have experienced economic hardship, particularly due to economically active people's difficulty in being able to afford island housing costs. Community-led housing projects such as Arran Development Trust's Rowarden affordable housing project—the biggest such housing project on Scotland's islands—are playing a key role in increasing the availability of affordable housing and, in turn, the prospects of islanders. Thanks to a record £1.512 million from the Scottish Government's rural and islands housing funds—which represents £84,000 for each new home—18 one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom homes are now under construction in Lamlash, backed by the provision of 24 further affordable building plots on Arran.

The project is an excellent example of a positive outcome that was created through collaborative working between the public and private sectors and the community. I trust that Arran Development Trust's and islanders' bold ambitions and dedication can be learned from to ensure that local communities' voices are heard in planning processes throughout Scotland.

The continued support that was offered by civil servants throughout the project was greatly appreciated, with the announcement of the project in May being very warmly welcomed. However, it took some three years to secure a grant from the rural and islands housing funds. I urge the minister to explore how such projects can be expedited in future. It can be a long and weary process for organisations such as Arran Development Trust, which mostly consist of volunteers, to deliver projects, which acts as a deterrent to those who lack the dogged determination and patience of the trust's members.

The First Minister's visit to Arran on 23 August, when he met Arran Development Trust to discuss

the demand for affordable housing, the cost of building on the islands and empowerment for island communities, ensured that islanders know that their lived experiences are valued when housing policy is implemented. The trust appreciated the opportunity to relay its concerns directly to the First Minister, and a number of the points that were raised are reflected in the plan.

Arran's largest employer, the Auchrannie resort, has been vocal about how a lack of affordable island housing has impacted on its business, with many employees being unable to reside on the island in a home of their own. Auchrannie is an employee-owned business and it should be commended for providing 103 accommodation units to team members, which has removed the need to commute while supporting those who reside on the island. Understandably, however, employees do not see such accommodation as a home, leading to few retaining their employment for long, and its provision means that the true level of homelessness is, regrettably, underestimated. Team accommodation should not be included in figures on people who are housed if we are actually to reflect need.

The programme for government dedicated up to £25 million to identify homes for key workers in rural communities, and that funding is essential to ensure that businesses in rural and island communities remain afloat, particularly after the devastating impact of the pandemic. I welcome the island skills and repopulation pilot, with one of the three projects taking place on Arran and Cumbrae. Through the support for career pathways, retraining and upskilling, local economies on the two islands in my constituency will diversify, increasing capacity and skills across a variety of sectors and further supporting the delivery of more affordable housing.

I look forward to publication of the addressing depopulation action plan this autumn, and I will continue to work with the minister on island communities in order to tackle depopulation. That is essential if we are to ensure that islanders do not have to move to the mainland for housing.

North Ayrshire Council's community wealth building approach to economic development, which is the first of its kind in Scotland, offers a unique opportunity to contribute to our wellbeing economy as well as the local authority's five pillars while building affordable homes. By using local procurement, we can deliver more and better jobs, business growth and shorter supply chains, creating greater resilience while also supporting net zero ambitions. In turn, that will boost the local economy and increase opportunities to build more affordable homes.

As many island and rural communities across Arran experience, 26 per cent of the housing stock

comprises second or empty homes. That is 735 properties, with 47 per cent in one village. Although those homes are not the primary cause of the island's lack of affordable housing, they could play a role in the solution. While Arran's economy is heavily dependent on tourism, it is essential that employers that support community services remain on the island, one key need being permanent and affordable housing. It is essential that we encourage empty and second homes into long-term rent across construction of affordable homes.

Arran Development Trust has long campaigned for councils to be granted more discretion over the rates of council tax on second homes, and it will welcome the secondary legislation to be delivered by the Scottish Government to enable local authorities to apply up to a 100 per cent premium on council tax rates for second homes from April next year. Compulsory sales orders can also play an important role and, as other members across the chamber have done, I urge the minister to take forward such orders.

The "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan", if and when it is implemented, should successfully tackle a number of issues that contribute to Arran and Cumbrae's affordable housing crisis and that of other islands. I welcome the minister's innovative approach to ensuring that island and rural communities will have increased access to affordable homes, thereby helping to boost local economies, and I welcome the minister's promise to visit my constituency and meet directly Arran Development Trust and stakeholders who are affected by the prevalence of second and empty homes to ensure that housing policy alleviates the burden on islanders in my constituency.

15:23

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): In February, the convention of the south of Scotland held its biannual gathering, bringing together Government ministers and key national and local public bodies with responsibility for growth. The convention usually debates a range of economic issues. This time, the crisis facing the region is such that there was just one item on the agenda—housing. South of Scotland Enterprise has described the lack of affordable housing as one of the biggest economic barriers that the region faces.

A week rarely goes past when I do not speak to a business that is facing labour shortages and struggling to recruit. More and more, however, those businesses are telling me that, even when potential employees are interested in taking up posts, they often cannot do so because there is no suitable affordable housing near the place of work. I have spoken to hospitality businesses that have

bought nearby hotels to house their workers because that is the only way that they can attract key staff such as chefs. The lack of housing is holding the local economy back. It is stifling growth and blocking the ambitions of those who want to get on.

We are simply not building enough affordable homes to meet demand and the needs of our rural communities. That is partly because of house building capacity. National house builders have little interest in building what they view as small-scale developments in rural areas, and there has been a decline in the number of local house builders. Those that exist increasingly face skill shortages and cannot get local contractors. Astonishingly, Government cuts recently meant that Skills Development Scotland reduced the apprenticeship contract for Dumfries and Galloway College by 13 per cent. At a time when demand for apprentices is at a peak, we have a waiting list at the college for apprenticeship places in construction.

The Government has also taken its eye off the ball when it comes to making best use of existing housing. Many of the properties in the region are old and have poor energy efficiency. There are eye-watering levels of fuel poverty in the region—in fact, almost a third of households are in fuel poverty, which is higher than the national average. Too many families are being priced out of the area due to the acquisition of second homes that often sit empty for much of the year.

Rachael Hamilton: Do Labour and Colin Smyth agree with expanding permitted development rights to ensure that we have enough housing for people who are struggling to live and work in their own areas?

Colin Smyth: I absolutely believe that we need a far more can-do approach to our planning processes. One move that would help would be to properly resource planning authorities to make decisions as quickly as possible, because delays have increased in recent years.

At a time when there are all these challenges, there has been an increase of more than 90 per cent in the number of open homelessness cases in Dumfries and Galloway compared with 2019-20. The number of children in temporary accommodation in the region has risen by two thirds in a year. The crisis is so bad that housing officers are placing people in caravans and in 50 bed and breakfasts across the region.

However, the number of homes in Dumfries and Galloway given grant funding by the Scottish Government in the year to the end of June as part of the affordable housing supply programme was down by 22 per cent. The number of affordable

homes being built in the region is at its lowest since 2016.

It is little wonder that, despite its many admirable aims, the universal response to the Government's rural housing action plan is that there simply is not enough action. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations says that the plan

"does not go far enough".

Scottish Land & Estates says that it is not ambitious or radical enough to deliver the step change that is needed to meet rural housing needs. Homes for Scotland says that the plan does little to identify the challenges that home builders face, and Shelter Scotland says that the plan

"does not indicate that the Government recognises the severity of the situation."

It also says that

"a housing emergency needs an emergency response."

We can see the lack of that emergency response and a lack of ambition in the Government's motion, not least in the target of 10 per cent of the planned affordable homes being in rural and island areas. The Government's figures show that rural areas make up 17 per cent of Scotland's population, and the minister seemed to suggest earlier that that 10 per cent figure has just been plucked out of the air.

We need far more action in the Government's so-called action plan. That means more urgent targets for building new homes in rural areas. As Mark Griffin set out, Labour supports not only a 100 per cent council tax surcharge on second homes but wants local authorities to be given powers to introduce an escalating council tax surcharge on empty homes. That call was supported in the responses to the Scottish Government's consultation on council tax for second and empty homes. A 100 per cent second home surcharge would raise £1.8 million in Dumfries and Galloway alone, and an empty home escalator would raise a further £1 million. That money could be used to bring more empty properties back into use.

To kick-start house building, we need a more can-do approach in our planning processes and new rural-specific consenting processes. We also need an allocation of resources that properly reflects the additional costs of housing in rural areas, particularly the costs of renovation and energy efficiency measures in older properties.

I recognise that there is good practice in rural housing. I see that for myself in the work of South of Scotland Community Housing in developments such as the old police station in Langholm, which was refurbished to create affordable homes, but

we need a lot more. A decent, warm and affordable home is a basic human right that everyone, whoever they are and wherever they live, is entitled to.

However, far too many of my constituents are being denied that right. Until we have the emergency response from Government to our housing crisis that Shelter Scotland has called for, the ambitions of far too many families and the economies of rural Scotland will continue to be held back.

15:30

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): “Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan” contains a wide range of examples of how rural and island housing has been created and delivered. The diverse and innovative approach should be welcomed.

I want to focus on the unique rural housing challenges that are experienced in communities across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. We have many opportunities to make a difference in improving rural housing and in encouraging people to move to our rural areas, to address depopulation and to keep our rural communities alive and thriving. Such possibilities include incentivising housing development on brownfield, vacant, abandoned and derelict sites, and exploring alternative types of housing to meet the needs of our areas.

Marie Curie’s briefing ahead of the debate was useful in highlighting that accessible housing and adaptations to housing need to be made more quickly, especially for terminally ill people. I thank Marie Curie for that briefing.

Mark Griffin spoke about population decline, which is a real threat to the sustainability of many of Scotland’s rural communities. The lack of good-quality, affordable rural housing is a key concern. It is crucial that we acknowledge that the Scottish Government alone cannot tackle the critical challenges of depopulation. National and local government and the third, community and private sectors all have a role to play if we are to tackle depopulation collectively.

Finlay Carson: Colin Smyth mentioned the convention of the south of Scotland having housing on the agenda. When we promoted the establishment of South of Scotland Enterprise, Colin Smyth lodged an amendment to promote the development of affordable housing on the face of the bill. Why did Emma Harper vote against that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Emma Harper the time back.

Emma Harper: Thanks for giving me the time back, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I am coming to that issue.

It is crucial that, when we look at what we need to do for housing, we look at how we will tackle depopulation. Depopulation restricts the local labour supply and affects public service provision, as funding is typically population driven. Those issues were raised at a meeting that I attended with the equalities and depopulation minister in Dumfries towards the end of the summer recess.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government recognises the key role that is played by housing in supporting the successful delivery of its aims relating to addressing depopulation and wider population sustainability. However, we need to think innovatively in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders in order to attract more people of working age, address depopulation and have good-quality rural housing while ensuring Scotland’s food security.

There is a wealth of evidence and research, including from the Scottish Land Commission, that demonstrates that changes to VAT in construction, which is currently at 5 per cent could help to address rural housing challenges. We know that VAT is reserved to Westminster, but the evidence shows that, if VAT were reformed, we could renew, regenerate and rebuild some vacant, abandoned and derelict sites instead of using prime agricultural land, for instance. If VAT were reduced, we could use and change those sites, which are a blight on our communities.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: I will take an intervention from the minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, minister.

Paul McLennan: I will be very quick on that specific point.

The VAT figure has been mentioned in discussions that I have had with construction companies and developers. For some projects, the 5 per cent can be the difference between going ahead and not going ahead. Therefore, I will certainly pick up that issue with Emma Harper after the debate and will raise it with the UK Government.

Emma Harper: That is good news. The issue has been raised in the chamber before when we have talked about vacant, abandoned and derelict land and what we can do about it.

We know that Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders have more than their fair share of derelict sites, such as at the former Interfloor factory in Dumfries, the George hotel in Stranraer, the Central hotel in Annan and the Mercury hotel in

Moffat, to name just a few. There are also the N Peal and Glenmac buildings in Hawick.

Published research from the Glasgow Centre for Population Health shows that neglected environments can contribute to mental ill health. Dilapidated neighbourhoods and abandoned shops or houses can make people feel unsafe, with run-down environments found to contribute to anxiety and persistent low mood. Therefore, I thank the minister again for being willing to speak to me about the issue of VAT, so that we can encourage brownfield site redevelopment.

An additional point is that the combination of our legacy of out-migration and depopulation and the challenges of Brexit and demographic change means that Scotland urgently needs the powers to increase inward migration. Scotland needs a tailored migration solution to tackle depopulation. That is why the Scottish Government has called for cross-party support for a rural visa pilot scheme. The needs of Scotland are clearly not being met within the current UK Government immigration system, so that is something that we need to keep pursuing.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer, but I would ask the minister to explore an innovative company called Iron and Pine, which is based in Dalbeattie. It is able to make bespoke types of builds for palliative care beds and accommodation for rural employees who might be coming just for training, but they can be used for long-term housing as well.

15:36

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am delighted to participate in this debate. As an MSP for the Highlands and Islands, I frequently discuss the pressing need for housing solutions with stakeholders across the region.

Producing the plan was a commitment that was made in the Bute house agreement, along with ensuring continued funding through the rural and island housing fund. With precarious populations and a lack of housing for key workers, the plan provides welcome momentum and direction in tackling our rural and island housing crisis, but the plan needs to be given profile and priority if we are to see it through.

How will the plan boost the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, encourage asset transfers and enable delivery of our islands plan? There must be policy coherence to support our communities and businesses in working to deliver housing and placemaking.

The plan can and must drive delivery of rural and island housing. The role of Government is to support our communities in delivering the right

homes in the right places, in developing more high-quality affordable homes, in making the best use of existing homes and in supporting a range of ownership and tenures.

Along with policy coherence, the success of the plan will be dependent on the detail; that is especially true when it comes to community-led housing. The plan comes on the back of the recently announced Bute house commitment to funding our rural housing enablers so that they, in turn, can build capacity, capability and confidence in communities so that they can take their urgent housing needs into their own hands.

Support for communities is necessary if we are to meet the initial commitment to providing 11,000 affordable rural homes. However, there are two things to consider. First, we need to acknowledge that community-led development happens on the backs of volunteer-led organisations, which I hear is a challenge. We must find a way to support those organisations with secure funding for community development officers.

The second point is about the amount of housing. We must recognise that 11,000 houses will not be the end. There is a need for more rural and islands housing if we are to transform the future of our rural communities and see them thrive. We need to find better ways to assess the value and impact of building rural homes that captures the cultural, environmental and social benefits to communities, so that we can tackle our rural and islands population crisis.

The plan is very welcome, but it needs all key stakeholders, especially the Scottish Government teams and local authorities, to buy into it and to work together. We need to move away from some of the familiar approaches to housing options and to build flexibility into the mix in order to respond to nuanced needs, on the ground.

For community-led development to work, communities must be seen as full project partners. That will mean communities being involved in the very early stages of development or, if they take the lead, support being there from all levels of government and barriers removed.

I would like to see more work being done on how the rural and islands housing fund can be opened up to support the growing demand for co-housing, which is a place-making model that has a lot to offer in terms of wellbeing by tackling isolation and loneliness.

Although it is good to see that the Minister for Housing has been in discussion with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, this is a much broader issue. I would like communication and collaboration to be taking place across a wider range of portfolios in order that we can drill down into community needs. For

example, the need for carers in our rural communities means engaging with the health and social care sector as much as we engage with housing and rural affairs teams.

I welcome the commitment to building more housing using modern construction methods. It would be good to see the Scottish Government engaging with the numerous small companies that are based in my region, including Makar and North Woods, which have track records in successful off-site construction and have lots of experience to offer.

Small construction companies tell me that keeping down the costs of construction is a challenge. They do not have sufficient cash flow to support the purchase of large quantities of materials. In some cases, such materials, such as oriented strand board—OSB—are being manufactured right on their doorsteps. That is why I am fully behind the approach that Communities Housing Trust is proposing—to establish a materials hub so that we can build at scale, and to spread that across the area. The idea is that materials can be purchased in bulk by the customer and made available to local construction companies. That approach has the potential to bring confidence to the small-scale construction sector and to support it to develop its apprenticeships programme. If we are going to build 11,000 houses—and more—and take forward a placemaking agenda, we not only need communities to lead; we also need buy-in from the people who are going to build the houses.

The investment plan should be an opportunity to ensure that there are, in all our communities, more people with hands-on skills to maintain and repair local buildings. Those skills are as relevant to maintenance and retrofitting programmes as they are to building schemes. Let us plan to preserve and to maintain, as well as to build our communities.

To conclude, I say that we must do all that we can to ensure that there are homes for everyone who wants to live in the community, from young to old and from families to single people. We must take an approach, and listen to the calls for 11,000 homes in Highland, that will see lights going on in the straths once again.

15:42

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As the motion indicates, the Scottish Government is, not least through some serious investment in social housing, taking much vital action to address the housing crisis that now exists in many parts of the Highlands and Islands. Indeed, any debate around the issue must begin with the frank admission that, for young people in some rural

communities, “crisis” is the only word that can be used.

Decades-long trends in depopulation have accelerated since the pandemic. Islands house prices have increased far more substantially than islands wages. Those who are on the bottom rungs of the housing ladder simply lack the economic means even to begin to compete with retirees, property investors and second-home purchasers. No Government can build houses at the rate that they are disappearing in those ways. For my Na h-Eileanan an Iar constituency, between 2018 and 2028 the working-age population is due to decrease by 6 per cent and the number of children is due to decrease by 13 per cent. I regret to say that, at the same time, the islands are being touted in the national press as an idyllic wilderness—the best place in the UK for people to retire to. That definitely does not help.

We are already seeing the impacts of all that on businesses and public services, as critical vacancies go unfilled. In many communities, the balance is shifting rapidly away from year-round lived-in houses to short-term lets and second homes. When that trend gets out of hand in a community the school closes, families relocate and, in the space of a generation or less, a village is transformed into a retirement or holiday community. The Gaelic language plan is also being squeezed under those pressures.

Writing in *The Observer* earlier this month, Ness-born poet Donald S Murray warns of the dangers of allowing the idea to take hold that the Highlands are merely a place where

“the natural world has a greater appeal than the existences of the humans in their surroundings.”

I do not say all that lightly: I am an incomer myself. The islands need new people, but they need a mix of new people.

Getting the housing question right is now an existential concern for many of the communities that I represent, so I very much welcome the publication of “Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan”. The plan supports Scotland’s long-term strategy in “Housing to 2040” and will bolster the commitment to deliver 11,000 affordable homes—of which 70 per cent will be for social rent—by 2032.

In response to some of the accusations that have been thrown about during the debate, I should say that in my constituency more than 650 housing association properties—roughly a third of the Hebridean Housing Partnership’s stock—have been built since the SNP came to power in 2007. The Scottish Government has made more than £43 million available for affordable housing in the islands over this parliamentary session alone. That money now needs to be spent wisely.

It is not just about building homes; it is also about keeping homes in the housing stock. Hundreds of islands houses have slipped out of domestic use as the number of short-term lets has exploded: the number of short-term lets is nearly two and a half times what it was a decade ago. Short-term let licensing and control areas now give local authorities much-needed options to exercise controls in communities where such controls are needed.

In common with other areas, my constituency has a high number of empty houses, so I welcome the plan's focus on building on the work that has happened across the country, much of which can be said to have been pioneered by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and its empty homes officer, Murdo Macleod.

With nearly a quarter of all second homes in Scotland being in the Highlands and Islands, many people across the region consider that the unregulated increase in the number of second homes is helping to fuel the housing crisis. Giving councils the ability to levy additional charges on second homes will help to tackle the problem while bringing the approach to them into line with the existing rules for long-term-empty properties. I believe that the Scottish Government should consider granting powers to restrict the number of further second homes in any locality where the supply of housing for full-time habitation is under pressure.

I welcome the plan's recognition of crofting's vital role in maintaining the population of the Highlands and Islands, and its commitment to reviewing the croft house grant scheme, in search of improvements. The upcoming reform of crofting law should, in my view, include looking for ways to make it easier for affordable housing developments to progress on land that is under crofting tenure. I know that that has been a struggle in the Western Isles, where such land accounts for the great majority of the land. There is also an urgent need to tackle what are increasingly becoming, in some cases, absurd prices for croft tenancies on the open market.

Although there are no easy solutions to the housing crisis, "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan" lays the foundations for a range of actions that have the potential to make a real difference in providing the housing that island communities urgently need.

15:48

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): As I have often said, my constituency is the most beautiful in Scotland, and I still believe that. Living in small communities such as Galloway has its many attractions, but it also has its

disadvantages, including the significant lack of quality affordable homes to ensure that people can live and work in rural Scotland. For many years, there has been a notable lack of suitable homes in the south. Much of the housing stock is old, with poor energy efficiency.

We know that there is also a shortage of skills in rural Scotland, especially in traditional trades. For example, there is a shortage of plumbers, joiners and electricians. Inevitably, that leads to a limited number of locally based house builders.

The lack of suitable housing is a huge factor in the recruitment challenges for both public and private employers, and it undoubtedly prevents Dumfries and Galloway from delivering on its considerable potential. We face a vicious circle, with house prices in the south remaining below the national average, but it is equally important to recognise that, at the same time, we have a high price to income ratio as a result of our historically low-wage economy. In essence, that means that affordability for local people is a serious issue.

The shortage of supply has also been a major problem in the local property market, with a lack of new social housing and affordable homes being built to meet growing demand. That makes it almost impossible for local first-time buyers and local workers on low incomes to get on the property ladder. However, it is questionable that the increasing demand for affordable housing will be met if the Scottish Government's rural and islands housing action plan is anything to go by. It promises to deliver 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, but with only 10 per cent going to rural and island communities.

I will repeat the facts, because they are worth repeating. In terms of land area, urban Scotland accounts for somewhere around 2.2 per cent of Scotland and rural areas account for 97.8 per cent. In terms of population, urban areas account for 83 per cent and rural areas account for 17 per cent. It is typical of the Scottish Government that it thought that we might cheer the commitment to have 10 per cent of those affordable homes for rural housing. Is that disappointing? Yes. Is it surprising? No.

It is also highly questionable that that number will be built, given the 16 per cent year-on-year cut to the housing capital budget, equating to nearly £113 million. It is little wonder that the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland have heavily criticised the reduction in funding for the affordable supply programme from £893 million to £721.6 million. Those housing bodies, which have called for an increase in funding for new homes, argue that the reduction does not fit with the Government's focus on reducing poverty in

Scotland. The national director of CIH Scotland said:

“the budget for new affordable homes has been reduced by over £200m in real terms which makes the challenging target of 110,000 affordable homes ... even more difficult.”

Sally Thomas, the chief executive of the SFHA, said:

“social housing provides one of the greatest protections against poverty, and we are alarmed to see a cut to the Affordable Housing Supply Programme which, coupled with continuing uncertainty over rent setting and inflationary pressures on costs, seriously threatens our members’ ability to build homes. A budget decrease of any amount will still reduce the number of homes our members can build, and we urge the government to rethink this cut if it’s serious about tackling poverty in Scotland.”

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): If the member believes that social housing is so important, why does he support the UK Government cutting the capital budget for the Scottish Government?

Finlay Carson: That is so sad, and it does us a disservice to continually deflect about where we are. The block grant in Scotland increased, so it is about priorities. Obviously, the SNP Government does not prioritise rural areas and affordable housing.

We have the stark prospect of fewer homes being built, which will do little to encourage our younger generation to remain close to home or, indeed, return home. Depopulation remains at crisis point. Young people want and deserve a future that they can plan for, which is why many are having to consider moving to more urban areas to gain a decent wage, better prospects and, more importantly, a roof over their heads.

Depopulation in rural Scotland was highlighted last year when the report “Population Estimates for Settlements and Localities in Scotland, Mid-2020” revealed the growing movement towards larger towns and cities. Dr Calum MacLeod, the policy director at Community Land Scotland, said:

“The report starkly illustrates the depopulation and demographic crisis faced by many of Scotland’s rural areas. We urgently need to repopulate these areas and also resettle previously inhabited rural places where it’s practicable to do so.”

Dr MacLeod continued:

“That requires tangible action in the form of affordable housing, good quality jobs, better infrastructure and digital connectivity to fulfill the Scottish Government’s commitment to increasing the population of rural areas of Scotland contained in National Planning Framework 4”.

As I mentioned, those who are fortunate enough to have a home often encounter another major headache, which is fuel poverty. Many rural properties that are off grid rely on alternative heat solutions, many of which are costly and in some cases unsuitable. In its latest report,

Changeworks, a leading environmental charity, highlights the inequity facing rural households, identifying several negative factors that, when combined, create a perfect storm of very significant fuel poverty across rural Scotland. The plight of Scottish households driven into fuel poverty is worsened by the lack of effective alleviation measures. The chief executive, Josiah Lockhart, said:

“This report highlights an unjust reality; rural Scotland experiences higher levels of fuel poverty than the rest of the country.”

I have previously highlighted in the chamber the stellar work that South of Scotland Community Housing has carried out. Until March 2020, the organisation was core funded by the Scottish Government via the more homes programme. However, the Scottish Government withdrew funding, despite the fact that SOSCH provided long-term technical and professional support to community organisations and landowners on the planning and delivery of affordable homes, which addresses local needs.

I am pleased that the ministers, for once, have taken on board my and others’ calls to restore SOSCH’s funding. Albeit that it is a U-turn, it is a small step in the right direction but not the giant leap that rural communities were hoping for and need in order to survive.

15:55

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests. I own a small cottage in Lossiemouth, which has been let on a long-term basis for the past 16 years.

This is not the first time that I have made this speech in this session of the Parliament and I have a feeling that it might not be the last occasion. When I previously made the points that I am going to make again, the minister was kind enough to suggest that I should write to him, fleshing out the detail. I was happy to do that. He has been energetic in his portfolio and I was keen genuinely to try to influence the Scottish Government to take up some ideas that I have had and that have enjoyed fairly substantial support in rural Scotland.

I set out those ideas in a letter of 1 September. It was not a short letter—I do not think that I can lay any claim to any talent for brevity. It was six pages of closely typed foolscap. I have not yet received a reply, but I hope that the minister will do more than consider what I have to say today, because I say it as somebody who spent 20 years as a lawyer, working in conveyancing to a great extent, and now nearly 25 years as an MSP for a constituency that is largely rural. Over that period,

I have been fortunate to work closely with land agents, surveyors, landowners, farmers, tenant farmers, crofters, local builders and local artisans. Therefore, I have a sense of what we need to do to tackle a problem on which we all agree that we need to do far better.

As Dr Allan and Kenny Gibson argued, housing associations and local authorities do a great job in providing affordable and mid-market rented housing. They are professional, and it is not easy. The complexities and delays are extremely difficult. The minister is well aware of that from his time in local government. However, there is a danger of missing an opportunity in the strategy. I have found two passing references to working with private landowners but no more than that. I could not see any of the action points at the end correcting that other than possibly in the medium to long term.

When I say “private landowners”, I am talking about a whole panoply. I am talking about landed estates, those who have particular land holdings, farmers—substantially farmers—and crofters, including secure tenant farmers. I believe that most owners really want to do everything that they can to develop the asset that we have of privately owned land. They want to make a contribution to providing more housing in rural Scotland. Our approach should be to assist them by working very closely with them.

Nobody knows more about rural Scotland than people whose families have, in many cases, farmed or crofted the land for hundreds of years. In the October recess, I met some farmers just outside Nethy Bridge. Their knowledge of the local area and how to do things is immense, as are their skills. They are usually not only farmers; they usually have many skills that they put to good use.

I say to the minister that he should reach out to them. There should be a standing committee, and there are a number of specifics that would help.

First, I have suggested before, and I will say again, that permitted development rights that extended to building new homes of five houses per unit would be a terrific step forward. I believe that that suggestion is supported by the NFUS and SLE. I sent a letter to them about it and they confirmed to me privately that they support it, as I see in the SLE briefing. It would do a tremendous amount to mobilise the sleeping capital that is being held in private land in Scotland.

A tremendous amount of capital is tied up in farms. Although most farmers are not cash rich, they are land rich. By no means is all land suitable for building houses. Some land, such as peat and rock, cannot be built on.

Rachael Hamilton: I completely agree with you about expanding permitted development rights. You also make a very good point—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Rachael Hamilton: I am sorry, Presiding Officer.

The member makes a good point about the demolition of buildings, which is not allowed, or changing the use of specific agricultural or forestry buildings. I want to know whether that is his personal opinion or whether he has the backing of his SNP colleagues.

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

Fergus Ewing: Thank you.

That is for the minister to say. I am attempting to persuade the minister to adopt measures in addition to his plan, which contains many welcome steps, because I believe that it would make a tremendous contribution to tackling the problem. Of course, it would not be so expensive. If we enable people to use their own money instead of taxpayers’ money, what is not to like about that? Does that not make economic sense?

Our farmers—50,000 of them—are the sleeping giants of rural housing. Just think what we could do even if only 10 per cent of them took that up. It could transform the situation. They are the sleeping giants. Let us not leave them in a state of somnolence like some Scottish Rip Van McWinkle. Let us wake them up and deliver what we can for Scotland.

I had intended to say an awful lot more but, as I lack any skill in brevity, I have completely failed to do so. I hope that the minister will respond to what is a positively meant constructive suggestion that I think would fly and would help him and us all to achieve the targets that have been set out today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ewing. I am sure that there will be further opportunities.

We move to the closing speeches. I call Rhoda Grant, who joins us remotely.

16:02

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I draw members’ attention to my entry in the register of interests, in that I own a sixth share in a family home.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry to interrupt Ms Grant, but I am afraid that the audio from her transmission is not very audible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was just making the same point, Mr Cole-Hamilton, but I think that Ms Grant was about to burst forth at a higher volume. Ms Grant, if you wish to start again, you have around seven minutes.

Rhoda Grant: Okay. Can you hear me now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Loud and clear, Ms Grant.

Rhoda Grant: Perfect, thank you. I repeat that I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I own a sixth share in a family home.

The "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan" is a first step, but it really lacks ambition. As Mark Griffin said, we now have a rural housing emergency, and we know what the issues are. Second homes and holiday lets inflate prices, as pointed out by Colin Smyth and others. There is also urbanisation, where people are moving to centres of population because of a lack of homes and services in our more rural communities.

Housing costs are more expensive in rural areas because there are no economies of scale. For instance, the six new affordable homes that were built in Barra cost £1.4 million, which is £233,000 a unit. That is a huge cost in a rural area. Housing policy is made for urban areas, so until we have a policy that is made for rural areas by rural communities, we will not get the housing that we need in those areas.

Mark Griffin and Rachael Hamilton talked about depopulation and the fact that the lack of housing was a key driver of that. Jamie Halcro Johnston also quoted the HIE report, which showed that young people were leaving because of a lack of housing, which is true for every generation, not just young people. People are being forced out because of the lack of housing. Finlay Carson quoted Calum MacLeod's work on the need to repopulate rural Scotland, because if we do not, the economies of those areas will fail. With our young people being frozen out, we will also end up with an ageing population, and there will be no young people to provide services.

Members from the Highlands and Islands recently met Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which talked about rural housing being a priority, because the lack of it is holding back economic development in those areas.

Mark Griffin talked about meeting Salmon Scotland, which flagged up to him the issues of a lack of housing for workers in those communities, which is holding back development and communities.

Colin Smyth talked about hospitality businesses, which are really struggling to house staff. That is certainly true in my region—the Highlands and

Islands—where many hospitality businesses close for two days a week because they do not have staff to cover shifts and they need to give staff time off to enable them to rest.

All services—health, education and many others—are suffering because there is no housing. The minister mentioned key workers, which is a case in point, especially in the health service, to which people cannot be recruited to take up posts. People want to move, of course, as the standard of living in remote rural communities is very attractive, but the inability to find a home to live in makes that impossible.

It is not always about affordable housing. We cannot attract general practitioners because no suitable housing is available. Many other professionals who might need to buy a house cannot do so because of the pressure on the market from second homes and holiday lets.

Many people would build their own houses, but a cost is involved in that. I talked about the social rented houses on Barra, but even self-build means that the transport costs of materials are higher. Access to planning and to land also causes problems.

Many speakers talked about the 10 per cent figure not being enough, given that 17 per cent of people in Scotland live in rural areas. I agree with that. In addition, the 10 per cent that is ring fenced for rural areas includes remote small towns and accessible rural communities—which are, to all intents and purposes, commuting communities. If those areas are covered, remote rural areas—where the housing crisis really happens—are going to be left out. We need to focus on remote rural, not pursue the urbanisation of rural communities by including rural towns.

I welcome the fact that the Government has said that it will review the croft house grant scheme. That is a positive move, because the grant is not enough to build a house. It needs to increase; to include workspace, because crofting is a business; and, I suggest, to be paired with a self-build loan, to make self-building affordable. Kenneth Gibson and Ariane Burgess talked about how self-build means that local companies are involved in the build. Using local companies is more affordable than having large companies coming into the area and having the additional expense of workers having to stay over and travel. Using local procurement would be really good in providing jobs and would be a boost to the local economy.

Mark Griffin made a number of positive suggestions to the Government—for example, on examining how the Crown Estate might help by taking some of the money that it makes from its leases of the seabed, the compulsory sale of empty homes to local people, and charging council

tax on empty homes. Colin Smyth talked about good practice in his area that needs to be promoted and shared as good practice elsewhere.

We need to pursue a rural burden on every house that is built or renovated using Government money. We need to find a way of protecting rural homes—especially those that are created or renovated with public money—and have them stay within those local markets. I therefore urge a look at a two-market option or a rural burden, in order to keep those homes in community hands.

Alasdair Allan talked about the impact on the Gaelic language of forcing people out of communities. Alex Cole-Hamilton talked about fuel poverty, which is another huge issue in rural areas.

I am conscious that I am coming to the end of my speaking time. Many constructive comments were made in the debate, which I hope that the Government will listen to. I hope that it will listen to the comments about the fact that the action plan is not ambitious enough and that it is a missed opportunity. The action plan needs to be developed by those who know and understand rural areas, because lazy mistakes are made due to a lack of understanding of the needs of rural communities.

16:10

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Like other members, I welcome the opportunity to debate housing in Government time. I thank the many organisations that have provided useful briefings ahead of today's debate.

The debate is the first opportunity for the Parliament to look at the details of the Scottish Government's "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan". The question that we must ask ourselves is whether the plan is ambitious enough to meet the housing needs of our rural and island communities now and in the future. I do not think that it is. Many of today's contributions have pointed towards that, with members notably saying that it undercuts rural Scotland's entitlement to 17 per cent of homes, which should have been on the face of the plan. The Government needs to reflect on that. As the briefing from Scottish Land & Estates makes clear, the Scottish Government's rural and islands housing plan is

"not ambitious or radical enough to deliver the step change that is needed to meet rural housing needs."

In addition, the Scottish Government needs to consider the impact of other policy areas on housing supply. The minister touched on policy interventions in his speech. If we are to develop long-term solutions, the Scottish Government needs to focus on the causes of the housing crisis and to avoid exacerbating it by just tinkering

around with its symptoms. Recent and proposed legislation continue to undermine confidence in housing providers, which is helping to reduce the supply that is available—the opposite of what ministers want. We have seen that happen due to rent freeze and short-term let policies.

Rural and island developments are full of challenges. The primary challenge is viability, which usually involves the cost of infrastructure due to lower levels of existing connectivity and services in many areas. Whether community led or, as we have heard, landowner led, the principal challenges remain the same, as do the objectives in relation to prioritising where housing needs to be located in our local and rural communities.

As the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has stated in its briefing,

"It is highly unlikely that we (as a country) will deliver 110,000 affordable homes in our remote, rural and island communities if the Affordable Housing Supply Programme ... fails to deliver"

on its target for 2032. Crucially, as things stand, the Government is not on track to achieve its target on the supply of affordable housing; indeed, delivery is slowing down. The most recent quarterly statistics show huge drops in the number of approvals and starts under the affordable housing supply programme. The Scottish Government has no target for completions for this parliamentary session, either. It is disappointing, but it is clearly not on track to meet its housing to 2040 policy.

The time that it takes for developers to be granted permission is also problematic, and there is little in the plan to suggest how priorities will change around that, which, again, is a missed opportunity. I hope that the minister will reflect on that beyond the debate, because looking at the bureaucracy in our planning system should be a priority. It needs to be reviewed, and we need to see how we can cut down times. NPF4 was another missed opportunity to do that.

Jamie Halcro Johnston and Kenny Gibson made important points about the low take-up of Government schemes, which we have seen over the past 16 years of this Government. That must be prioritised. For example, in April, ministers announced £25 million to help to boost the number of key workers' homes and tenancies in rural areas. The Government does not know how many people that money has supported, but it is clear that, when announcements about such schemes are made, we need to see—not just for a press release but on the ground—how they are taken up and delivered. That is critically important.

On the point that I made about council planning departments across the country, the average processing time for local housing applications is

14 weeks, according to Homes for Scotland. That is 16 per cent longer than the 12-week statutory framework, and it compares with an average time of nine weeks pre-Covid for getting approval to build.

The fact is that the SME builders that will be tasked with delivering most of the individual builds and small-scale developments are also in a difficult position. The Government does not know how many SME homebuilders there are in the country. It is clear that we must see what support can be given to them, because we have seen a decrease in the number of SME homebuilders that are active in our rural and island communities. There were 782 in 2007, with the latest figure, from 2017-18, showing that that number had gone down to 465. That means that 40 per cent of those SMEs had disappeared during that period, while we do not know what that figure looks like today. We must begin with those who will do the work to bring empty homes back into use or to build new homes and must look at how SMEs will be able to deliver that.

An important issue that was raised during the debate by Emma Harper has also been brought to our attention by the Marie Curie charity: we must ensure that we have homes in place to meet the needs of an ageing population. According to MND Scotland, 23 per cent of the local authorities that responded to an inquiry have not actually developed a definition of an accessible home. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has said that the new Scottish accessible homes standard will provide that clarity, but that should have been part of this housing plan.

Rachael Hamilton outlined Scottish Conservatives' proposals and ideas and I hope that the minister will look at those, because we want to see a step change for rural and island communities. We want to see the establishment of a Scottish housing delivery agency, the implementation of a rural homes just transition package and permitted development for rural homes that will not only provide those homes but will support the businesses that provide for and sustain our communities. We also support the introduction of compulsory sale orders.

This week could see the first instance of a Scottish council declaring a housing emergency, with the City of Edinburgh Council debating a call for that at its full council meeting on Thursday. This Government has been in office for 16 years and the housing crisis is deepening. This plan misses the opportunity to focus on the real-world solutions that would help to realise the potential of our rural and island communities.

I support the amendment in Rachael Hamilton's name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up the debate.

16:17

Paul McLennan: I thank colleagues for their contributions to the debate, which has been mainly collaborative.

I meet Miles Briggs and Mark Griffin regularly and will continue to discuss the subject in future, listening to any ideas that they bring forward and working on those with them.

Members' contributions have clearly shown the importance of delivering more housing in rural and island areas to meet the needs of communities. The diverse make-up of our rural and island communities is something to be celebrated, and I am proud that this Government is focusing on doing more, through the action plan, to support those communities to thrive. I will say more about that in a moment, but first I want to touch on some of the views that have been expressed.

Rachael Hamilton and others mentioned that 17 per cent of Scotland's population will get 10 per cent of the affordable housing budget, but I reiterate that that 10 per cent figure is a minimum and that we hope to be able to deliver more. The 17 per cent figure does not determine where funding goes; the funding is based on the targets. I would be happy to look at that. She also talked about the pressures in her own area, and I would be happy to visit her there to talk about that.

Mark Griffin touched on the consultation on second homes. He will know that that has just finished and that the Government will be moving forward on that.

Finlay Carson: Will the minister give way?

Paul McLennan: I am conscious of time. If I can go a little further, I hope to be able to pick up some of the points that Mr Carson made.

We talked about the £25 million fund for key workers, which is important, and discussions on that continue.

Alex Cole-Hamilton made a really important point about fuel insecurity. The Scottish Government has recognised that with its £30 million fund, which is really important.

Ivan McKee made a range of important points about how housing is key to economic development. I come from a local government background. Local housing strategies, local development plans and economic development strategies must be tied together. That is incredibly important, as has come through from some of our discussions. It is also important to work with bodies such as the Scottish Council for

Development and Industry. Off-site options are being considered, which is really important.

Land capture and other issues were mentioned. There will be discussion and debate about that when the Government introduces its land reform bill. The skills element is also incredibly important.

Jamie Halcro Johnston talked about the all-tenure approach. We need to be, and are, working with Homes for Scotland on that particular point. There was also mention of stakeholders such as SLE, the NFU, crofters groups and employers. Their involvement is really important.

One of the key issues—I know that there has been a debate in the Parliament about this—is the role of rural visas in ensuring that we are populating our communities and getting people back to work in them. I hope that the Conservatives will change their view on the role of rural visas.

Kenny Gibson mentioned project funding, which is important. We gave the Communities Housing Trust £1 million to tackle capacity in some of those groups. That is an incredibly important point and something that I heard loudly and clearly on my visits during the summer. It is important that we work with employees. That goes back to my point about talking to local authorities about the housing strategy, the economic development strategy and their local development plans. Colin Smyth talked about how we do that and the role of South of Scotland Enterprise, which is really important.

Labour shortages are another really important issue. One of the wider issues is the need for us to try to bring immigration policy back into the Parliament, so that we can use that role to get more people in. We have not just skill shortages but labour shortages. That comes back to the role of the local development plan, the economic development strategy and the local housing strategy. Colin Smyth also mentioned empty homes. We will continue to discuss that issue. I know that the funding for his area has increased by £15 million to £106 million in this parliamentary session.

Emma Harper mentioned depopulation challenges. I come back to the rural visa and immigration, which are really important. I will pick up on the VAT issue, and I am happy to meet Emma Harper in Dalbeattie to talk about the project there.

Ariane Burgess talked about the role of community-led housing. I visited a project in Gairloch, which is an incredible example of how that has worked. Funding from the Communities Housing Trust was an important part of that. Placemaking is important.

Alasdair Allan touched on the balance of accommodation, which is important. Just a few weeks ago, the *Stornoway Gazette* reported that there are 180 short-term lets in Harris alone. There are funding challenges around that. However, the issue is not just about funding; it is about making projects work. We talked about local control areas, and that is a decision that is up to each local authority.

Finlay Carson touched on the role of economic development, local development plans and local housing strategies being tied up, because we cannot regenerate areas without having proper housing and vice versa. Again, I would be happy to catch up on that when we discuss the broader issues.

Finlay Carson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I am happy to, if I have time, Presiding Officer.

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

Finlay Carson: Has the minister factored into the 10 per cent of the 110,000 homes that are to be built in rural areas the impact of the lack of capacity and proper funding of planning departments in the likes of Dumfries and Galloway, which are really struggling because of the huge number of wind farm applications and their complete inability to deal with planning applications?

Paul McLennan: I am going to touch on that—I will come back to it.

On the point that Fergus Ewing raised—I will make sure that he gets a reply to the letter—I have engaged with SLE, the NFUS and crofters on the issue of development rights. I have visits planned, and I agree with him that there are huge opportunities. I know that he will be aware of the project at Tornagrain, which was initiated by a landowner. I am happy to talk to Mr Ewing about that. I totally agree with the point that he made.

Miles Briggs: Will the minister take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): If it is brief.

Miles Briggs: One of the key points of the plan is to review the bureaucracy that is holding back potential changes to policies. Is the Government willing to take that forward above and beyond the plan?

Paul McLennan: I agree with the point that Finlay Carson made on that.

Rhoda Grant made a point about the croft house grant scheme, which is also important. She mentioned rural burdens, which are also mentioned in the report.

I want to get back to some of the other points that were touched on. There is a consultation on resourcing for planning going on at the moment. We have been working closely with the Royal Town Planning Institute, and I have been working with Joe FitzPatrick on that. We take our commitment seriously.

The budget is one of the key things that has been talked about during the debate. The target of £3.5 billion over the parliamentary session has not changed. The profile changes during that period, just as it does in other budgets. The figure continues to be £3.5 billion, which will support a total investment package of £18 billion and up to 15,000 jobs each year. Our rural and islands housing fund is also delivering for rural communities and providing an additional funding route for those who are not able to access traditional affordable housing, as we have talked about.

In the next year, we can begin to set out some of the priorities. We will be delivering secondary legislation to enable councils to apply a premium of up to 100 per cent on council tax rates for second homes from April 2024. We are working closely with local authorities and registered social landlords, including the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, on that. We are working with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, local authorities and owners in order to bring more homes back into use. We are also providing the financial support that I mentioned to the Communities Housing Trust and South of Scotland Community Housing, to enable them to support communities to drive capacity.

In addition, we will commission independent research to support a review of affordable home ownership in rural and island areas, and our five area-based teams will work closely with local authorities and others.

As I mentioned earlier, I thank the many organisations and individuals who have taken the time and effort to contribute to the development of the action plan. The action plan is a start; much work is going on and will continue to go on. The action plan sets out the short-term, medium-term and long-term actions around that work.

Since this Government was elected, we have prioritised housing, and I am proud to say that we will continue to do so. I am glad that we have had this debate. Housing is a key part of our interdependent missions and a key part of our mission to prioritise our public services and focus on equality and opportunity. We have committed

record investment to affordable housing, delivering more than 10,000 affordable homes in rural and island areas since 2016. We have introduced our game-changing rural and islands housing fund, and we have now published the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan".

During our engagement with stakeholders on the action plan, we heard that the pieces of the jigsaw are all there and we heard suggestions on how they can be brought together. The action plan seeks to achieve that. As I said earlier, the ambitions that are set out in the action plan cannot be delivered solely by the Scottish Government. That will require collaboration with a wide range of partners, including local authorities, housing associations, landowners, businesses and the Scottish Government, including the enterprise agencies in Highlands and Islands and the south of Scotland, to name a few.

From my conversations with partners, I strongly believe that there is a willingness, and I look forward to working with colleagues and partners as we deliver the action plan. I have been very clear that I am in no doubt about the vital role that housing plays in generating sustainable local economic growth. The appetite, enthusiasm and support for rural and islands housing remain, even when things might seem insurmountable, challenging or complex. The Government remains committed to working with partners to deliver the right homes in the right places, in order to meet the needs of our rural and island communities. Therefore, I ask the Parliament to support the motion.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan".

Covid-19 Inquiries (Scottish Government's Provision of Information)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the Scottish Government's provision of information to the Covid-19 inquiries. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:27

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The loss and trauma that were experienced by people across Scotland throughout the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be overstated. We remember all those who lost their lives or had them permanently changed. It is my hope that, through the Scottish Government's co-operation with the United Kingdom and Scottish Covid-19 public inquiries, we can help to provide some answers and some relief.

I know that Parliament will appreciate that we would not normally make a statement regarding engagement with public inquiries while their proceedings are live. However, as the minister who is responsible for the Covid-19 inquiries, I am making this statement to address issues that were raised by the UK inquiry at the preliminary hearing on 26 October, and to give our reassurances on our commitment to making a full response.

I hope that Parliament will also appreciate that, in order to ensure that the inquiries can take forward their necessary work without undue speculation, we do not intend to provide a running commentary on the work of either inquiry.

The Scottish Government established the first public inquiry in the UK to examine the response to Covid-19 in December 2021, ahead of the UK Government commencing the UK-wide public inquiry.

It is important to note that both inquiries have made all their requests to witnesses in confidence, and that those requests are not public. All those who have received requests, including the Scottish Government, have been told by the inquiries not to share their content. It is entirely up to, and wholly a matter for, the independent inquiry chairs to determine, where appropriate, whether to publish the material that they receive.

The Scottish Government is obliged to comply with that requirement. Therefore, I will not—and cannot—provide precise details of any of the requests that the Scottish Government has received to date, including specific information on

what has been asked of individuals who have received requests from the inquiries, and nor can I discuss in detail what material individuals have or have not provided.

Let me say from the outset, Presiding Officer, that where there has been any lack of clarity from the Scottish Government about the material to be provided to the inquiries, I apologise to the families who have been bereaved by Covid for any distress that that has caused. That certainly was not our intention.

The First Minister has reached out to the representatives of the Scottish Covid bereaved group and has offered a meeting to provide further reassurances, where we can. What I can assure those families, and Parliament, is that the Scottish Government has worked, and will work, tirelessly to provide the UK inquiry with the material that it has requested. The material that has been provided to the inquiry to date includes emails, messages, submissions, advice to ministers and papers from key decision-making meetings, including meetings of the Scottish Cabinet. In total, more than 19,000 documents have already been provided to the UK inquiry, and that figure continues to grow.

The initial requests that were received from the UK inquiry focused on decision making. As we have stated previously, it is not the culture within the Scottish Government routinely to use systems such as WhatsApp for decision making. Decisions are routinely made in minuted meetings or through formal submissions to ministers. All relevant records of both have been provided to both inquiries already.

The UK inquiry asked in June for summaries of all WhatsApp and similar groups relating to co-ordination, logistics and day-to-day communication, thereby greatly expanding the scope of what the Scottish Government needed accordingly to collate and process. That request was followed in September by a request for the actual messages that were exchanged within those groups.

In examining the messages that were collated, it was clear that a number of them were of a particularly personal nature, including photos of individuals' children and personal medical details. In order to reconcile our obligations as data controller for the contents of the messages with our desire to co-operate fully with the inquiry, the Scottish Government wrote to the UK inquiry on 5 October requesting a section 21 notice to provide the necessary legal basis for providing the information within the messages.

The Scottish Government received the section 21 notice yesterday. I can confirm that work is well under way to comply fully, in accordance with the

timetable that has been set by the UK inquiry. That will mean that all requested messages that are held will be shared, in full and unredacted, by 6 November.

In addition to the hundreds of messages that have already been handed over to the UK inquiry, the section 21 notice will allow us to share more than 14,000 messages, mainly from WhatsApp, from various groups and individuals over the period of the pandemic, mostly concerning routine co-ordination of work and meetings by officials. I can confirm that messages from ministers and former ministers are included, but I have not seen them—nor should I, because that is for the inquiry.

We will, of course, continue to co-operate fully with both inquiries and will share any additional messages, should more become available or further material be requested.

Following questions in Parliament last week, I would also like to highlight that the First Minister has asked the permanent secretary to ensure that all steps are being taken to meet the inquiry's requests and for the Solicitor General to satisfy herself that the Scottish Government has met all its legal obligations. It will be for individuals to explain to the inquiries any actions that they have taken in relation to records retention.

As the First Minister recently stated, should either Covid inquiry want more information, we expect every minister, past and present, and every Government official to comply. I can confirm that the First Minister will, when submitting his final statement for inquiry module 2A in the coming days, hand over WhatsApp messages, unredacted, to the inquiry.

Presiding Officer, I would now like to offer some insight and reassurance regarding the handling and retention of records including, but not limited to, informal communications by the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government has a clear records management policy, including on the transcribing and storing of salient information from informal communications, such as evidence of decision making, to a centralised record system.

The Scottish Government's duty to create and retain records has remained consistent throughout the period that the inquiries are looking at, and we have complied with that duty. The Scottish Government has maintained a detailed record and evidence of key decisions that were taken during the pandemic. Our policies fully comply with our legislative obligations under the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 and other legal obligations.

The Scottish Government's records management policy makes clear what must be recorded in the official record, because it is not

practical, cost effective or necessary for any organisation to retain every single exchange that everyone who works within that organisation creates.

To be crystal clear, I say that there is not, and never has been, a need for material that is without business value to be retained as part of the corporate record. Colleagues' exchanging pleasantries and chatting electronically about inconsequential or personal matters while working from home during lockdown should not be retained. No Government and no organisation of any size routinely retains such material, because it has no business use. It should also be noted that there are clear legal requirements not to retain data—in particular, personal data—for which there is no legitimate purpose. Those legal requirements are statutory and UK-wide.

Prior to the development of a dedicated mobile messaging policy in November 2021, the retention of mobile messages was covered in the Scottish Government's records management policy. The records management policy continues to apply to all records. The guidance has always been clear that, regardless of the platform, information that is relevant to the corporate record must be saved.

The mobile-messaging policy, which was drafted by civil servants, is intended to ensure responsible and effective use of messaging applications. It is consistent with and supplements the established records management policy. The policy covers a range of applications that are used on mobile devices, including, but not limited to, WhatsApp. The policy does not prohibit use of messaging applications, but it requires people to consider the benefits and risks of using those apps and to ensure that any usage is compliant with records management responsibilities and data protection requirements.

The policy encourages consideration of security and privacy when using mobile-messaging apps, including whether the application allows for the automatic deletion of messages after a set period to address the risk of messages being misused if a mobile device is lost or compromised. Let me be clear, however, that contrary to some reports there is not, and has never been, a requirement for any official, let alone ministers, to auto-delete messages without ensuring that relevant information from them is captured and saved appropriately first.

The Scottish inquiry wrote to the Scottish Government's permanent secretary on 5 August 2022 requesting that all material of potential relevance to the inquiry be retained. The UK inquiry, to date, has not written to the Scottish Government with a specific request for records retention. However, the UK Government wrote to permanent secretaries in each devolved

Administration in June 2021, February 2022 and October 2022 asking that material of potential relevance to the inquiry not be destroyed. Those requests were cascaded through the Scottish Government and the significance and importance of storing material of potential relevance was made known to all relevant staff, as was the instruction that that material should be saved on the official record.

For the avoidance of any doubt, I point out that the Scottish Government has consistently acted in line with its records management policies and relevant legal obligations with regard to collating and storing corporate information.

Before closing, I note my gratitude to those who are working in the UK and Scottish Covid-19 inquiries. I am conscious of both the immense responsibility that they hold and the enormity of the task that they face in understanding and distilling the events of the pandemic and the lessons that can be taken away. We all stand to benefit from the work that they are taking forward on our behalf, so I am pleased with the constructive relationship that has developed between both inquiries and Scottish Government officials, including in the context of challenging deadlines and detailed scrutiny.

I am happy to reiterate the Scottish Government's pledge to continue with the highest standard of co-operation that has already been established with both public inquiries. Those who have been affected by the pandemic, especially those who have borne some form of loss, have placed a great deal of trust in the Scottish Government—not just to take on the challenges that Covid-19 posed, but to be open and accountable about our performance. That trust is of the utmost importance to me and to the Scottish Government, and we will continue to work to make sure that we are acting accordingly.

Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am happy to take questions.

The Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 30 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question would press their request-to-speak button.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The UK and Scottish Covid inquiries were set up to give answers to the thousands of families who lost loved ones during the pandemic and to everyone who suffered. They must be at the forefront of our thoughts today. I also state that the Scottish Conservatives believe that it should be the First Minister delivering this statement and being held accountable in this Parliament.

With respect to evidence to the inquiries, Nicola Sturgeon, who is in the chamber today, promised in August 2021 that nothing would be off limits, including WhatsApp messages. However, the stench of secrecy from the Government is now overpowering, because it was revealed at the weekend that Nicola Sturgeon had manually deleted messages. It has also been revealed that Scotland's most senior clinician, Jason Leitch, deleted WhatsApp messages on a daily basis.

Although the Deputy First Minister has said that the Scottish National Party Government will provide 14,000 WhatsApp messages, almost a year after they were originally asked for, does that figure include all messages from Nicola Sturgeon, Jason Leitch and any others who deleted messages? If so, how were they recovered, and if not, how does the Deputy First Minister defend that cover-up?

We know that in June 2021 the Scottish Government was told not to destroy any communication relating to the pandemic. Can the Deputy First Minister tell us whether any messages were destroyed after that date? If they were, does the Deputy First Minister accept that any SNP minister or former minister, including Nicola Sturgeon, broke the law if they did so?

Finally, many of the issues that are causing concern just now relate to disappearing messages. We have seen correspondence that suggests that the Deputy First Minister had disappearing messages turned on on her WhatsApp account. Is that true, and does she still have disappearing messages turned on on her WhatsApp account?

Shona Robison: Where I agree with Douglas Ross is that the families are at the forefront of the issue. That is why it is important that we give as much information as is possible. That is why 19,000 documents have already been given. I need to again explain something that I said in my statement, which is that the first tranche of queries and asks from the inquiry related to decision making. The 19,000 documents were given in response to that request.

In June this year, the inquiry came back to ask for groups of WhatsApp messages—the titles of those groups and who the members of the groups were—and then in September the inquiry asked for the individual messages, so it is not correct to say that it has been a year since that request was made; it has been just over a month. We then had to ask for the section 21 order because of the nature of those messages. That order came in yesterday, and those 14,000 WhatsApp messages will be given to the inquiry by the deadline of 6 November.

I said in my statement very clearly that I cannot say who those messages are from and what the content is, because I am not allowed to. I cannot see them. It is a set of confidential information requests.

The Presiding Officer: I ask members to ensure that we can all hear the Deputy First Minister.

Shona Robison: That is the confidential nature of what the inquiry has asked for. If I were to breach that and ask for information from officials who do not share that information with anyone, that would be a breach of the confidential requirements of the inquiry.

I do not know who those 14,000 messages are from, other than that they include ministers, former ministers and officials. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

Shona Robison: The only person I know of who has provided and will provide WhatsApp messages is the First Minister, because he has publicly stated so. Beyond that, I do not know who those 14,000 WhatsApp messages relate to. Publishing them is in the gift of the inquiry. It will decide whether any of those messages are released.

On the disappearing messages, in my use of WhatsApp with my private office, for example, any decision where I ask for information or ask for something to be taken forwarded is recorded on the system, because otherwise it would not happen. We would not hold on to other messages about whether I want a coffee or what my time of arrival is, because that would not comply with the data management policy.

I hope that I have managed to give Douglas Ross the answers to the questions that he asked.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Evidence that is being taken in the UK Covid inquiry today demonstrates why transparency in Government is so important. People were discharged to care homes without testing, too many people died and people lost their livelihoods. We absolutely need to understand why decisions were taken and what happened so that we can learn lessons for the future.

Bereaved families were promised nothing less than full co-operation by the Scottish Government in both the UK and Scottish inquiries, but they have been treated with disrespect. There has been promised transparency and a guarantee from the First Minister that all messages would be handed over but, instead, the Government and individual ministers have so far failed to deliver. Messages from those closest to the decision making have been destroyed on an industrial scale and what we have seen instead can only be

construed as deliberate and co-ordinated withholding of information.

A public inquiry was talked about in May 2020. Why did ministers not retain evidence from then? The Deputy First Minister points to individual responsibility to co-operate with the inquiry, but surely it is the collective responsibility of the Scottish Government to ensure that its own procedures are followed, not least by the former First Minister and the former Deputy First Minister. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is inconceivable that a former First Minister would not understand the importance of that evidence?

Finally, have all the 70 people in the 137 WhatsApp groups—ministers, special advisers and civil servants—been issued with individual section 21 notices, or was there a notice to the Scottish Government? Does that include the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister? Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that she will be able to comply fully and has not destroyed any evidence?

Shona Robison: First of all, I agree with Jackie Baillie that in the midst of all this are families who have lost loved ones and have been profoundly affected. Many of us have families who have been affected, so it is not in my interest or the Scottish Government's interest to not provide that information.

We have already provided 19,000 documents about decision making, and at least 14,000 WhatsApp messages will be provided by 6 November. The section 21 order covers all those messages. Because of the nature of the sensitivity of some of the personal information, that is required.

As I said in my statement, the permanent secretary and the Solicitor General for Scotland have also been asked for reassurance about the policy that is being followed.

Ultimately, each individual is required to comply with the policy. The recommendations and requirements were made very clear to everybody concerned. The inquiry can, of course, interrogate the information that is provided to it by individuals in the course of the hearings if it considers that it is relevant to do so. However, for the Scottish Government's purposes, I set out in great detail in my statement what the management of information policy was, the requirement, and the clarity to ministers and officials on their requirement to follow that policy.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I take the opportunity to put on record my condolences to the families who have been bereaved. I hope that the inquiries will provide the answers that they so desperately need.

I am grateful that the First Minister has committed to handing over whatever the Covid inquiry asks for, which is in contrast to the Prime Minister's attempts earlier this year to block Baroness Hallett's request for information. Given the concerns that the representatives of bereaved family members have highlighted, will the Deputy First Minister give an assurance that the Scottish Government is doing everything that it can to provide maximum transparency?

Shona Robison: As I said in my statement, the Scottish Government is wholly committed to co-operating with the UK and Scottish Covid-19 public inquiries and will continue to comply fully with all requests for information that we receive. As I have said on a couple of occasions, that is why the Scottish Government has already provided more than 19,000 records to the UK Covid-19 inquiry, and we are providing more than 14,000 messages by 6 November, now that the inquiry has provided a legally compliant way for us to do that. We will continue to work with both inquiries to respond fully to any future requests for information beyond what has already been provided.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Last week, the SNP Government told the Covid inquiry, in reference to WhatsApp messages, that

"Relevant information ... would be recorded ... in the Scottish Government's electronic records and document management system."

The public deserve to know the truth. How many WhatsApp messages in relation to the pandemic were saved through the Scottish Government's electronic records and document management process? Have any of those messages been subsequently deleted from those records? Will the Covid inquiry be given full access to those records?

Shona Robison: In my statement, I went through, in quite some detail, how the records policy works. It is the responsibility of the official, the minister and the minister's private office to make sure that discussion on WhatsApp of anything that is material is recorded on the records management system.

As I said in my statement, WhatsApp is not routinely used for Government decision making, and members can see why. Anything that is about a decision has to go in the system—otherwise it will not be acted on. WhatsApp is not routinely used for decision making.

I have set out clearly the expectation of every single person who was required to follow the policy and set out how that was communicated. Ultimately, each individual is required to comply with the policy, which was clearly set out. As I said in a previous answer, the inquiry can interrogate

the information that is provided to it by any individual in its hearings if it chooses to do so.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The Finance and Public Administration Committee recently held an inquiry into Government decision making. Does the Deputy First Minister agree with what I think was the committee's feeling, which is that there needs to be space for informal chats and sharing of ideas? How do we get the balance right between formal discussions, which should be properly recorded, and informal discussions, which need not be?

Shona Robison: John Mason makes a reasonable point. Free and open discussions between ministers and officials in formal and informal manners are a key part of the functioning of the Government and other organisations. Such discussions help to generate ideas and solutions, and they provide a way of communicating quickly. However, if any decision or anything that is pertinent to the organisation is discussed, that should be recorded on the information management system.

The Scottish Government has extensive records management policies that ensure that any discussions that have corporate value—particularly in relation to policy decisions—are transcribed and stored in the corporate record appropriately. That is how WhatsApp, Teams or any other platform should be used. As I said in my statement, the permanent secretary and the Solicitor General are making sure—and are assuring the First Minister and the Scottish Government—that that is the case and that it is fully understood by everyone in the organisation.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): "Do not destroy" notices were issued to ministers and officials on August 2022. In her answers so far, the Deputy First Minister has made it clear that it is a matter of individual responsibility whether they comply. Can she tell us how many individuals have complied and how many individuals have yet to comply?

Shona Robison: As I said clearly in my statement, I have no sight of any of that information, because it would be against the inquiry's rules for me to have any of that. The requests—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the Deputy First Minister.

Shona Robison: This is really important, and it is important that members understand this point. Rule 9 requests come from the inquiry to the individual. No one is sighted on the content of that, and no one is sighted on what the response is. That is completely confidential. It would be quite wrong of me to ask to see those—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if members allowed us all to hear the Deputy First Minister respond. That can be difficult when others are talking at the same time.

Shona Robison: This is actually a very serious matter. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: It is a very serious matter, and it is very important that people understand the nature of an inquiry. The inquiry is the guardian of the information regarding what it requests, from whom it requests it and what it receives back. That is confidential. I will have no sight of that. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Johnson!

Shona Robison: I do not know, for example, how many ministers—past or present—are included in those 14,000 WhatsApp messages, because I have no sight of that. I have no sight of who they are or what the content is, and neither should I have. If I was to have that information, that would be a breach of the inquiry rules.

That is how an inquiry works. Perhaps it might be helpful for us to circulate some information about exactly how the inquiry works, because, if people do not understand that basic concept, we have a problem in relation to the confidential nature of the information that is being provided.

The Presiding Officer: Members will appreciate that there is a great deal of interest in the statement. Many members wish to put questions, so we require concise questions and responses.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The First Minister was clear last week—as the Deputy First Minister has been clear today—that Scottish Government decisions were not routinely made over WhatsApp, which is very welcome. We know that that has not necessarily been the case elsewhere in the UK. Will the Deputy First Minister provide an update on steps that are being taken to reinforce that practice across Government?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government has internal practices to ensure that all record keeping around decision making follows the internal policies that I referred to in some detail in my statement, as well as legal requirements for information management. The record management policy is available to all staff on the Scottish Government's intranet as well as to the public on www.gov.scot.

We will, of course, reinforce those practices following today's statement, with an all-staff communication to be issued reminding officials of their responsibilities to ensure that good record

keeping practices are maintained—and, yes, that applies to ministers as well.

The interaction between ministers and their private offices, with private offices making sure that any decision making is recorded, is a really important interaction within Government. That is what I reiterated in my statement.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Thousands of grieving families are looking to the inquiries for answers. UK Government WhatsApp messages show, minute by minute, what was really going on behind the scenes and how decisions were made. Those messages show that the discussions behind an order were often as important as the order itself.

Did those life-and-death judgments ever hinge around Nicola Sturgeon's desire just to be different from Boris Johnson? We may never know—*[Interruption.]*—because, Presiding Officer, messages deleted at the very top of the Scottish Government erase the process by which ministers weighed the politics and the science behind the decisions that were required of them. If anyone else had acted in such a conspiratorial way, the Scottish National Party would now be in uproar.

This will all come out in the wash. Does the Deputy First Minister personally believe that those grieving families will ever see the correspondence of most importance to them—that being all relevant messages to and from Nicola Sturgeon?

Shona Robison: I agree with Alex Cole-Hamilton that families are looking for answers. Indeed, he is right about the context of some of the decision making. That is why the 14,000 WhatsApp messages that I referred to in my statement—that number will, without a doubt, grow—are so important, because some of them will provide the context of the environment in which decisions were made. The inquiry will see all of that, including the First Minister's WhatsApp messages, which he will provide as part of his final statement to the inquiry.

I do not know what the inquiry will put in the public domain, because that is a matter for the inquiry. It might put all the messages in the public domain or it might put none of them in the public domain. That information is its information—matters relating to the information that it has requested, what it holds and what it releases are for the inquiry, not for the Scottish Government.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): A substantial number of people will be involved in Government decision-making processes. What engagement has been undertaken with civil servants to ensure that their views inform robust decision-making processes?

Shona Robison: All civil servants receive training to ensure that ministers receive the best possible advice. That includes training in using data and evidence and in working with partners and communities so that the advice that comes to ministers is based on relevant information and different views and perspectives. The civil service regularly works with external experts, too, who can peer review information and ensure that ministers receive high-quality advice on which to base decisions.

As I said earlier, the advice is then stored in the corporate record, in line with our records management policy. That is the crucial part of how decisions are recorded. I have made that point a number of times because its importance cannot be overstated.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Yesterday, the First Minister said that there was a policy of deleting social media messages after 30 days. However, in her statement, the Deputy First Minister told us that that policy was introduced in November 2021, after the height of the pandemic was over. Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that anyone in the Scottish Government, whether a minister or a civil servant, who deleted messages before that date would be in breach of the Government's records management policy?

Shona Robison: As I set out in detail in my statement, the records management policy is very clear that WhatsApp is not routinely used as a decision-making tool but that any decision that is made, whether on WhatsApp or on any other platform, has to be recorded on the official management system. That has always been the case; nothing has changed in relation to that.

As I pointed out in my statement, the issue about the deletion of messages relates to being able to distinguish messages about cups of coffee or when someone is arriving at an event from important information that is about decision making or that has corporate value. That distinction is made because no organisation in the world retains every WhatsApp conversation between every individual in the organisation—organisations just would not do that. The policy is clear about what has to be retained and where it has to be retained. That has always been the policy. I could not be clearer about that.

In relation to the messages that will be handed over, some of them will be in the category of chitchat on WhatsApp and some of them will pertain to the context of decisions that were made at the time. All the information that the Scottish Government holds will be given to the inquiry by 6 November, and it will do its best to provide the inquiry with any additional information that is requested beyond that.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Can the Deputy First Minister provide any more information about the steps that are being taken to ensure that there is a comprehensive understanding of the Scottish Government's records management policy across the Government, including any further guidance on use of messaging apps or other apps for any relevant purposes?

Shona Robison: Senior officials have issued a number of emails to staff reminding them of their obligation to understand and adhere to the Scottish Government's records management policy. Detailed advice on the policy and others related to it are available to all staff via their intranet. The Scottish Government's senior information risk owner is also preparing a further all-staff communication to be issued in order to direct officials towards that information to ensure that everyone is reminded about the key aspects of the policy.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): It is crucial that, in this important discussion, we are all clear about exactly how and where Scottish Government decisions are made and how those decisions are recorded and acted on. Will the Deputy First Minister clarify whether decisions were made on WhatsApp during the Covid pandemic? What safeguards were in place to ensure that good governance standards were adhered to during the height of the crisis?

Shona Robison: Let me make it clear again that WhatsApp is not routinely used as a decision-making tool. That is because, if a minister wants a decision to be acted on, it has to go into the system. That is why any decision that is communicated to, for example, a private office from a minister will be transcribed into the system. That is done so that decisions can be acted on. When any decision was made, that would have been the process to ensure that it was put into the system. That would happen not just with WhatsApp messages but when any communication, conversation or phone call had to be followed up by action. They would be recorded in the management system to ensure that they were acted on.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The independence of the inquiry is paramount. However, the need to gather accurate and reflective detail can lead to long timescales for any inquiry. Can the Deputy First Minister set any expectations as to timescales for the relatives who are desperate for answers?

Shona Robison: I very much understand the desire to see the findings and lessons learned from both inquiries as soon as possible. That is a key underpinning of the Scottish Government's desire. Section 17 of the Inquiries Act 2005 gives

an inquiry chair alone, rather than ministers, responsibility for deciding how an inquiry should operate. Therefore, operational matters such as the timetabling and timescales of the inquiry's work are for the chair to decide, entirely independent of Government.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister has not made it clear whether the Scottish Government complied with its own policy, which is that salient WhatsApp messages should be saved, at least on the centralised records system. Can she confirm that that is normally what happens, and can she confirm whether it happened in relation to Covid messages? Can she confirm whether Covid records policy was reviewed on receipt of the "Do not destroy" notices?

Shona Robison: On that final question, any further information and requirements would have been cascaded through the organisation to make sure that everyone was fully aware of their need to comply.

As I have said throughout my statement and in answering the follow-up questions, the guidance has always been clear about what should be transcribed from WhatsApp messages. Ultimately, the requirement is on each individual to comply with the policy. As I have said, once the inquiry has all the information in front of it, if it has any concerns and feels that that has not been the case, it can interrogate the information that is provided to it—or not provided to it—by individuals. It can do that in the course of the hearings, if it considers that to be relevant. Anything that the Scottish Government was asked for that we have either already been handed over in the 19,000 documents or will be handed over in the 14,000 WhatsApp messages, which we can do now that we have in place the section 21 legal underpinning.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What steps have been taken, or changes made, to maximise transparency in the Scottish Government's records management policy and processes?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government continually acts to ensure that its own policies and processes are fully understood. In aid of that, the Scottish Government's records management policy is available to officials on the staff intranet and to the public via www.gov.scot. I am also happy to confirm that the Scottish Government published its mobile messaging policy on www.gov.scot this afternoon to ensure that the wider public can see it.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising national health service

general practitioner, which role I performed during the pandemic.

The current First Minister told reporters that Government policy was that WhatsApp messages should be deleted, but in response to my question in December 2022 about whether WhatsApp messages are covered by freedom of information legislation, George Adam said:

"All recorded information that is held by ministers or officials",

including WhatsApp,

"that relates to the business of the Scottish Government is subject to"—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2022; c 1.]

FOI requests. I ask the Deputy First Minister how I can make an FOI request for messages that are deleted.

Shona Robison: In some ways, the member answered his own question, because he said:

"that relates to the business of the Scottish Government".

That is the key point. Anything that is contained on WhatsApp, Teams or anything else that relates to the business of the Scottish Government should be transcribed. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: The deletion issue, as I set out in my statement, is about all the other information that does not relate to the business of the Scottish Government, which no organisation would keep. We meet our legal obligations in respect of deletion of information that does not relate to the business of the Scottish Government. It is clear that the advice, policy and legalities are that organisations should not hold on to information that does not relate to the business of the organisation concerned.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): How many individuals in the Government have failed to comply with the Scottish Government's internal processes, including its records management policy, since February 2021?

Shona Robison: As I have said in response to a number of questions, only the inquiry knows what it has asked for and what has been provided. I have no sight of that. I have no oversight of what the inquiry asks for, because that goes directly to individuals through rule 9 requests, and the information goes back to the inquiry.

On the inquiry's wider ask about what the Scottish Government holds more generally, all the information that has been asked for by the inquiry that the Scottish Government holds in relation to decision making has been provided—19,000 documents have already been provided. That wider ask about all communication on WhatsApp

and other message platforms is being addressed through the more than 14,000 messages that will be provided by the 6 November deadline.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The Deputy First Minister cannot confirm whether the former First Minister manually deleted her WhatsApp messages, as was reported in the press at the weekend. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it would be in order for the former First Minister to make a personal statement to Parliament on whether she deleted her WhatsApp messages, as has been reported?

Shona Robison: I have made it clear throughout my statement and all the answers to all the questions that I cannot comment on any individual, because I do not know what they have been asked for or what they have provided. I do not know any of that information because I should not know it. It is a confidential matter between—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear the Deputy First Minister. Let us conduct our business in an orderly manner.

Shona Robison: What has been asked for and what has been provided is a confidential matter between the inquiry and the individual concerned. I imagine that if I were suddenly to ask for all that information to be given to me, members across the chamber would ask me why I was breaching the rules of the independent inquiry. The rules are clear: it is confidential information and is for no one but the inquiry, the person concerned and the group of officials who are working completely independent of ministers to provide that information. The channels of communication are clear. I think that the chair of the inquiry would take a very dim view if we were to do anything other than that.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes the ministerial statement.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:15

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-11043, on committee membership, and S6M-11044, on substitution on committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Ivan McKee be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Stephanie Callaghan be appointed to replace Ivan McKee as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee; and

John Mason be appointed to replace James Dornan as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Emma Harper be appointed to replace Christine Grahame as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and

James Dornan be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.—[*George Adam.*]

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:15

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-11027.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11027, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: The Parliament is not agreed, so we will have a short suspension to allow members to access digital voting.

17:15

Meeting suspended.

17:17

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-11027.1, 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. I would have voted no.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysof (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (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)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 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)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11027.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, is: For 55, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11027.2, in the name of Mark Griffin, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11027, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (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)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (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)
 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)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (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)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11027.2, in the name of Mark Griffin, is: For 22, Against 96, Abstentions 3.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11027, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan", 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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (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)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (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)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-11027, in the name of Paul McLennan, on the “Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan”, is: For 69, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan that will support the Scottish Government’s ambition to deliver 110,000 affordable homes, of which 10% will be in rural and island areas and help attract people to, and retain people in, these communities; recognises that the action plan complements a range of other vital work being taken forward to support sustainable economic growth and to deliver for rural and island communities; considers that it marks an important step in tackling challenges to deliver and retain more homes of all tenures and puts in place the systems and support for the delivery of the right homes in the right place, and believes that achieving delivery of ambitions will require the Scottish Government to work collaboratively with a wide range of partners, including local authorities, registered social landlords, community organisations and Scottish Government agencies, to deliver committed and coordinated action that will support thriving rural and island communities.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-11043, which is on committee

membership, and S6M-11044, which is on substitution on committees, both of which are in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Ivan McKee be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Stephanie Callaghan be appointed to replace Ivan McKee as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee; and

John Mason be appointed to replace James Dornan as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Emma Harper be appointed to replace Christine Grahame as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and

James Dornan be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Fire Service

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-09705, in the name of Katy Clark, on fire service cuts. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes, with concern, reports that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) has ordered the temporary withdrawal of fire appliances at 10 stations across Scotland, including Greenock Community Fire Station in the West Scotland region; understands that the Fire Brigades Union has expressed deep concern that this reduction will risk the safety of both firefighters and the wider public; further understands that the SFRS is expected to receive a flat cash budget settlement from the Scottish Government over the next four years, and that the service claims it must make £36 million in cuts as a result; believes that this follows a decade of cuts, the reported loss of 1,100 firefighter jobs, and, it understands, a 14% increase in average response times per incident; notes SFRS Chief Officer Ross Haggart's comments that there is also a £630 million backlog in the service's capital investment; further notes reported freedom of information (FOI) findings that 75% of buildings in Scotland's fire estate are assessed as being of "bad" or "poor" suitability, and that around 45% are assessed as being in either "bad" or "poor" condition; believes that the combination of withdrawn appliances and what it sees as a dilapidated fire estate puts firefighters, who are exposed to health risks from encountering dangerous fire contaminants in their job, at further risk; further believes that firefighters work hard to ensure the safety of people in Scotland's communities; notes the view that firefighters deserve to be well-equipped, well-resourced, well-protected and well-paid to do the job that they do, and further notes calls for the Scottish Government to come forward with emergency funding for both day-to-day spend and capital budgets, in order to prevent further cuts to staff and equipment, and to modernise the fire estate.

17:25

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to raise the serious concerns that are currently facing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I thank all those members who signed the motion to enable the debate to take place, and I put on record my gratitude to the Fire Brigades Union Scotland for its briefings and its tireless campaigning work.

Last week, FBU Scotland published "Firestorm: A report into the future of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service"—a state-of-the-nation report on the fire service, in which almost 1,500 serving FBU members in Scotland participated. It makes for grim reading.

In the past decade, there has been a real-terms cut of 22 per cent to fire service budgets, which amounts to around £64 million in real terms, going by the Scottish Parliament's inflation calculator. More than 1,200 jobs have been lost, which is

about 15 per cent of the entire workforce. In addition, according to Chief Officer Ross Haggart when he gave evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee, another 780 jobs are at risk if the Scottish Government proceeds with the planned budgets.

When I speak to firefighters, they tell of fewer firefighters on every shift, and fewer available for each incident. They often speak of how, when the first appliance has arrived and there are insufficient firefighters available to proceed to fight the fire or deal with the incident without acceptable risk, there are delays while they wait for more colleagues to arrive.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Is it not right that, while the Scottish Government will say that the number of fires has gone down in recent years, the reality is that this is the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and the recent inclement weather and floods have shown the importance of having a fire service with diverse responsibilities that can respond to the needs of the people?

Katy Clark: The member is absolutely correct that the challenges that the fire service faces from the climate are going to be greater. In addition, as I will demonstrate in my contribution, the response times to incidents have been increasing as a result of budgetary pressures.

The number of available appliances across Scotland has also diminished, and the chief officer says that dozens more appliances will have to be withdrawn if the current planned real-terms cuts proceed. Many stations are in a state of disrepair because of the lack of adequate capital budgets.

The impact of all that is clear. Last year, it was revealed that the average time to attend 999 calls was eight minutes and eight seconds—a significant jump from the six minutes and 50 seconds that was recorded as an average in 2013. That is far from the stated policy intentions that were set out when the service was centralised. The policy memorandum that accompanied the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill in 2012 said that the intention was

"not cutting front line services."

Chief Officer Ross Haggart has indicated that, as a result of the flat-cash budgets, the service will be required to make savings of £36 million in the next four years to balance its budget.

In September, second or third appliances were temporarily withdrawn from 10 fire stations across Scotland as part of an £11 million package of cuts for this year. The number of high-reach appliances was reduced, and that means more risk.

Since then, concerns have been raised about the increased time that high-reach appliances take to attend incidents in, for example, Ayr, East

Kilbride and elsewhere. Freedom of information answers that were recently released to my office show that full-time fire appliances were “off the run”, or unavailable, 6,272 times in 2022, which represents a 138 per cent increase since 2013. In his evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee, Mr Haggart told us that if further cuts proceed next year, the SFRS might have to reduce the number of appliances by a further 17 per cent.

Firefighters have also had a pay cut of about 12 per cent in real terms during the past 10 years. We know that those workers put their lives on the line for us. Earlier this year, firefighter Barry Martin died as a result of injuries that he sustained in the Jenners fire. Research shows that firefighter cancer rates are 1.6 times higher than the rates for the rest of the public as a result of exposure to dangerous contaminants, and yet, in many cases, firefighters in Scotland do not have adequate spaces in which to wash, or adequate equipment.

In the “Firestorm” survey, many firefighters say that they have access only to baby wipes after incidents. Several describe decontamination as the “biggest issue” for staff, with others submitting that they are “extremely” worried about their health. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has a duty of care to its employees, and a duty to provide safe systems of work. I understand that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is working on guidelines, and I ask the Minister for Victims and Community Safety to provide an update to ensure that the service is meeting its legal obligations as an employer.

Research by my office found that three quarters of stations are assessed as being of “bad” or “poor” suitability. Indeed, not a single station in the region that I represent is assessed as “good”. Tackling those issues will take sustained investment, and yet there is already a capital backlog of £630 million.

The fire service has faced a decade of cuts. Response times have increased, and the chief officer says that they will continue to increase if the proposed cuts go ahead. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is failing in its duty as an employer to provide a safe system of work. I call on the Scottish Government to bring forward an emergency funding package.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. There is a lot of interest in the debate, so I would be grateful if members could stick broadly to their time allocation.

17:33

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I commend Katy Clark for bringing the debate to the chamber.

Since the changes were announced earlier this year, I have been contacted by many people across my constituency, including serving and retired Scottish Fire and Rescue Service officers, FBU members and members of the public. Like all the people who have contacted me, I was concerned about the changes that were proposed and are now being enacted.

I will focus my comments on my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency. I share the FBU’s concerns about the Greenock fire station. Following the announcement of the proposals, I, along with a few MSP colleagues, wrote to Chief Officer Ross Haggart, and I met Area Commander David McCarrey and serving FBU members and retired Scottish Fire and Rescue Service members. More recently, I attended a meeting with Assistant Chief Officer David Farries that was organised and attended by the minister.

I have listened to what each person has had to say, and I have read intently the written correspondence that I have received. Although I understand the SFRS’s rationale for removing the aerial rescue pump and replacing it with a dedicated high-reach appliance at the Greenock fire station, I do not agree with it. It was explained to me that the aerial rescue pump is deployed often but used infrequently. That might be the case, but I feel that when the dedicated high-reach appliance is deployed and is needed to fight a fire from above, a pump will be required to supplement that. I also have concerns about a greater reliance being placed on the retained crews and their appliances.

This afternoon, Parliament debated the “Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan”. Inverkip and Wemyss Bay, two villages in the south-western part of my constituency, are covered by the retained crews from Gourrock, which is also in my constituency, and from Skelmorlie, in Kenneth Gibson’s Cunninghame North constituency. For context, there is a proposal to build 650 properties on the old Inverkip power station site. I do not support that proposal, as I believe that it will have a long-term detrimental effect on Inverclyde’s economy.

That development, alongside the 400 additional homes to be built at Spango Valley—which I support, as there is already a railway station on site—will increase the future challenges for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s retained crews, in addition to the full-time crew at the Greenock station.

At the meeting that the minister hosted, I asked the assistant chief officer if the Scottish Government were to give the SFRS extra money today, would it use that money to reverse the recent changes in stations, including Greenock? The answer was no, the money would be used to

invest in and modernise the service, as the assistant chief officer stated that the changes are not about saving money. That clearly indicates to me that the decisions are being taken as an operational matter, not by the Scottish Government.

Following the meeting, I responded to the FBU, setting out my position. In its response, the FBU agreed that there is a need for modernisation, but made the point that, if that extra money would not lead to the “temporary” changes being reversed, they would, in fact, not be temporary. I hope that the minister can address that in her closing comments.

From my conversations with serving SFRS officers, recently and during my 16 years as an MSP, I know that the service has been working well to reduce the number of fires through increased preventative work. There are 11.3 firefighters per 10,000 of the population in Scotland, in comparison with 6.1 in England. Between 2011-12 and 2021-22, the number of fires recorded in Scotland dropped from 32,339 to 27,771—a 14.1 per cent reduction.

That demonstrates the role of our fire and rescue service in keeping my constituents, and people across Scotland, safer. However, there might be a perception among some members of the public that there is less need for personnel or appliances as a result of the reduction in the number of fires. I do not agree with that. I want the preventative work to increase, as I believe that it has contributed to that reduction.

The assistant chief officer told me that he was comfortable with the level of cover that we have in Inverclyde. I am in no way questioning his belief in that respect, but I also in no way question the position that has been taken by the local officers who have shared their concerns with me.

I firmly believe that our emergency services are critical to community safety, and I thank every single one of them for their actions in helping to keep my constituents, and everyone else in Scotland, safe.

17:38

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Katy Clark for bringing the debate to the chamber. We owe our gratitude to the brave emergency workers who put their lives on the line to protect us. When incidents such as the recent blaze at Ayr Station hotel occur, firefighters step up to keep us from harm. They deserve our thanks, and as much support as possible from the Scottish Government—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Dowey, could you move your microphone up just a little bit, please?

Sharon Dowey: I was pleased to meet firefighters locally at both Ardrossan and Ayr stations to talk to them about the work that they do, to offer my support and to make sure they know how valued they are. The fire at Ayr Station hotel was just one incident in which Scotland’s fire service came to save the day, but there are so many others happening all the time, from house fires to road traffic accidents and industrial incidents.

We can only imagine how much worse those situations could turn out if we did not have such brave front-line officers, if there were not enough of them, if they did not have the equipment that they need, if they had to wait for specialist appliances to come from far away, or if they were operating out of crumbling stations. Unfortunately, we do not have to imagine those situations, because they are happening right now. SNP cuts have left Scotland’s fire service on its knees. People do not have to take my word for that—they just need to read the recent “Firestorm” report.

Response times to incidents will inevitably get worse. Why? Because firefighters no longer have the resources that they need. The recent “Firestorm” report from the Fire Brigades Union revealed a service in “crisis.” It found that we are already down 1,200 firefighters under the SNP.

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Does Sharon Dowey acknowledge that the £36 million in savings that is based on the assumption of inflation pay increases is from the resource revenue that is predicted for the next five years and is not the actual budget?

Sharon Dowey: The Scottish Government has the biggest block grant that it has ever had. Where it wants to spend that money is its political choice. When we are doing the budget, we will need to ensure that the fire service is suitably funded.

In the next few years, the service could lose nearly 800 more jobs. We hear a lot of comparisons between Scotland and the rest of the UK but, as the FBU pointed out,

“The FM’s comments regarding firefighters per head of population fails to recognise the divergence of risk across the home nations. In 2021-22, which is the latest data set, Scotland suffered 5,068 fires per million of population, a significantly higher level of fire incidence than Wales at 3,456, and England at 2,702.”

A decade of underinvestment means that it would now cost £800 million to bring stations and the wider infrastructure up to the required standard. The FBU report found that morale is at a terrible level as firefighters struggle to cope with the scale of the SNP cuts. Firefighters are dealing

with the consequences of that in their daily work, but we could all easily suffer the consequences of those cuts. Any one of us could be trapped in a nightmare situation and need their help. We do not often think that those things will happen but, when they do, we all want to know that the fire service will be there to protect us, that there will be enough firefighters with the resources and equipment to ensure our safety, and that they will reach us quickly.

If the SNP keep on this path of cutting fire service budgets every year, there is no doubt that it will increase the risk to public safety. No matter the amazing efforts that firefighters go to, such cuts will increase the danger of accidents and unfortunate incidents. I urge the SNP Government to think again and reverse the cuts, give firefighters the support that they deserve, invest in the service so that it can be there to protect people when trouble strikes, put public safety high on the agenda, and make sure that, in an emergency, our front-line services can respond swiftly.

17:43

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I say to Katy Clark: thank you for your tenacity and determination in once again raising the grave concerns, not least on public safety grounds, about the cuts being inflicted on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

I say to Siobhian Brown that the policy of the Scottish Government, of which you are a minister, was to remove the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service from local democratic accountability. That was the policy. That was the political choice. You therefore cannot turn up to Parliament and plead that you are not accountable and that these are operational matters. You are the only line of democratic accountability that is left to the people who we represent. That was the choice of your Government, so you cannot wash your hands of it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, Mr Leonard.

Richard Leonard: The Fire Brigades Union's outstanding new report, "Firestorm", reminds us that when the single fire service was created, the Scottish Government promised that it was about

"stopping duplication of support services"

and

"not cutting front-line services"

but that is precisely what we are witnessing today, so let no one try and tell us that these are operational choices. They are political choices: the political choice to impose a disastrous flat-cash settlement on Scotland's Fire and Rescue Service; the political choice over the last decade to cut in real terms the fire service budget by 22 per cent;

and the political choice with the result that over 1,000 jobs have been axed, another 800 are now at risk and the retained duty system is in crisis.

So, when we are told that the removal of high-reach appliances is about a modernisation of the service, we do not believe it. When we are told that the removal of appliances is temporary and not permanent, we frankly do not believe that either. We see it for what it is: another attempt to subvert then sidestep the democratic process. So I say to the minister that we are not having it; the fire crews, such as those that I met at the Hamilton station recently, are not having it; their trade union is not having it; and our communities are not having it either.

Then there is the information technology system catastrophe. In recent months, I have taken up with the minister the reckless waste of public money on a new command and control IT system for the service with the value of over £12 million. I have been told that those are also operational matters, but at least £1.7 million has been squandered in milestone payments for a system that was first ordered in June 2014 and was supposed to have been delivered in March of this year, but which was scrapped in December of last year, and now over £18,000 has been spent on external legal fees alone.

With next to nothing to show for it except for mounting legal costs, that is a failure on a monumental scale, and the Government is asking us to place our faith in the same people who now want to cut back on appliances. I know that the Scottish Government will blame Tory austerity for much of that, and it has a point, but whatever Jeremy Hunt announces, this Parliament has in train a process of setting our own budget—a budget of over £40 billion.

So, this evening I call on the Minister for Victims and Community Safety to do her job. Protect our communities. Keep them safe. Stand up for your department. Stand up for this service. Listen to what is being spelled out by the Fire Brigades Union. Fight your corner and let us have some decisive political leadership before it is too late.

17:47

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Katy Clark for securing the debate. Before I begin, I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, Katy Clark and everyone in the chamber. I will have to leave very shortly after speaking, but I am glad to be able to participate and I am grateful to you for your understanding.

In my role as justice spokesperson for the Scottish Greens, it has been a huge privilege to work closely with members of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the FBU. I am grateful to

all of those personnel who have spent time with me talking about the service, showing me around different fire stations and teaching me so much about the vital, life-saving work that they do. I never fail to be inspired and uplifted by the commitment that they show to their work, to each other and to the people whom they serve, because our firefighters—firies, as we affectionately know them—are among the most trusted public sector workers in Scotland. They are welcomed into our homes and communities. We trust them to keep us safe.

So I say thank you to all our firies and operators. Thank you for being there when we need you. Thank you for your commitment to your work. Thank you for walking into danger when most of us would choose to run away. Thank you for being on the phone, talking to us when our worst possible nightmares are happening in front of our eyes. We owe our Scottish Fire and Rescue Service personnel our lives.

We have heard from other members that the service is already under strain, with too many appliances off the run, shifts not being fully covered, watchers having to travel further afield to support other stations, more and more of that happening than ever before, longer response times, low staff morale, stress at work and more.

In conversation with firies, I have heard so many stories of near misses: things that nearly went wrong, which would have had tragic consequences, but did not—just—which was thanks usually to firies' ingenuity, commitment and dedication. Those near misses do not feature in the modelling or statistics that the service has undertaken or provided. They are not captured in the data, but they are very real.

I also know that the service is having to adapt to deal with the increasing risk and severity of wildfires and floods due to climate change. We have seen the realities of that so clearly in recent weeks and months.

Earlier this year, I led a debate on the FBU's DECON campaign to raise awareness and get action to ensure that our firefighters can decontaminate effectively after incidents so that they do not put themselves, or their friends and family, at increased risk of cancer, heart attacks and other diseases and conditions. I commend Professor Anna Stec for her excellent and ongoing work on that. Firefighting is a carcinogenic profession, and we need to treat it as such.

One part of the service that is not often talked about are the control operators. People might not know this, but those operators will stay on the phone with callers while they wait for firefighters to arrive at an incident, for as long as it takes, and even if that means the worst outcome for the

person on the phone. All of that is taking its toll on the mental and physical wellbeing of our fire service staff, and all of that puts pressure on already stretched resources.

The service needs to evolve and adapt to deal with new challenges and threats, but service redesign and resource allocations have to be done in collaboration and partnership with those on the front line. We should not have to wait for a disaster or tragedy to happen to ensure that they have the resources that they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. Instead, we must—must—invest in our fire and rescue service.

I was proud to host the launch of the FBU's "Firestorm" report last week. I urge the minister to heed the warnings in that report, because they are warnings. We owe our firefighters, and the communities that they protect, nothing less.

17:52

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Katy Clark on her motion, which I was pleased to sign. I am delighted that she has brought the debate to the chamber.

I agree with nearly everything that my old sparring partner, Richard Leonard, had to say in his—as usual, energetic and convincing—speech.

The reality is that Governments are responsible for the difficult business of setting spending priorities. That is the reality. Before we hear rebuttals from the front bench about how, if you are going to spend more money here, you have to take it from there—the same old tired argument that we get from nationalist and Green ministers continually—the reality is that the public expect the Government to set true priorities. They expect the Government to do the right thing by them.

Despite the wilder claims of members in this chamber, there will always be greater demands on public spending than Governments have the resources to satisfy. There is no bottomless pit of money, and to suggest otherwise is to be fundamentally dishonest with the public. I say again that the public rightly expects Governments—here and at Westminster—to do what is right, based on the information available to ministers.

Government is about taking on difficult challenges and stopping pretending that they do not exist. We do not negate the fact that the Government has to make difficult decisions, but given the way that SNP and Green ministers bleat on about how difficult it all is, I wonder whether they have not grown tired of being in the business of Government and making those tough decisions. They certainly come across as a Government that has run out of steam completely.

Fundamentally, I believe that the first duty of Government is public safety. Sensible spending priorities begin with the basic obligation of public safety and properly funding and investing in essential public services. That means the blue-light services: the first responders; the people who are there to protect and save life, and to put their own lives on the line to serve us all.

Therefore, why does this Government refuse to prioritise those services? Senior officers in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service are telling us that the service is catastrophically underfunded, but last week, for example, during First Minister's questions, the First Minister claimed that he and his ministerial colleagues know more about what is happening in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service than the people who work in it.

That is the same ignorant dismissal that is given in response to the voices of concern that are raised in other essential services that the public expect us to fund properly—most notably, Police Scotland and the Scottish justice system—all of which are in crisis.

Stuart McMillan: Surprisingly, I actually agree with Mr Kerr on his point about putting more money into the emergency services. That is probably the first time that he and I have agreed on something during our time in Parliament. However, I go back to his earlier comments that Governments have to take difficult decisions on spending priorities. What budget would he take money from to put more money into the emergency services?

Stephen Kerr: I think that I have agreed with Stuart McMillan on other issues. He is being somewhat ungenerous in what he says. However, I have to say to him that he has brought out the same tired old line about how difficult it is to be in government. If you cannot stand the heat of the kitchen, you get out of the kitchen. If you cannot be in government to make governmental decisions and set priorities, you get out of ministerial office, because making those decisions is what you get paid the big money for, and there have been, frankly, too many examples in recent weeks of ministers in this Government lightly dismissing the concerns that people are raising about the state of our public services.

I have run out of time, but I suggest that members look at the example of what the SNP has done to the Fire and Rescue Service. This debate has given us just a snapshot of what is in the report, which has been quoted quite a few times in the reflections of colleagues. I say well done to Katy Clark on uniting all of us in all the parties to demand that the Government sits up, pays attention and does something more to fund our essential public services.

Fire stations are closing, tenders are being withdrawn, staff are not being trained adequately, response times are stretching dangerously and morale is in decline. None of that is sustainable, so it is time for this SNP Government to prioritise the national interest—and not its nationalist interest.

17:57

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank my colleague Katy Clark for bringing this important debate to the chamber and for her comprehensive description of the state of Scotland's Fire and Rescue Service. I do not have time this afternoon to address the issues of the capital backlog or the health and safety of firefighters, so I will focus on the recent changes that were introduced to the fire service in my area.

The motion highlights the
"temporary withdrawal of fire appliances".

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service used the word "temporary" to describe the withdrawal, and the First Minister also referenced that last week in the chamber. However, from my conversations with those in the fire service, it is clear that that is not the case, and the continued claim that the withdrawal is temporary is, at best, a misunderstanding and, at worst, disingenuous.

What is happening to the withdrawn appliances during the temporary period? Are firefighters who are relocating as a result of appliance withdrawals—including on compulsory transfers—doing so on a temporary or permanent basis? Describing those changes as temporary has allowed them to happen quickly. Such a significant change would require a consultation, but the scale of the budget cut has required immediate reductions to capacity. The public will be consulted on the changes only if there is an intention to make them permanent, and it is anticipated that that will happen. However, what is being done to assess the impact of those changes ahead of that?

The erosion of funding for Scotland's Fire and Rescue Service over a number of years brings us to this point. The case for the shift to a single service in 2013 was that it would protect the front line but, since then, we have seen massive job cuts, slower response times and changed conditions of service. The policy aim of a single service was to protect and improve local services, despite financial pressures. Can the Scottish Government really argue that that has been delivered?

In Mid Scotland and Fife, we have seen second and third appliances removed at Methil, Glenrothes, Perth and Dunfermline. Kirkcaldy's

height appliance was withdrawn literally hours after it was deployed to respond to a fire at the former Kitty's nightclub at the start of September. After that serious incident, are we really supposed to accept that that appliance is no longer necessary?

Across my region, within the past 12 months, there have been a number of larger fires including at the New County hotel and the Shore recycling centre in Perth, at Kitty's in Kirkcaldy and at the Poundstretcher on Leven high street. The fire at a block of flats in Lochgelly earlier this month was devastating for residents and for the local community. Thankfully, all those who were in the flats were able to get out safely, but their homes have been ruined and their lives have been turned upside down as a result.

That dreadful fire demonstrates the vital importance of the fire service in keeping communities safe, but it also underlines concerns about the changes to the service. To extinguish the fire, a high-rise platform from Dunfermline was deployed—it is now the only such appliance in Fife—with an additional height appliance brought in from outside the region.

Although the fire service states that appliances attending high-rise incidents have always been sent from multiple stations, the removal of the local appliances from Fife will have an impact, whether in the response time or in the remaining cover for surrounding areas. We saw the latter with the fire in Lochgelly, when another fire took place in Leven. Because all the crews in Fife were dealing with the very serious fire in Lochgelly, a crew had to be sent from Dundee to go to Leven.

Assessment work earlier this year found that the time taken for second appliances to respond to emergencies would be 2 minutes 40 seconds longer for urban areas in Fife, but we know that for those trapped in a fire and needing rescue every one of those seconds will count. That delay also puts increased pressure on the first-responder appliances and the firefighters who are having to make urgent decisions about what their response will be.

From speaking to those on the front line, it is clear that the changes that have already been made have put them under additional pressure in carrying out what is already a very difficult job. If we continue in the same way, it will only get worse. I urge the Scottish Government to listen to those on the ground and to improve the funding settlement urgently.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As I indicated at the outset, there is a great deal of interest in this debate. I am conscious of the number of members who still wish to participate, so I am minded to

accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3. I invite Katy Clark to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Katy Clark]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: On that basis, I can now confidently call Jamie Greene, to be followed by Mercedes Villalba. You have up to four minutes, Mr Greene.

18:02

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Katy Clark for bringing the debate to the chamber, and also the FBU for its "Firestorm" report. When I attended the FBU's event last week in Parliament, I spoke to some of the reps from the union. One seemed a bit surprised to see me; he said, "We don't often get folks from your benches around here." However, I want to be clear to him and all his members that he has perhaps an unlikely friend on the Conservative benches. Let me assure every one of them that we will always stand up for their hard work and their sacrifices to our constituents, no matter what our politics and differences may be.

Of course, the issue that we are debating primarily stems from the issue of capital underinvestment over a prolonged period. That is not a new issue. We have been talking about that for a long time in Parliament. It did not become a £600 million-plus backlog overnight; it took many years of chronic underinvestment, which I think the Government has acknowledged.

We had a debate earlier this year, which Maggie Chapman brought to the chamber, in which we spoke about the DECON campaign. We spoke about the horrendous situation that many front-line firefighters are in—the lack of basic facilities to shower clean, the lack of fresh water, the lack of facilities for female firefighters, the inability to decontaminate properly and the toxins that they are taking home to their families. It is all unacceptable and we all agreed that it was unacceptable at that time.

The then Minister for Public Safety, to her credit, acknowledged that and understood that that level of underinvestment had gone on for some time. When we grilled the minister further on the budget, and on the potential for a flat-cash settlement for four years, if that was a real potential scenario, she made it clear to us that

"the current level"

of funding

"will be protected".—[Official Report, 19 January 2023; c 50.]

The problem is that it has not been protected, because if it had been protected properly, we would not be having this debate; we would all be in the garden lobby having a glass of wine.

The “Firestorm” report that the FBU brought to us would not have been required in the first place, had those budgets been protected. Far from the budgets being protected, we are now seeing impossible decisions being masqueraded as operational matters for the fire service. They are operational in the sense that the fire service is having to make them, and we know why they are having to be made because committees of this Parliament have grilled fire chiefs, year after year, about what the consequences of a flat cash settlement would look like.

I do not disagree with anything that Stuart McMillan said in his speech when he spoke about his concerns for the Greenock station—I share many of those concerns. However, I do not agree with him about the difference that extra cash would make with regard to making amends. We know the difference that it would make because, when asked, interim chief fire officer Ross Haggart told me and the Criminal Justice Committee what the result of a flat cash settlement would look like in real terms. His response was worrying to the committee and it should be worrying to us today. He said that, after a four-year period of flat cash,

“About 25 per cent of the whole-time firefighting establishment would probably become unaffordable”.—*[Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee, 26 October 2022; c 42.]*

That also takes into account 5 per cent pay rises for the next two years.

I say to the minister that we are not asking for money for the sake of it. The devastating consequence that capital underinvestment has is the removal of appliances, the removal of retained full-time positions, a lack of training and a lack of investment in important upgrades for the stations. The issue is not just about pay rises, although pay rises are important; the money has to go to the infrastructure. If the money is not spent, years down the line, that £600 million will become £1 billion very quickly, and no Government on earth is going to find £1 billion down the back of its sofa these days. The local effect that that has on each and every one of our constituents is worrying and devastating.

We are not making a political point. Those are the views of the firefighters themselves. They told us all that—it is all in the report. I read the report page by page, cover to cover, and I hope that the minister did, too. We cannot ignore them, because all our blue-light services are there for when we need them. and we should be there for them when they need us.

18:06

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland)

(Lab): I thank Katy Clark for securing tonight’s important debate on the subject of fire service cuts. Like many in the chamber, I am compelled to speak tonight by my alarm over reports that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has ordered the temporary withdrawal of fire appliances at 10 stations across Scotland. One of those appliances is set to be removed from Kingsway East fire station in Dundee, in my region. Although those changes are reportedly temporary, firefighters and their trade union, the FBU, know all too well how easily temporary solutions become permanent, and, like them, I am extremely concerned by the proposals. I fear the impact that they will have on my constituents and the significant risk to firefighters and the public that those changes will cause.

I also fear the impact that a reduction in appliances will have on staff numbers—staff whose essential skills and expertise could then be lost from the service for ever. We know that recruitment and retention are already an issue in the fire service, which has lost 1,100 firefighters in the past 10 years, with a further 780 job losses still to come, according to the SFRS’s financial projections. Having fewer firefighters means longer response times and greater risk to the public and to the firefighters responding to emergency incidents.

In the event of any major incident in Dundee, there is concern that there simply is not the cover needed to keep our firefighters safe and protect the public. It is simply not good enough to refer to appliances elsewhere, because mobilising appliances from other stations has an impact on the service’s ability to respond quickly, and it could leave those other areas vulnerable.

We simply cannot allow further cuts to this emergency service. It is imperative that the Scottish Government provides immediate and sustained investment in the SFRS to enable it to retain all 10 appliances and maintain the personnel required to staff them. However, when I wrote to the Minister for Victims and Community Safety to urge her to act, she was unwilling to meaningfully engage, stating that

“Operational decisions on the number and location of appliances are entirely a matter for the SFRS Board and Chief Officer”.

However, those operational decisions do not take place in a vacuum—they take place within the context of budgets. It is the minister’s Government that sets the fire service’s budget.

This summer, the SFRS published its organisational statistics for 2022-23, which show several concerning trends that further highlight the

impact of shrinking budgets and firefighter numbers. That report does not even include the further cuts that have taken place over the course of the summer. Let us be clear: the problems facing the fire service are the result of chronic underfunding over a sustained period. The service has been operating with a massive double-digit cut in real terms in its budget over the past 10 years, which is why it is in the position that it is in now.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is an emergency service. It requires urgent investment from the Scottish Government, not cuts. I stand with firefighters, I stand with the Fire Brigades Union and I stand with the public, and we are saying: stop the cuts.

18:11

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am honoured to contribute to today's important debate on fire service cuts. I thank Katy Clark for bringing this matter to the chamber.

As we have heard from members from across the parties today, fire services play a vital role in keeping our communities safe by responding to emergencies and providing medical assistance. They are always there when we need them most, protecting lives as well as property. We all recognise that they often go far beyond their duty. In my community, they play a huge role in water safety and rescue teams. In East and West Dunbartonshire, we have 45 stations with 460 officers and 120 volunteers, all of whom are true community safety advocates.

Just this year, I was lucky enough to attend a Clydebank fire station open day where I met some of the real-life superheroes in our community from the west of Scotland. There were also Army cadets in attendance with their vehicles, the Scottish Ambulance Service and members of the community. All in all, it was a fantastic day and perfect for educating the community. There were lots of activities for people to watch and get involved with, including fire engines with water hose displays, fundraising activities and a live chip-pan fire display, which caught the attention of everyone at the event.

It was great to hear about the impressive multiagency approach to school education, and the timing could not have been more appropriate. In West Dunbartonshire, more than 170 deliberate fires have been recorded so far this year. That figure is already more than the annual figure for 2022. Play areas, school grounds and nurseries were among the sites that were being targeted. Those are areas that our children play in, and we expect them to be safe.

Although the open day certainly raised community awareness about the dangers of fire, it

also showed everyone the risks that our fire service personnel take every day just to protect us. As the motion outlines, they deserve to be well equipped, well resourced, well protected and well paid to do the job that they do. However, we know that the Scottish National Party has cut the service's budget to the bone.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is expected to receive a flat cash budget settlement from the SNP over the next four years. A flat cash settlement will mean that the fire service will have to make millions of pounds' worth of cuts, which the Fire Brigades Union has warned will threaten the lives, livelihoods and homes of everyone in Scotland. We all need to remember that the service is already stretched to breaking point. The number of personnel is down, leavers are on the rise, attacks on service personnel are up and the number of vehicles at their disposal is down. The majority of buildings that are assessed are of poor suitability, and there is a huge backlog in services capital investment.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to outline why the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is vital to my community. Quite the opposite of SNP cuts, our fire service needs to see significant investment. Those in the fire and rescue service risk their lives every day to protect our communities and to make them a better, safer place to live in.

I urge the Scottish Government to provide a fair funding deal for our fire and rescue service, and to return to the negotiating table with unions as soon as possible, so that the lives, homes and livelihoods of Scots are not put at risk. Our fire and rescue service deserves better treatment than this.

18:15

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am grateful to my Scottish Labour colleague Katy Clark for securing this debate. From listening to Ms Clark and other speakers, it is very clear why the debate is so necessary.

I am also grateful to Maggie Chapman for hosting last week's FBU Scotland event, which launched the "Firestorm" report. For me, "Firestorm" is more than a report; it is a call to action, and Government must act. The truth is that firefighters do not feel supported or valued. Scotland's firefighters feel abandoned and ignored. After last week's First Minister's question time, I fear that they will feel more frustrated than ever.

To recap, last week, hundreds of firefighters, FBU members and other supporters gathered outside the Parliament and demanded that MSPs and ministers listen to them, understand and act. Instead, we heard in the chamber the same

predictable spin from the First Minister. We need honesty, because the cuts are costing lives.

The reality is that there has been £57 million of real-terms cuts since 2012-13; 1,200 firefighter jobs have been scrapped; response times have increased; five control rooms have been closed; and an increasing number of fire appliances are unavailable. I am glad that the “Firestorm” report has been published, because that is not the voices of ministers or MSPs; it is the voice of serving FBU Scotland members. I urge all colleagues to read it, because it is about a menu of cuts, lack of recruitment, crisis in retained service, decline in training standards, and the necessity of responding to the climate emergency. All that and more has created the perfect conditions for a devastating firestorm.

Like colleagues, I am here because the issue is affecting constituents in my local community now. Mercedes Villalba talked about Dundee; in my case, it is about Hamilton, where we have lost our temporary appliance. We do not know when we will get it back, and that is having an impact on crews and their families right now—Richard Leonard can also speak to that. We had a devastating fire in East Kilbride recently—six homes have been destroyed and six families have been put at the heart of this issue. Luckily, no lives were lost, but we have heard that the cuts have had an impact on response times, so public safety is being compromised.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is not well equipped to respond to the demands of the climate emergency. Our firefighters need appropriate personal protective equipment and other equipment and training to tackle wildfires. We need to expand capacity to deal with the predicted increase in flooding incidents. The capital budget must be increased significantly if the service is to meet the demands of net zero targets.

I know that members of the FBU are proud of the work that they do, but are they proud of us? I do not think so. There should be no ifs, no buts and no more fire service cuts.

18:19

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I start by paying tribute to all the firefighters who work hard and play a vital role in keeping our communities safe. It is clear from the comments in tonight’s debate that we are all aware of the important role that the service plays, through working in partnership with others to prevent and respond to emergencies, in improving the safety and wellbeing of people throughout Scotland.

The bravery and passion of our firefighters have never been in question, and I do not recognise the negative picture of the service that has been painted by others this evening. I am confident that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has delivered and will continue to deliver the highest standard of service in order to keep our communities safe.

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

Siobhian Brown: I would like to make a little bit of progress, if I may. I have a lot to address, given all the contributions to the debate.

I turn to some of the issues that have been raised, starting with the budget. Since 2017-18, there have been substantial year-on-year increases in funding to support a modern and effective fire and rescue service. In the budget for 2023-24, the Scottish Government provided the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service with a total of £14.4 million in additional funding, bringing the total funding to £368 million this year, despite the challenging financial environment that we are in due to United Kingdom Government austerity and inflation. It is clear that all our public services have been hit by the inflationary pressures. That has meant that the SFRS has had to look at making efficiencies to deliver a balanced budget. That is the case across every single portfolio at the moment.

Although we have a cash increase of £1.7 billion in the 2023-24 budget, the impact of sustained inflation meant that, in real terms, the block grant at the time the budget was set was 4.8 per cent lower than it was in 2021-22. The UK Government’s autumn statement must take more substantive action to increase investment in the services that people rely on. It must feed into our budget so that we can better align spending and deliver for people and organisations across the whole of Scotland.

As long as Scotland’s public finances are tethered to the decisions of the Westminster Government, we will always be working with one hand behind our back. We must balance the budget each year, and we are committed to doing all that we can, within the powers at our disposal, to ensure that public finances are on a sustainable path. In relation to future budgets, as members know, that will be part of the annual budget.

Thanks to continued UK Government austerity, these are difficult financial times, and money is likely to continue to be tight for the next year. Limited levers are available to us to increase our spending power in the face of the UK Government’s failure to ensure that public spending responds to the real challenges that

everyone's lives are facing. We recognise that that means taking tough choices to ensure that our resources are focused on the three critical missions that are outlined in the policy prospectus, and driving reform to secure value for money for the taxpayer.

The financial position on capital funding is equally challenging. I am sure that we would all like to see the fire service—along with transport infrastructure, schools, prisons and hospitals—receive additional funding. That illustrates the difficult choices that need to be made on the allocation of scarce resources. We have maintained the SFRS capital budget at £32.5 million, and we will continue to strive to provide the SFRS with the funding that it needs to ensure that firefighters have the equipment and buildings that they need to keep people safe.

I turn to pay and firefighter numbers. I am pleased to say that, in February 2023, firefighters accepted an improved two-year pay offer of an increase of 7 per cent for 2022-23 and 5 per cent for 2023-24, to run to the end of June 2024. We are maintaining front-line services with a higher number of firefighters than there are in other parts of the UK. On 31 March 2022, there were 11.3 firefighters per 10,000 population in Scotland, 6.1 in England, and 8.4 in Wales.

A number of members have brought up the issue of the number and location of fire appliances. The number that is needed to keep communities safe is obviously an operational matter for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. *[Interruption.]* I hear Richard Leonard's points, but it would be totally inappropriate for me to get involved with operational matters. I am sorry. I am involved with its budget from the Scottish Government, but not with operational decisions.

I am aware that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has recently withdrawn 10 appliances. It is important to highlight that those changes are not all about saving money. By withdrawing appliances in a planned and measured way, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can ensure that full crews are available, so more appliances can always be available to keep communities across Scotland safe.

Those operational changes were implemented at the start of September. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has said that they were chosen to minimise the impact on communities.

In some areas, as we know, there has been an overprovision of resources in comparison with the rest of the country. It is right for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to look to deliver effective and efficient services that deliver value for money for taxpayers and the public purse. His Majesty's chief inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

has provided independent assurances that those temporary changes are based on a robust analysis of activity level, historical demand and the ability to supplement any initial responses within an acceptable time.

I say to Stuart McMillan and Mercedes Villalba that I was in Aberdeen this morning for the annual performance review of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and that issue was brought up. The service committed to a full public consultation on any permanent changes.

On Claire Baker's comments about whether the situation is being reviewed, the service is constantly reviewing, and I have had an assurance from the SFRS on the withdrawal of the 10 appliances.

It is also important to note that the changes are being made in the context of the reduction over the past 20 years in fires and fire deaths in all domestic premises.

Claire Baker: Although a review might be taking place, if that review comes back and says that those appliances are needed, will the Scottish Government fund that?

Siobhian Brown: That is an operational matter for the SFRS. It would not be for the Scottish Government. The SFRS is reviewing the situation. In September, after one year, it will go to a public consultation if—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask you to resume your seat for a second.

As all members know, whether to take an intervention is up to the member who is on their feet. Their doing so is not an invitation for other members to start bilaterals across the chamber.

Siobhian Brown: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I have a lot to get through.

Fires and fire deaths in all domestic premises have reduced in the past 20 years. Statistics that came out today show that there were 26,825 fire incidents in 2022-23, which is a decrease of 3.5 per cent on the previous year; that there has been an 11.9 per cent decrease in the number of primary fires over the past 10 years; and that dwelling fires have consistently reduced over the past 10 years, with a 26.1 per cent reduction since 2012-13.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I want to address some points that members have made. Is that all right? I do not know how I am going for time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you additional time.

Siobhian Brown: Thank you.

I want to respond to Katy Clark on the capital backlog. As I have mentioned, even though we had a flat cash settlement, we protected the capital investment this year at £32.5 million. Five fire stations are being refurbished this year. We will continue to work with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to identify the capital funding that it needs for its buildings, fleet and equipment.

In response to Richard Leonard, as I have said, it would be inappropriate for me to get involved in operational matters, but the Scottish Government is responsible for the budget.

Maggie Chapman asked about the FBU's "Firestorm" report. The majority of the points that are raised in it, including on the allocation of resources and the recruitment, retention and training of firefighters, are matters for the SFRS to consider and address. However, having read the report, I can say that the Scottish Government agrees with a lot of the issues that it raises—such as keeping the community safe—and believes that bullying and harassment are always unacceptable. We want our firefighters to receive fair pay. The Scottish Government believes in a lot that is in the report.

I met MSPs during the recess and have met the SFRS for the past few months. Mercedes Villalba did not accept my invitation to meet, but I extend it again. I am more than happy to meet her.

I will address Pam Gosal's point of getting around the table with the FBU.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Do so very briefly, please.

Siobhian Brown: I met the FBU in June, I met it today, I met it last week, and I am meeting it again next month. Not getting around the table with the FBU is not an issue. I am always having discussions with it.

I will conclude. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service continues to perform well, and I firmly believe that it is in everyone's interests to have an efficient and effective service. The Government will ensure that fire and rescue is a priority, both now and in the future.

I finish where I started, by commending all those who work in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and by thanking our firefighters for their dedication and work, day and night, to keep people and communities safe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I close this meeting of the Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:29.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba