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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 7 November 2023

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection, and our leader today is the Rev Norma Moore, Church of Scotland.

The Rev Norma Moore (Church of Scotland):

Thank you, Presiding Officer and members, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

When I first became a minister, I discovered that the Church of Scotland is awash with committees. We have committees for everything, and they take up an inordinate amount of time and energy.

In every one of those church committees, there are the yes men and women, who usually vote with the chair, no matter their own true feelings. There are the single-issue folk—whatever you happen to be discussing, the issue is raised at every meeting. Then you have the awkward squad, who always have a different opinion, and so the discussion goes round and round. It is exhausting and time consuming, but if you want to take folk with you, such discussion is the only way to get things done—or at least the only way to get things done where even those who do not agree cannot say that their voices have not been heard and that no one has listened to their views. That is democracy and, as Churchill said,

“democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

In the democracy that you are dealing with here, you have committees at all levels. Like the church, you will have the yes folk, the single-issue folk and, of course, the awkward squad.

Being the age that I am, my mind slips back to Tony Benn and Tam Dalyell. Man, were they a problem for the leaders of the day—but we most definitely need such people. We need the people who keep prodding us with the things that we had not thought of, the things that we would like to go away, the things that directly oppose our own view and the things that will make our lives difficult.

That is democracy at work, and no one can say that they were not listened to or that their concerns were not taken seriously. They will not all agree or, indeed, be happy, but they will have been taken seriously. You can please some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot please all of the people all of the time. Your job may not be to please the people,

but it is to do the best for them—and for “people”, read “individuals”.

That is a very tall order, but by listening to the opinions of all those around you and seeking to bring as many of the strands together as is humanly possible, it seems to me that you are providing democracy, and—with apologies to Churchill—it is the best of all forms of government.

Thank you.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Attacks on Emergency Services (Bonfire Night)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it plans to take in response to reports of widespread violence against police officers and firefighters over the bonfire night period. (S6T-01623)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): First, I want to express my gratitude to all our emergency services for their work over the weekend. All attacks against them are totally despicable.

The Scottish Government fully supports the courts using the extensive laws and powers to protect emergency workers, including the new statutory aggravation for attacks on emergency services through the Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Act 2022.

As part of the annual review of the police-led multi-agency operation moonbeam, there will be an analysis of the incidents that took place over the weekend and a response taken.

The Scottish Community Safety Network's report on antisocial behaviour has been published today, and I have accepted the report's recommendation that we consider how best to develop our long-term approach to preventing and tackling antisocial behaviour. I will therefore be convening an independently chaired working group on antisocial behaviour.

Russell Findlay: The scenes across Scotland have been shocking. Police officers and firefighters have been attacked with petrol bombs, bricks and fireworks, and terrified people have been trapped in their homes by gangs of rioting youths. Eight police officers are injured, and it is no exaggeration to say that lives could have been lost. Those responsible are reckless and dangerous. There needs to be punishment and there needs to be a deterrent. Does the minister agree that those criminals are old enough to know better?

Siobhian Brown: I do not know the intelligence so far on the incidents, and we are waiting for the police outcomes. I know that it has been reported that some of the youths were being encouraged by adults.

With significant Scottish Government engagement, a broad range of planning and preparation is done every year by the emergency services and others to ensure that the existing laws are adhered to. However, on effective preparatory work, there will always be a challenge

and a threat for enforcement agencies once fireworks and other potential weapons fall into the hands of those with criminal minds.

Introducing stricter measures at the point of purchase, including via the new proxy purchase offence, will help to ensure that fireworks do not end up with those who may misuse them. Not all offences involving fireworks are prosecuted under fireworks misuse laws, and the most serious offenders may be prosecuted for common-law offences such as assault and culpable and reckless misconduct. The link with fireworks may not be identified clearly in the data collected relating to those offences.

Russell Findlay: The minister did not answer the question, so here is the answer: those criminals are old enough to know better. However, criminals know that the police are stretched to breaking point, because of Scottish National Party cuts. They know that they will not be jailed and that there is a good chance that they will not even be prosecuted. In response to the events of the weekend, yet another report has been produced, but it does not mention the word "prosecution" even once.

Will the cabinet secretary bring in meaningful punishments before those shameful scenes are repeated next year, rather than having yet another SNP talking shop and report?

Siobhian Brown: Just for clarity, I am a minister, not a cabinet secretary.

We have increased the police funding year on year since 2016-17, investing more than £11.6 billion since the creation of Police Scotland in 2013. Sentencing guidelines are, of course, set by the Scottish Sentencing Council, and it is totally inappropriate for politicians to interfere with the independent judicial sector. It is up to the courts and prosecutors to decide on what action is taken against individuals who commit such crimes.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In addition to what we witnessed in Edinburgh, there were also antisocial behaviour incidents involving fireworks in Dumfries. They included fireworks being set off in the town centre, which almost hit the historic Robert Burns statue. In addition, Heathhall in Dumfries has recently experienced an increase in antisocial behaviour, with windows being egged and damage being done to cars. Can the minister outline how the Scottish Government is supporting Police Scotland to deal with those issues, and can she confirm that antisocial behaviour issues are being dealt with seriously?

Siobhian Brown: There is simply no excuse for the sort of behaviour that was witnessed recently in Dumfries town centre and elsewhere. It puts everybody at risk. I am grateful to Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and partners

for their swift attendance and actions at the scene to minimise the damage from the reckless use of fireworks and the irresponsible throwing of projectiles into a public area.

We are committed to ensuring that the police and local authorities have the powers and the resources to address antisocial behaviour. That includes formal warnings, fixed-penalty notices and antisocial behaviour orders. The Scottish Government has increased police funding year on year since 2016-17, with £1.45 billion being invested this year alone. There are 379 more police officers than there were in 2007, and Scotland continues to have more police officers per capita than England and Wales.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The pictures from Sunday night clearly show that the incident constituted a premeditated attack on the police. Fireworks were being aimed directly at police officers, who were having to wear riot gear to prepare themselves. Will the minister consider a full ban on the sale of fireworks to private individuals, apart from in relation to organised fireworks displays? Will she give serious consideration to holding meetings with authorities in Edinburgh, including the council, to discuss measures that should be taken to tackle such outrageous behaviour, should it happen in future years?

Siobhian Brown: Daniel Johnson raises an emotive issue. I understand his point about there being cause to ban fireworks sales to individuals, but unfortunately that is not currently within the competence of the Scottish Parliament. I will be more than happy to meet councils to discuss the way forward.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the minister outline what actions the Scottish Government is taking to support preventative services, such as cashback for communities and the violence reduction framework, which aim to prevent such behaviours from happening in the first place?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government acknowledges that its prevention services are crucial to preventing crime in Scotland's communities. Through the violence prevention framework, which was published in May this year, we are implementing our public health approach to preventing violence from happening in the first instance. That is backed with more than £2 million of investment from this year's budget. We are the only Government in the United Kingdom that is reinvesting money recovered from the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 directly back into communities across Scotland. Our cashback for communities initiative delivers diversionary activities for young people, who are most at risk of being involved in antisocial behaviour, offending and reoffending, to

support the communities that are most affected by crime.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): This might come as news to the minister, but what is crucial is that we see an end to soft-touch justice in this country. To come to the chamber and announce that we are going to have another task force just makes it seem as though we are in a never-ending cycle of task forces and reviews, but that nothing ever actually happens. We know that 50 people were present—

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Change the script.

Stephen Kerr: I am afraid that I cannot change the script when we are seeing the same repeat cycle from the SNP. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: We know that 50 people were involved in the demonstration of what one police officer said was the worst violence that he had ever seen. Five officers were injured. I ask the minister to say how many arrests there have been.

Siobhian Brown: There have been two arrests so far. The police are looking at intelligence and there will be more arrests in the coming days. Mr Kerr says that we should change the record, but, as I have already said, it is up to the courts and prosecutors to decide on what action is taken; it is not up to politicians. It would be totally inappropriate for the SNP Government to try to influence that. I do not know whether the Conservatives would try to do so if they were ever to be in Government, but it would be totally inappropriate if they did.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The Parliament passed the recent fireworks legislation after a reduced scrutiny process, to enable it to be in place for bonfire night last year. Delay meant that councils were not able to designate control zones this year, and the proposed licensing scheme might create a black market. Labour supported the bill because of the new offences that it contained. Does the minister not accept, though, that the framework that was created by the legislation is making no difference to the problems that communities have experienced with fireworks, and that the 2022 act represents a wasted opportunity?

Siobhian Brown: I have to disagree with Katy Clark on that. The act was brought in as a preventative measure; it was not a short-term quick fix. Control zones have been developed to support the long-term cultural change on fireworks. As I have said, such change will not happen quickly. A programme of work has progressed, at pace, to successfully commence

firework control zones, in line with the original timescales, on 22 June 2023. I know that my officials are engaging with all local authorities and are making progress, and the zones might be in place for next year.

The Presiding Officer: We are very tight for time this afternoon so we must move on to question 2.

Waiting Times (Hip Operations)

2. Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking following Reform Scotland's recent report, "NHS 2048: Future-proofing Scotland's Health and Social Care", which found that 11 national health service boards have seen waiting times for hip operations at least double from the point of decision since 2019. (S6T-01624)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Long waits of that nature are unacceptable. The pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on the normal operation of our NHS since 2019, just as it has across the world.

We remain committed to eradicating long waits and to ensuring that all people receive the treatment that they need as soon as possible. We have opened two national treatment centres this year, in Fife and Highland, with two further centres opening soon, in Forth Valley and at NHS Golden Jubilee. Those centres will provide additional protected capacity for patients across Scotland, including for orthopaedic hip surgeries, and are an integral part of the wider NHS Scotland waiting times improvement programme.

However, we know that there is still more to do, which is why we have committed to investing an extra £300 million over the next three years to reduce in-patient and day-case waiting lists by an estimated 100,000 patients.

Foysoyl Choudhury: Under the Patient Rights (Scotland) Act 2011, all patients have a right to receive treatment within 12 weeks of agreement with their consultant. My constituent received a hip replacement five years ago, when she waited just over the 12 weeks. She now needs her other hip replaced, and she agreed that with an orthopaedic consultant in May 2022. She is still waiting for a surgery date. Can the cabinet secretary advise me why the treatment time guarantee is simply not being met?

Michael Matheson: The major reason for that is that we had a pandemic over a two-year period, which meant that a lot of elective procedures had to be cancelled because of the pressures on the NHS. That was the case not just here in Scotland or in the United Kingdom but globally. The vast majority of healthcare systems had to stop

carrying out elective procedures such as hip replacements, knee replacements and other types of surgery. That is why, as we have come out of the pandemic, we have had a programme of work to support our NHS to recover.

In respect of long waits, we have seen reductions of some 83 per cent in new out-patient specialties and 57 per cent in in-patient day-care specialties, which now have fewer than 10 patients waiting more than two years. We are also undertaking a range of other work to reduce waiting lists further, including the additional £300 million that I have said we will invest for the next three years to reduce waiting lists by 100,000.

Foysoyl Choudhury: My constituent, Wendy, is on the waiting list for a knee operation due to osteoarthritis. She also has a hip problem because of that condition. Her consultant advised her to proceed with non-operative measures instead of a hip replacement. The report highlighted that some health boards are reducing elective surgery to save money. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that every person is being evaluated and treated correctly and is not left in pain and without help in order to reduce elective surgery?

Michael Matheson: The additional investment that we are making at present to tackle the backlog and waiting lists that have built up during the course of the pandemic, alongside the additional investment that we will invest over the course of the next three years, is specifically to deal with the challenges that Mr Choudhury has highlighted and his constituent has experienced. The length of delay that his constituent has experienced is unacceptable, and I want to make sure that we take action to address that. We are making a significant level of additional investment available to reduce waiting lists over the course of the next three years, in order to help people such as Mr Choudhury's constituent to get the treatment that they require as early as possible.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has mentioned the new funding of £300 million, which the Scottish Government will provide over the next three years. That is very welcome. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about how that funding will be directed to increase capacity, and so tackle the long waits such as those that are detailed in the Reform Scotland report?

Michael Matheson: In the coming weeks, we will set out in the budget how we will prioritise our investment over the course of the next financial year, including in the health portfolio. I assure the member that the intention is to use the funding to build greater capacity in the NHS and deliver greater resilience in the system in order to increase the number of patients who can be treated.

That work is being taken forward by the national centre for sustainable delivery in partnership with our boards, and it will identify the funding that is needed for each of the boards to deliver on the programme to ensure that we reduce waiting lists by the targets that have been set as part of our waiting lists initiative.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The last time I checked, more than 2,000 people were waiting for orthopaedic operations in the Highlands. A thousand of them are not suitable because they are too complex to go into the national treatment centre. Hospital operating theatres have been closed to save money and beds are not available for the 20 orthopaedic surgeons who are sitting around in Raigmore hospital and want to do operations. What is the cabinet secretary's message to Highland patients?

Michael Matheson: The message is very clear. We have made a significant investment in NHS Highland via the creation of a new national treatment centre and, at the same time, we are investing an additional £300 million to increase capacity and throughput in facilities such as those in NHS Highland. That is exactly the type of action that people in the Highlands want us to take, despite the fact that the United Kingdom Government is cutting budgets right, left and centre, including in the health service.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Mental Health

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Marie Todd on the vision for Scotland's mental health. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:21

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I am glad to make this statement this afternoon as we publish our "Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan 2023-2025" and our "Mental Health and Workforce Action Plan 2023-2025". Those plans, which were published jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, describe the work that we will undertake together with a wide range of stakeholders and partners to deliver the vision that is set out in the "Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy", which was published in June.

Mental health is a topic that attracts passionate and robust debate in Parliament and rigorous scrutiny of the Government. That is as it should be, but there is a consensus across all parties on the importance of supporting good mental health and wellbeing across the country.

We are all here today with the ambition of ensuring that anyone who needs help for any aspect of their mental health and wellbeing should be able to get that help. To that end, I will outline the strategy's vision for improving mental health in Scotland at all levels of need. I will cover the importance of taking an outcomes-focused approach to how we monitor and evaluate progress. I will also highlight some of the key commitments that are contained in the delivery plan and the workforce action plan.

Over the past 18 months, we have undertaken a significant programme of stakeholder engagement. We heard from people and families with lived experience of mental health conditions, as well as from organisations that are led by and support those with lived experience. I thank the hundreds of people and organisations who passionately shared their views—their input has been invaluable.

The mental health and wellbeing strategy's vision is of a Scotland free from stigma and inequality, where everyone fulfils the right to achieve the best mental health and wellbeing possible. The vision covers a very wide spectrum, from maintaining good mental wellbeing to supporting communities to ensuring that specialist services are available whenever they are needed. Crucially, it means recognising and responding to the many underlying social determinants,

circumstances and inequalities that can affect mental health and wellbeing.

The strategy has people at its heart, and our outcomes demonstrate the changes to people's lives that we want to see. For example, we want everyone to have an increased knowledge and understanding of mental health and wellbeing and to know how to access appropriate support. We acknowledge that people will have different starting points, life experiences and journeys. They may have experienced different kinds of inequalities and discrimination. Although needs may vary and people will require different kinds of support, it is vital that the overall outcomes that we are aiming for are the same for everyone.

Monitoring progress towards our outcomes will allow us to better understand what is working well and where we might need to change our focus in future. The delivery plan that we are publishing today illustrates the work that we feel is key to progress over the coming 18 months.

I will give some examples. Building capacity in local communities is vital. We are driving a shift in the balance of care across mental health and wellbeing to ensure a focus on prevention and early intervention. We will therefore build on the success of our community-based supports, which benefited more than 45,000 children, young people and carers in the second half of 2022 alone.

Recognising the recent Audit Scotland report, we will work collaboratively to improve access to mental health support. That involves developing multidisciplinary teams around general practice and maximising the role of community mental health teams, digital provision and NHS 24 to make access quicker and easier.

It is crucial that we acknowledge that not everyone wants to, or is able to, access support in the same way. Ensuring a range of provision, with a key role for universal services, the third sector and peer support, is essential to achieving our vision, as is building on the successes that we have achieved to date through our expansion of digital therapies. We will continue to improve access to clinical services, including child and adolescent mental health services and psychological therapies.

In addition to boards' core funding, we will invest more than £50 million this year in our mental health outcomes framework to support the delivery of clinical services in priority areas.

Our actions will continue to evolve over time. We will regularly refresh the delivery plan, based on a full assessment of where we know we can build on existing good work. There will be actions that we will want to expand or refine. Our actions must also continue to reflect the significant

challenges that remain. We have record levels of investment and record staff numbers, and we are treating and supporting more people than ever, but we know that demand continues to increase.

I make an offer to all parties: please work with us to identify where we can go further and what our commitments in future years should be. I will always approach such discussions with anyone across the chamber constructively.

The first iteration of the delivery plan represents work across Government. It shows how the mental health portfolio is fully aligned with on-going core work across Government on child poverty, employability, housing and much else. That cross-portfolio approach is essential to addressing the underlying causes of poor mental health as well as to ensuring the provision of the right support for those who need it.

I turn to the workforce. Our amazing workforce is foundational to our vision. We must ensure that our whole workforce is diverse, skilled, supported, sustainable and able to operate at safe levels. The workforce action plan is aligned to the "National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care in Scotland". It places training, wellbeing, job satisfaction and the principles of fair work at its heart.

The plan also looks at the whole workforce journey. That includes how we attract, train, employ and nurture. Some of our key actions will support and improve workforce planning, such as for psychological therapies delivery. That is linked to the new national specification for psychological therapies and interventions.

We will promote existing and alternative pathways to widen access to careers in mental health. That involves going beyond the traditional university and college routes. Improving equality, diversity and inclusion training for staff is central to our plans. We will prioritise upskilling the workforce by providing funding for training to help with treatment, support and recovery.

In recent weeks, I have met representatives of mental health nurses and psychologists, and I have heard from those with lived experience. I have seen many examples of the good practice, high-quality support and innovation that are currently happening across all parts of the system.

Many people play a key role in our workforce. We have recognised the existing and potential contribution of everyone who supports mental health and wellbeing at every level of need, not just in the national health service. It is critical to recognise and value volunteers, experts by experience, unpaid peer support workers and unpaid carers who work with and support people. That includes family, friends and befrienders.

Although we can recognise successes, we should also acknowledge the scale of the challenges that we face. To meet those challenges, we must work collectively to consider what the future workforce needs to look like and to develop more multidisciplinary approaches that meet the diverse needs of those who are seeking help.

The action plan sets out our first steps, and we know that much more will need to be done in future iterations. Achieving and sustaining our ambitious vision will require time and incremental change as funding and resources permit.

The delivery and action plans will require local and national leadership as we work collectively towards national outcomes, while maintaining local flexibility. For that reason, I am delighted that we have published the documents jointly with COSLA, as councils are key partners for much of the work that has been outlined.

Governance arrangements will be crucial to ensuring that we are making the right progress, so we will establish a mental health and wellbeing leadership board to provide national leadership and strategic oversight of priorities. It will ensure that our commitments deliver clear benefits that are aligned with the strategy's vision and outcomes. It will provide constructive support and challenge to ensure progress against actions, and it will play a key role in evaluating impact.

The publication of the strategy, the delivery plan and the workforce action plan represents a reset and a refocus of our whole mental health policy that allows us the opportunity to set a new level of ambition and to be clear about what a high-functioning mental health system should look like. Most important, it describes what help anyone is entitled to receive when they ask for it, for any aspect of their mental health. I commend the strategy, the delivery plan and the workforce action plan to Parliament and I am happy to answer questions.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to ask a question pressed their request-to-speak buttons.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a practising NHS general practitioner.

A robust strategy is needed to tackle mental health, but it is incredibly difficult for our mental health professionals to do their job without sufficient funding. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has contradicted the minister's

statement and said that the workforce will not grow to keep pace with demand. In the latest budget, funding for mental health was frozen and, since then, CAMHS waiting times have continued to suffer—about 30 per cent of patients are still waiting for more than 18 weeks, and health boards are struggling to recruit the staff they need.

New funding is welcome, but it will be too late for the thousands of children who are on CAMHS waiting lists—the waiting lists that Humza Yousaf promised to clear by March 2023. As with the drug deaths strategy and the Covid recovery plan before it, this is another flimsy plan that will fail to deliver results for the Scottish people. When the aim is not achieved, the Government will simply say that it will learn lessons.

Will the minister reiterate that the Scottish National Party Government is still committed to clearing CAMHS and psychological therapies waiting lists, or has that target been abandoned? Given that one in four vacancies in the CAMHS workforce have been advertised for six months or more, how will the plan eliminate the long waits to fill vacancies?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that we have made record-breaking investments in CAMHS in the past number of years. Since the Government took power in 2007, we have doubled the money that goes into mental health services compared with the amount that went in before the Government took charge.

CAMHS staffing levels have more than doubled under the Government. I absolutely agree that there are still challenges for us to rise to, but we are on the right trajectory. The past six quarters have had the six highest figures on record for the number of children starting treatment from CAMHS. We have also gone further. The Government has made sure that counselling is available in every high school in Scotland. We have also invested in local authority community-based mental health support, which more than 45,000 children and young people and their family members accessed in the second half of last year.

We have absolutely not lost our commitment to meeting the CAMHS targets. We will achieve the waiting list target for CAMHS and we will achieve the waiting list target for psychological therapies. We are making the right investments and are improving the situation. I would expect to see further improvement continuing on the same trajectory.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the minister for an advance copy of her statement. The scale of Scotland's mental health crisis cannot be overstated. A recent survey by the Royal College of Psychiatrists found that 53 per cent of respondents were not confident that they or a

family member could access mental health support if needed.

The Government's latest strategy rightly focuses on the need for patients to be able to access good mental health support earlier and in their own communities. However, both the strategy and the accompanying workforce plan fail to acknowledge the increasing pressures that that will place on a declining GP workforce that is constantly firefighting and has no headspace to make service improvements.

Will the minister tell us how patients can have confidence in the strategy, given that the workforce has already told me today that it is not possible to deliver it?

Maree Todd: We will work closely with the workforce. I recognise that general practice is under immense strain, and we talk about that day in, day out in this chamber. There were challenges prior to the pandemic, but there is no doubt that the pandemic has placed an even greater strain on our health and social care system than it has ever experienced before. However, we are investing in primary care and in a diversity of workforce in primary care.

So that we do not just rely on general practitioners in primary care to deliver support to mental health, we have invested in specialist mental health workers, community link workers and the full multidisciplinary team, including nurses with specialist skills and qualifications, practitioner nurses, pharmacists and, sometimes, psychologists and counsellors, all of whom are available through the primary care door at GP practices.

I recognise that we are not able to wave a magic wand to fix everything that is needed in mental health care, but we are absolutely on the right track. It is important to recognise the challenges that we face as well as the progress that has been made in recent years. There has been sustained investment. We have record numbers of staff providing more varied support and services to a larger number of people than ever before. Although I recognise that there are still challenges, and that needs are increasing, I think that we would all acknowledge—I would absolutely say—that this strategy, this workforce plan and this action plan are the answer to those challenges.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a mental health nurse holding registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

The independent forensic mental health review's final report, which was published in February 2021, made wide-ranging recommendations for the future of those services including that

"All forensic mental health services, including both inpatient and community services, should be brought under the management of this new Forensic Board."

Will the minister update me on the progress towards implementing those recommendations?

Maree Todd: Continuing to improve support for those in the forensic mental health system is one of the priorities that are set out in Scotland's mental health and wellbeing strategy. Therefore, the delivery plan that was published today includes an action to progress issues that the independent review identified. That includes continuing to bring together stakeholders to agree a clear plan for addressing the strategic planning and governance of forensic mental health services.

The first phase of that work was the establishment of a planning and collaboration short-life working group, which undertook an options appraisal. A report of the appraisal was published in August. Taking into account that work, which did not result in a clear consensus, my plan is to update Parliament and to publish a document on progress towards delivering the independent review's recommendation early in the new year.

I recognise the member's on-going commitment to, and interest in, making progress on the issue, and I am more than willing to keep her updated on progress.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): It is good that the strategy recognises the importance of the perinatal period for mothers, but it does little to deliver. Last year, a consultation on extending mother and baby unit provision found that most respondents wanted another unit outside the central belt, as many of them were from the NHS Grampian area. After requesting an update on progress, I was told yesterday that a report will be published once the options have been fully considered and the next steps have been determined. Will the minister finally listen to women and tell them when that will be?

Maree Todd: I thank Tess White for her on-going interest, which we share, in that area. The options appraisal that she referred to has been completed, I have read it and the Scottish Government is considering its response to it. I am more than happy to update the Parliament and stakeholders on what the options appraisal recommends once we have made plans for how to respond to it. I do not want to present the public with the options appraisal until I can set out what our next steps are.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I am sure that members across the chamber will agree on the importance of removing stigma in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

Will the minister provide an update on how the plans in her statement can help to continue to tackle such stigma?

Maree Todd: That is an excellent question. Stigma is the bane of my life and of many colleagues' lives, because it prevents people from getting the help that they need and to which they are entitled. That is why one of the strategy's first priorities is to aim for

"a Scotland, free from stigma and inequality, where everyone fulfils their right to achieve the best mental health and wellbeing possible."

Stuart McMillan will be aware, and will agree, that we have made great progress in that regard over recent years. We are now in the lucky situation in which many people feel comfortable talking about mental health and mental ill health and about what they do to keep themselves well, but we have more to do. Given my history of working with them, I have a personal interest in supporting people with severe and enduring mental illness, who still face relatively large amounts of stigma.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Why is there little detail in the minister's statement on how we can retain existing staff? Staff turnover is as great a problem as lack of recruitment. Last week, the Royal College of Psychiatrists produced a report that states that 42 per cent of existing consultants are over 50 and that half of them are considering early retirement. Can the minister give details on what strategy is in place to retain those hard-working staff?

Maree Todd: A number of pieces of work, including a review of mental health nursing, are being done across the workforce. Right across the spectrum of the workforce, we are trying to support people and enhance the conditions under which they work.

I thank the Royal College of Psychiatrists for its comprehensive and wide-ranging "State of the nation report: The psychiatry workforce in Scotland". I absolutely acknowledge the issues that are raised in the report. The workforce action plan ensures that the commitments in our mental health and wellbeing strategy are underpinned by plans for a resilient and sustainable workforce. I agree that it is important that the workforce feels valued and supported in order to promote better health and wellbeing outcomes.

We will use the report to support the work of the newly created psychiatry working group, and I look forward to engaging with the college and with many other stakeholders. Recently, I met mental health nurses and psychologists to ensure that the issues that are identified in the report are considered as part of our on-going work to implement the new workforce action plan.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): In June, the minister responded to me regarding my concerns about the lack of assessments for attention deficit hyperactivity order for adults in my constituency. The response said that there is no routine reporting of community adult mental health service activity, nor any national routine reporting. In the documents that accompany the statement, is there a commitment to improving and collating data on ADHD in adults to inform workforce requirements?

Maree Todd: In terms of data, we know that there are gaps in current reporting, and our mental health and wellbeing strategy acknowledges that. The need for better data and evidence is specifically reflected in the strategy's outcomes and in the priorities. As I said in response to Christine Grahame's previous question, I am happy to consider that issue but, from regular discussions with health and social care partnership leads, we are aware that the number of adults coming forward has increased significantly, so capturing what we have now might not capture what we need in the future.

We have published quality standards to support general adult secondary mental health services. That is part of a wider ambition to develop a suite of standards for mental health services that will improve the quality and safety of mental health care and support. Those standards will be measurable and will provide a basis for continual improvement through enabling greater scrutiny and assurance of services against the standards. The standards will be part of the solution. They will undoubtedly focus on access to services and will set expectations around services and prioritising referrals on the basis of need. The standards will provide clarity on the prioritisation process and the need to support people who are waiting to access services.

The Presiding Officer: Many members are still interested in asking a question, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank the minister for her offer of cross-party collaboration and welcome the new delivery plan, although the crisis in mental health remains, despite the best efforts of staff.

The documents that have been published today promise more working groups, more reviews and more plans for future plans but, last winter, the Government cut £50 million from the mental health budget. Where are the extra staff that the Government promised to support police and to provide support in accident and emergency units?

Maree Todd: As I tried to set out when I spoke about the workforce plan and the action plan, the strategy is very much about shifting the balance of

care from acute services to community services. It is about building and strengthening resilience and capacity in our communities and making sure that early intervention and prevention are possible. As I said in response to previous questions, specific work is going on across the mental health workforce, but it must be acknowledged that there is also a need to increase resilience right across our communities. Mental health should be everyone's business, and the strategy's ambition is to ensure that it is everyone's business.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): We know that more rural areas of Scotland often struggle to recruit clinicians with specialist knowledge in areas such as mental health. How will the Government ensure that people in primary care teams have time to expand their knowledge and to do the early intervention work that is so vital? What work is under way to attract mental health workers to our rural communities?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that we have done a lot of work in primary care to try to ensure that a healthy multidisciplinary team is available as people access care through their general practice. That means that, in many general practices, specialist mental health workers are already available to support the general practice staff. We are keen to continue that work and to continue to invest. We are looking particularly to ensure that our investment aligns with the areas of greatest need, recognising that there is a link to socioeconomic factors and social determinants of health, which apply to mental health as well as to physical health. A lot of work is going on to ensure that the right people are available in the right place and at the right time for individuals.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Scotland's incredible mental health workforce carries out vital work every day. Can the minister say any more about the work that is under way to grow the mental health workforce in Scotland and how the current plans will build on that work?

Maree Todd: I have said something on that already, but I am more than willing to elaborate further. Since 2007, we have been proactive in increasing the number of mental health staff. In that time, the number of psychology and child and adolescent mental health services posts has more than doubled, and the number of psychiatric consultants across all specialties in NHS Scotland has increased by 16.3 per cent, which is a total of 525 whole-time equivalents.

For mental health nursing staff, the workforce has increased by 36.5 per cent, which equates to almost 10,000 extra whole-time equivalents. We have also exceeded our commitment to recruit 800 additional mental health workers to A and E

departments, GP practices, police stations, custody suites and prisons.

We know that, to achieve our vision for mental health and wellbeing in Scotland, we rely on having the right workforce that is supported to have the right skills in the right place at the right time. Our aim is to have a workforce that is diverse, skilled, supported and sustainable and that can operate at safe levels. That is why our workforce plan outlines a number of actions that we will take to support our vision, such as a review of mental health nursing in Scotland. Some of our other key actions will address the delivery of psychological therapies. We are always looking to promote and establish alternative pathways to widen access.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): The minister said that every senior school in Scotland has counselling services. How many full-time equivalent counsellors are there in Scotland's schools?

Maree Todd: I do not have that data to hand, but I can follow up in writing to Annie Wells. I am absolutely certain that we have delivered on our commitment to make counselling available in every secondary school in Scotland. It has been well used and a great success. We are keen to build on it.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a registered general nurse with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

The vision for mental health rightly has a focus on promoting positive wellbeing. Across remote and rural Scotland, many people—particularly older people—experience social isolation and loneliness. Will the minister provide an update on how the plan will seek to tackle loneliness and isolation, particularly in remote and rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders?

Maree Todd: The delivery plan recognises the need for us to continue to build capacity in local services and third sector community groups to ensure that everyone in Scotland, particularly those who are most at risk, is able to access mental health and wellbeing support in their local communities.

Since 2021, we have invested £51 million in our community mental health and wellbeing fund for adults, with approximately 3,300 grants being given to local projects across Scotland in the first two years alone. The fund supports grass-roots community groups in building resilience and tackling social isolation, loneliness and mental health inequalities. As such, it prioritises a range of at-risk groups, including older people and those who live in remote or rural areas.

During its second year, more than 1,200 of the projects supported by the fund included a focus on addressing social isolation and loneliness. Those included the Balmaclellan Community Trust, which I think is in the member's region. The trust provides a fun, informal and safe environment and a place for people to reconnect with each other and revitalise communities and neighbourhoods in the local area.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the vision for Scotland's mental health. I cannot take further questions, as we are very tight for time this afternoon and I need to protect the coming items. I will allow a moment for front benches to organise themselves.

Education and Skills Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on an update on education and skills reform. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:54

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am grateful for the opportunity to update Parliament on next steps for education and skills reform. Members will recall that, in June, I paused the legislative programme that was originally scheduled for this year. I did that for good reason. My engagements with the profession during the past eight months have cemented my view that our education system has fundamentally changed since Covid. Rushing to legislate will not change that. Reform must mean better outcomes for our young people and adult learners. Reform also means that we must take teachers with us. I cannot change our systems without their skills and knowledge and, importantly, their buy-in.

Our education and skills system must work as a single system that is easy to navigate, with collective responsibility to deliver excellence for all. In 2021, the Scottish Government accepted all the recommendations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report, which independently reviewed and endorsed curriculum for excellence. That was followed by Professor Ken Muir's report, the national discussion on education, the review of qualifications and assessment, and our initial response to James Withers's review of the purpose and principles for post-school education, research and skills. I again thank the reviewers for their reports.

We all accept the need to move on from those reports with tangible action by setting out the steps which are right for our young people and adult learners. To that end, although today's statement is largely focused on school reform, I confirm to the chamber that, subject to agreement, the Minister for Higher and Further Education intends to update Parliament later this year on our response to James Withers's review on post-school education.

Reform must be more than the sum of its parts, and it cannot exist in a vacuum. The pandemic changed us all, and the impacts of Covid were arguably the hardest for our youngest citizens. We know that the number of young children in Scotland who are experiencing speech and language delays has increased since Covid. At 27

to 30 months, the proportion of children with a developmental concern in our poorest areas is more than double that of children living in our richest areas. Speak to any primary teacher today and they will tell you about the difference that has come about since 2020 in the young people whom they teach.

That impact was, of course, layered on top of an attainment gap during a cost of living crisis that has delivered the biggest fall in living standards since Scottish records began. That context has fundamentally changed the type of learning and teaching in our schools. It means that teachers are accommodating vastly different needs than those that existed only four years ago. I know that teachers are doing that already—it is what they do—but reform must recognise that shift and it must better support how the profession responds. If reform does not recognise the changes in our classrooms, whether they be in developmental delays, changed behaviour, communication or even attendance, it will not carry credibility.

This is not, therefore, about rebadging organisations. Reform has to be about systemic, cultural change that improves outcomes for our young people and better supports the professionals whom we entrust with their care. To that end, I confirm to Parliament some changes to the governance processes that I hope will bring greater purpose, while supporting a more holistic approach to reform across the portfolio.

I will chair a ministerial group that will advise on the totality of education and skills reform, recognising that it is one system. That will better reflect the totality of the reports that have been published this year, and pull together the opportunity for a joined up system. We will also establish an education and skills reform chief executive forum, to ensure that all the bodies that will be impacted by reform can engage collectively and directly with Government in support of our reform ambitions. Finally, I have been clear that teachers and educators must be directly involved in the governance, to help to deliver the change that is required, through those new bodies, and to ensure that the expertise from the profession drives improvement.

Reform provides us with a unique opportunity to better support the teaching profession and, in so doing, our children and young people. Members will recall that, in June, I announced a review of the impact of the regional improvement collaboratives, and I thank all those who have contributed, including members of the RICs. Since their inception in 2017, the RICs have increased the improvement and leadership support that they provide. Indeed, the most recent evidence suggests that around 17,500 practitioners and leaders across early years, primary and secondary

settings have been engaged in regional activities in the past year. However, although their support was never intended to be universal, the number of staff and establishments receiving RIC support in the school year remains a minority.

I am clear that we must deliver a system that provides greater equity in access to improvement and professional learning support for teachers. Regional collaboration is important, and the RICs have helped to embed that culture in our local authorities. However, future Scottish Government investment will now be directed to initiatives that advance excellence in teaching in our classrooms, while looking to local authorities to build on those collaborative approaches.

To that end, I confirm that, for the next academic year, the Scottish Government will taper funding from the RICs and repurpose it to better support teachers in our classrooms. I have asked Education Scotland to review its regional structure, recognising the importance of strengthening the curriculum and professional learning.

I am clear that we have real strengths in Scotland's education system. For example, one aspect that is close to my own heart concerns the subject specialisms that we have in our secondary schools. That attribute should be celebrated and better supported nationally; it is unique to Scottish education, and we should be proud of it.

In our secondary schools, we have a cohort of teachers who are passionate about teaching their subject. Our national support should build on the expertise that we already have in our classrooms, using that passion to instil the joy of learning that the national discussion spoke to.

There is no greater strength in our education system than excellent learning and teaching. It is crucial to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and I want all Scotland's teachers to have the space, time and support that they need to develop their practice. I am particularly mindful of the cohort of teachers who learned how to become a teacher during the pandemic, which cannot have been easy.

We know that excellent teaching is already happening in schools across Scotland. Children and young people are achieving and the attainment gap is narrowing, but more must be done to support the profession. Being a teacher is a valuable profession. The new centre for teaching excellence will, therefore, fill an important gap in our national approach to education. It will help us to remain at the cutting edge of teaching practice by distilling research and evidence into practical support for teachers in our classrooms.

I anticipate that the centre will be hosted by a university, learning from the successful model of the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and

Protection, which is better known as CELCIS, and working closely with the Scottish Council of Deans of Education. Being hosted by a university, the centre will link the school sector with the university sector at national level.

Another strength of Scottish education is the independent General Teaching Council for Scotland, which oversees the professional standards that are required to become a teacher. By championing those standards, the new centre will strengthen support for the profession. Crucially, however, the centre must be designed with our teachers. Indeed, the centre needs to help school leaders and teachers to grow professionally throughout their careers. It will provide an opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities in the system, including those of the new education agency.

I recently met with teaching unions and professional associations to discuss more around the centre for excellence. That helped to generate some useful initial insights. Those have also been emphasised in the third report from the First Minister's international council of education advisers, which I am pleased to confirm that we will publish today. The council states that we must invest in education professionals' learning

"to address the changing needs of ... young people."

Establishing the centre for teaching excellence directly meets that recommendation.

The third report from the international council provides a strong focus on improving teaching and pedagogy. The report helpfully synthesises the recent reviews that we have heard about, recognising that there are significant commonalities and that now is the time for implementation, improvement and reform. The international council's report further supports the focus on improving teaching, professional development, collaboration and innovation.

Today also marks the launch of the consultation on the education reform bill. Building on engagement to date, the consultation sets out proposals to establish a new qualifications body, including the need for greater involvement of pupils, teachers and wider stakeholders in decision making. It also sets out ways to maximise the positive impact of inspection. I would encourage everyone to share the consultation, which is available on the Scottish Government's website, as widely as possible in order to support that engagement.

Of course, changing the organisations that deliver our qualifications, support and inspection is only part of reform. Since the conclusion of the Hayward review in June, I have been seeking views on the recommendations pertaining to the national qualifications. We undertook a survey with

teachers and lecturers on the report, which received more than 2,000 responses. Although agreement on the need for change was clear, there were varying views on next steps, and on the perceived appetite for radical reform.

In that context, I cannot ignore the challenges that our schools are currently responding to, and I must balance that reality with any reform of our qualifications system. With that in mind, I propose—subject to parliamentary agreement—to return to the chamber in the new year to debate the proposals fully. In the meantime, I will engage with Opposition spokespeople on the next steps, to ensure that we use any parliamentary debate to encourage greater support for political consensus.

I am conscious of time, but I want to place on the record my thanks to staff at Education Scotland and at the Scottish Qualifications Agency. I recognise the uncertainty that change brings. The Government has provided a commitment to no compulsory redundancies within the reform agenda, and I commit to fully engaging with both organisations and their respective trade unions, as I have already done.

To coin an expression, reform is a process, not an event. For every ardent supporter of radical reform tomorrow, there are 10 teachers telling me about the other challenges that they experience at the chalkface—challenges that Government needs to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and our trade union partners to resolve.

Covid turned our education system on its head. Overnight, our children were educated behind their screens. The role of the teacher, in that shift, is often forgotten.

We will have professional standards, supported by a centre for excellence that will join higher education with our schools and deliver the improvements that we need to see for our young people, and the teachers in our schools will be supported in the craft that they are trained in delivering.

I look forward to returning to the chamber next year to fully debate our qualifications system. As I do so, I will be guided by the most important principle of all: improved outcomes for our children and young people. That is the prize that reform offers us, and getting it right is absolutely essential.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that have been raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. Any member who wishes to ask a question who has not yet pressed their request-to-speak button should do so now.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. When we got the Withers and Hayward reviews about six months ago, the cabinet secretary said that she needed time to consider them and many other reports, some of which she has listed, before concluding on a way forward. I think that the Parliament understood that, given that the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland had said:

“confusion and frustration exist in the system due to the large number of external reports followed by the number of recommendations making progress unmanageable, swiftly followed by inactivity.”

I fear that there will be huge disappointment that today’s statement seems to promise more working groups, more discussion forums and probably exactly the sort of confusion and frustration that has been referred to. What might allay some concerns are precise and detailed answers.

With that in mind, can the cabinet secretary tell us who will sit on the ministerial group advising the cabinet secretary on education and skills reform and when precisely the group will report? Who precisely will sit on the education and skills reform chief executive forum, what are the forum’s remit and how much will it cost? Does the cabinet secretary believe that any current secondary pupils will sit assessments under the new qualifications and assessment system?

Jenny Gilruth: Liam Kerr touched on a number of different areas. I will start with the current context because that is really important. He spoke about the update that I provided to the Parliament back in June, on the plethora of different reports that I had on my desk when I was first appointed. I was keen to attempt to knit together a narrative linking those reports. I accept that we are not there yet, and I commit to the Parliament to work with my ministerial colleagues on developing that narrative further. Graeme Dey will come to the chamber later this year to give an update further to the James Withers review.

More broadly, the changes to governance that I have outlined today insert ministerial oversight into the process. It is hugely important that we are not working in silos and that there is a joined-up approach in the Government.

I hear the critique from ADES, which has highlighted the benefits of having a more systemic approach to curriculum review. That is hugely important, and I look forward to meeting ADES on Thursday this week at its conference.

More broadly, on governance structures, the chief executives of the relevant organisations will be represented in the forum. On the reform agenda, I will chair that group and provide direction on how we can tie the agendas together.

Mr Kerr asked a question about secondary pupils and their qualifications. I am not sure that I fully understood his question in relation to the Hayward review, but I would be more than happy to write to him directly.

In all that mix, I am conscious of what has been described to me as the growing appetite for radical reform and of the reality of my discussions and engagement with the profession, who say that there are challenges in our classrooms right now—whether that be behaviour, attendance or other broader issues in that realm—that the Government also needs to address. We need to be mindful of that current context as we move forward.

The approach that we are taking in relation to the education reform legislation is a truncated one. It is a short six-week period. It is important that we get that right, because things have moved on since 2021. Next year, we will move forward with the work to reform the bodies, to ensure that they better meet the needs of our children and young people.

I look forward to working with Mr Kerr on the qualifications issue, because that will be the next step following the change around the bodies and the question about whether we need to fully accept the recommendations that came from Louise Hayward’s review, which would be quite a radical change for Scotland’s education system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I echo the reminder from the Presiding Officer that we do not have any time in hand over the course of the afternoon, so we will have to have tight questions and answers, as far as possible.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I will do my best, Presiding Officer. I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

Reform has been on-going for some time, but all that we really know from today’s statement is that the Government has again delayed reform, that it has set up two new working groups and announced a centre in a press release, that the leaders of the bodies that need reform will lead the new ones, and that the Government has no new plans or next steps to tell us about. Meanwhile, the attainment gap is stubborn, classrooms are like pressure cookers, more and more young people feel unable to attend school and teachers are at bursting point with no reduction in contact time in sight.

Will the cabinet secretary confirm how what she has set out today will improve young people’s life chances while developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes, and how it will improve working conditions for teachers by increasing non-contact time and reducing class sizes? Can she give any

reassurance that the new institutions will be any different to the old ones?

Jenny Gilruth: Pam Duncan-Glancy has raised a number of important points. Today's statement about the consultation that was launched today to look at legislation is an important one. It is really important that we get that right.

The centre for teaching excellence is an opportunity to support the profession better. The member talked about some of the challenges in our classrooms right now: she said that our "classrooms are ... pressure cookers", talked about teacher time and mentioned attendance. Those are the issues that I must deal with right now, by working with COSLA and our trade union partners, in order to alleviate some of that pressure.

The member's point about class contact time is absolutely correct, which is why officials have commissioned the additional piece of work, which will report in December, to look at how we can deliver the reduced class contact time that will free up teachers. That is really crucial to developing better teaching practice and allowing teachers to have time and space to reflect on their pedagogy. The centre will have a key role to play in that and I look forward to engaging with the member, and with professional associations, to ensure that that new and additional support for the profession will deliver better-quality support to teachers, where they need it most, which is in our classrooms.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): We currently have inequality between outcomes for the children from our richest areas and those for children from the poorest areas. With that in mind, what role will the centre for teaching excellence play in reducing the poverty-related attainment gap?

Jenny Gilruth: Ruth Maguire has raised a hugely important point. Excellent learning and teaching are fundamental to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. We know from our work on the Scottish attainment challenge and through the people equity fund that additional organisations within our schools can provide lots of different skills, but we must also recognise the importance of quality learning and teaching in our schools and the role of the teacher in that regard.

It is recognised internationally that, along with leadership, the quality of teaching is a key factor in improving children's and young people's learning and outcomes within schools. We also know that research evidence shows that the quality of teaching is the most important lever that schools have to improve the attainment of their children and young people.

To answer the member's question, I say that the centre will ensure that teachers and practitioners

are better supported in delivering high-quality teaching in order to achieve the best outcomes for all, particularly those who are most impacted by poverty.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement, which I note says that

"teachers and educators must be directly involved in governance",

that Scotland's teachers must

"have the space, time and support they need",

and that we must support

"the teachers in our schools with the craft they are trained in delivering"

Scottish Conservatives have been calling for some time for increased autonomy for headteachers, which would do all that, so how is the Government actually planning to achieve that? Does the cabinet secretary agree with our proposals about headteachers and our new deal for teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: I must confess that I am not familiar with Roz McCall's proposal for a new deal for teachers, nor with the one about headteachers. However, I am perfectly prepared to engage with the member on that issue, because she makes a hugely important point.

Roz McCall spoke about the importance of engaging teachers in the process. I fully support that, which is why the consultation document that has been published today asks for direct feedback from teachers about how that can be better supported and accommodated within the new structures that will exist. We must use the professional expertise and knowledge of those who work in our classrooms to support the new organisations better. There is a real opportunity through reform, and particularly through the consultation process, to do just that.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Professor Ken Muir describes Scottish education as "complex and interconnected". Will the cabinet secretary ensure that the consultation document gives confidence to external stakeholders that change will be co-ordinated across all education and skills bodies?

Jenny Gilruth: Michelle Thomson has made a hugely important point, and the link that she makes in relation to the "interconnected" and "complex" system that was cited by Professor Ken Muir is hugely important. Pulling together the outputs from four reports is particularly challenging and cannot be done in one parliamentary statement. That is why Mr Dey will be coming forward later this year, and why I intend to have a wider debate on that at the start of next year.

The measures that are set out in the consultation document allow us to unpick some of the opportunities, which a previous member alluded to, in relation to how we can better engage the profession in ensuring that we drive improvement across the reform process.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary talked about the launch today of the education reform bill. She will be aware of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the process that the Scottish Government is undertaking on that. Will she take this opportunity to confirm that she will use adoption of legislation under the reform bill, rather than amending UK legislation, so that it becomes UNCRC compliant when it is passed?

Jenny Gilruth: Martin Whitfield has made a really important point. I will just confirm that the bill is not being published today; it is the consultation document.

However, on the point that the member made about the UNCRC, I must put on the record that that work is being led by my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville, so it is a matter for another cabinet secretary. However, I look forward to engaging with her on that point, because Martin Whitfield makes a strong argument in relation to that opportunity.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary highlighted the impact of the cost of living crisis. Does she share my concern that, as we undertake the reforms and do everything that we can to give our children the best start in life, the impact of decisions that are made at Westminster, which are pushing children and families into poverty, will continue to be felt in our education system?

Jenny Gilruth: Fulton MacGregor has made a really important point. We cannot divorce decisions that are taken at Westminster from the impact that they have in our classrooms. Before children have crossed the school gate, some of the impacts of those decisions are already felt in relation to those children's upbringing, how their families have experienced the world, and the benefits that they might or might not be entitled to.

The Government has spent significant finance on mitigating the impact of UK Government policy decisions, whether that is the bedroom tax, for example, or the benefit cap more broadly. Over the past six years, that mitigation has included £733 million of payments through activities such as our discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund. Those are hugely important investments from the Scottish Government, but that money could have been better spent on core services including health, transport and, of course, education.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Willie Rennie joins us remotely.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Today's Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report states:

"The need for change is clear and expectations are high".

I am afraid that the education secretary's statement appears to duck all the big questions. On skills reform, there will be a statement later this year. On qualifications reform, there will be a debate next year. The only thing that is new today is the abolition of the centrepiece of John Swinney's reforms from the previous parliamentary session.

I recognise the pressures regarding behaviour, the attainment gap, attendance and so on, but those are reforms for the future and they will take time to implement. What further information is the education secretary looking for to enable her to provide the leadership that Scottish education needs?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Rennie for his question, which went round the houses a wee bit.

Nonetheless, on the question how we can move things forward, the legislative agenda, as I updated Parliament in June, was delayed for a year. It is important that, before we take the legislation forward, we check where we are in relation to the roll-out of the new organisations. We have truncated the consultation process by six weeks, which is important. I hope that the member will help us in supporting engagement on the consultation document. It is important that we get it right.

However, I am conscious, as I outlined in my response to Liam Kerr, that the reality that our schools are facing at the current time is very challenging. I go back to the point that I made in my initial statement—that reform is a process, not an event. We have to take the profession with us. We need to make sure that reform is going to meet better the needs of our children and young people. That is what I am committed to and that is what the member will hear from me, in terms of leadership.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I welcome the decision on regional improvement collaboratives, in particular. For six years now, there has been a frustrating diversion of resources away from schools and classrooms, where they were really needed.

The cabinet secretary mentioned hearing from young people. Could she confirm that young people's voices will not just be heard as part of the reform process, but that the new structures that are to be established will permanently embed a

space in which young people's voices are heard, and that they will be the voices of young people themselves, not just those of adults advocating on their behalf?

Jenny Gilruth: Some of the challenges that Ross Greer mentioned and alluded to in relation to the RICs are ones that I have heard being played back to me by the profession during my engagements in recent months.

In relation to the voices of young people, I look forward to engaging with young people directly on the consultation document in the coming weeks. We are having a round-table event to that end. The member's point about embedding the learner voice is absolutely pivotal. It is among the recommendations that we have accepted as a Government, and it will be built into the governance process of the new bodies.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Following on from the points that were made in that last question, as well as discussing the involvement of pupils, the cabinet secretary spoke in her statement about "teachers and wider stakeholders" in relation to the consultation. Can she say anything more about harder-to-reach groups that she might be seeking to consult, including people with additional support requirements and, perhaps, families who are not very engaged at the moment?

Jenny Gilruth: I have done quite a bit of engagement in relation to additional support needs—in particular, in our schools. We know that more than a third of children and young people now have an identified additional support need. We are looking to engage directly with campaign groups on the issue, and it will be critical to embed those voices through the governance process.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In your statement, cabinet secretary, you talk about more committees and more working groups being set up, but I contend that everyone is now looking for action. You said that you will engage with Opposition spokespeople on next steps to allow for greater political consensus, yet we are starting that exact exercise at the Education, Children and Young People Committee tomorrow. I find it extraordinary that you have made that decision in a vacuum.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Sue Webber: That circumvents the committee process, rather than waiting for the outcomes and the evidence that will be taken. What were you thinking, cabinet secretary?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: I am sorry, but I fail to understand Sue Webber's question. I would be more than happy to attend her committee tomorrow, although I have not received an invitation. I am not sure about the decision to which she is alluding. The decision on legislation was taken in 2021, I think, and I took a decision in June to delay that legislation. Today, I have given an update in relation to the consultation. I am more than happy to attend the committee to talk to members about next steps and about reform more broadly, but the announcement today is not new, in terms of reform.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has stated that the centre for teaching excellence will rightly be designed together with teachers. On collaboration, what role will local government play in the centre, given the role of councils in delivering education?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Macpherson raises a really important point, because it is, of course, councils and not the Scottish Government that run our schools. It is hugely important that COSLA is part of the buy-in to the establishment of the new centre and that councils see a role for their own participation, with support for their staff.

My officials are setting up a series of engagements to hear from teachers and the wider profession, local government and national education bodies, in line with the commitment to co-design the new centre. We will, of course, draw on the expertise of teachers and practitioners in that process, and we will work with COSLA and colleagues across local government to ensure that the centre is designed with them. I met representatives of COSLA only yesterday to discuss the matter in a little more detail, and I have sought joint oversight of the centre itself by COSLA and the Scottish Government, working closely together. That fundamentally recognises their role in delivering education locally.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I did not have the advantage of seeing the statement ahead of hearing it, but I heard the cabinet secretary say something about taking resources and putting them on to the front line and into classrooms. I very much welcome that, and I appreciate that we need to listen to teachers and to act to support our teachers.

I wish to ask the cabinet secretary about the centre for teaching excellence that she announced at her party conference, and which she has mentioned today. How much of the functionality of the new body will be moved from Education Scotland? Once that has moved to the centre for teacher excellence, what will be left that Education Scotland will do? Is there scope—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Stephen Kerr for his question. I miss Stephen Kerr: I used to enjoy debating with him on a regular basis.

The member raised a really important point about the need to listen to teachers. He knows that I spend a lot of my time in schools: I want to bring some of teachers' frustration to the fore, but I want also to try to support them better. That is what the centre is fundamentally about.

In response to the member's question, I note that this is not about Education Scotland. It will not have a role, to my mind, in relation to the centre itself, which is a new body. That is why I outlined that some of the funding will move from the regional improvement collaboratives to the centre itself. Of course, Education Scotland will itself be replaced through the reform process, which is quite separate from the centre for teaching excellence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business.

Ferry Services

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11075, in the name of Edward Mountain, on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, on "A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland". I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:25

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am delighted to open the debate as convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. I thank the committee's clerks and its members for all their hard work in producing what I believe is an excellent report.

Let us be clear: too many of Scotland's ferry services are below standard. Over 15 and a half months, the committee conducted an inquiry into how the situation could be improved. The question that we needed to answer was what could be done to constitute a modern and sustainable ferry service for Scotland. It was very much a forward-looking, solutions-based inquiry, which was designed to go beyond the specific problems with delivering the much-needed ferries 801 and 802. Those issues are being dealt with very ably by the Public Audit Committee, and I pay tribute to the work that it is doing on behalf of the Parliament in relation to those ferries.

The catalyst for our committee's inquiry was a petition, which led to engagement with ferry-dependent communities. The need was established when we engaged with communities, which helped to shape the remit of our work to come. We visited Orkney, Arran and the Western Isles to meet community groups and we received hundreds of written submissions. However, we never lost focus on the human cost of unreliable ferries. I whole-heartedly thank all the people who contributed to the committee's work on the inquiry. They told us to be bold, to end the endless cycle of meaningless consultations, and to deliver a commanding and compelling case for change. I believe that we have delivered that through the recommendations of our report, which emphasise the need for strong leadership from the Scottish Government, which has been lacking.

I am delighted that Fiona Hyslop, the ex-deputy convener of the committee during most of its inquiry, is now involved as a Government minister. She knows the challenges and I hope that she will rise to them. Sadly, however, the Scottish Government has allowed responsibility for various aspects of ferry services to fall within the portfolios of three cabinet secretaries. Therefore, it is still

unclear who has ultimate responsibility for delivering the leadership and the long-term strategic thinking that the committee recommended. That is unhelpful and muddled.

The committee made a series of recommendations that were designed to progress improvement of the management of our ferries and the contracts for running them. I will begin with our recommendation on the structure for decision making on and delivery of ferry services. There was widespread agreement that the current tripartite agreement for managing the Scottish Government-funded ferries is not working effectively, especially for the Clyde and Hebrides ferries. The Scottish Government is considering the various options for reconfiguration, as outlined in the project Neptune report. The committee has recommended that the future of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd must be considered. I make no bones about the fact that I believe that CMAL's standing as an independent organisation should be ended, but the committee has offered various other options for its future role, including mergers with Caledonian MacBrayne and Transport Scotland. We believe that the status quo is completely unacceptable.

However, the underlying issue is the lack of clarity on whether the Scottish Government can amend the tripartite agreement. The project Neptune report was delivered to the Scottish Government in February 2022 and the matter is still to be resolved. The cabinet secretary does not appear to know whether the tripartite agreement can be amended. I suggest that we need a clear answer to that before we go any further—time is marching on. The next Clyde and Hebrides ferries contract is an opportunity to improve services by asking more from the operator in order to improve services and reliability. We need to grasp the opportunity to benefit the ferry-dependent communities.

I have some fundamental questions. When will the new contract start? Will it be awarded through a tender process or will it be awarded directly? Does the Scottish Government know whether a direct award could be made? We posed those questions in our report. We are 11 months away from the end of the current Clyde and Hebrides ferries contract.

There has been a lack of action on procurement, which will be resource intensive. Audit Scotland has warned that previous procurement exercises did not allow sufficient time. The committee is concerned that lessons have not been learned. Without endorsing how we get there, the committee felt that, from the current starting point, a direct award would have some advantages. As laid out in the project Neptune report, a direct award may save the resources of

Transport Scotland and CalMac and allow ministers to focus on strategy. However, there is an important caveat. We stipulated that if our recommendation was carried forward, it must be done with the acceptance of communities. In September 2022, the then transport minister said the same thing.

The report of the chair of the ferries community board, which sadly did not come out until after our report, recommended that operator services should be put out to tender. The question that we have to ask now, and which I hope will be answered, is what is the Government's view on that? Will the Government make an offer to extend the CalMac contract, given that there is now insufficient time for a tendering process of the magnitude necessary to end the current contract? What will it do?

The committee also recommended that the Scottish Government should consider extending the length of future contracts. The committee also considered the forthcoming islands connectivity plan as a strategy to replace the ferries plan, which ended in 2022. That plan currently consists of a series of proposed plans. The first—the long-term plan for vessels and ports—was published in a draft for consultation in 2022. The Scottish Government's response to our report said that the revised draft of that plan will be published later this year.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Edward Mountain: I will if I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a little bit of time at the moment, but not much. Could Mr McArthur's microphone be switched on, please? Maybe you could move seats, Mr McArthur?

Liam McArthur: Ah, there we go. I thank Edward Mountain for taking this extended intervention.

In the work that the committee carried out, which I warmly welcome, did it consider, as well as the confusion and lack of focus that was caused by the tripartite arrangement and the succession of different transport ministers and ministerial responsibilities, whether it was helpful for Orkney and Shetland's internal lifeline ferry services to be excluded from the connectivity plan, which, as the member suggested, is in a sense the replacement of the national ferries plan?

Edward Mountain: There is a very long answer to that but, in very simple terms, we considered the internal ferries in Orkney, and I visited and saw some of them. They are beyond their lifespan at the moment, and it is quite clear that the Government needs to take positive action in conjunction with the local councils to make sure

that islands are not left without ferries. *[Interruption.]*

I am sorry, but I am going to have to leave it there. The Scottish Government's response to our report said that a revised draft of the consultation that was published in December 2022 would be published later this year. It is not clear to me when the other intended sections of the islands connectivity plan, including community needs assessments and the low-carbon plan, will be finalised.

The question is, when will the final comprehensive islands connectivity plan be published? Will it be published in advance of the next Clyde and Hebrides ferries contract? It needs to be. We sought commitments that it will include elements that the committee identified as essential to an effective plan. Some of those have been accepted by the Government.

I am running short of time, Presiding Officer, so I will move to the key issues and cut this down as much as possible. We also made recommendations that future ferry services need to be more accountable and that we need better measurements of performance and more transparent working by operators. We did not have much confidence that the statistics reflected the performance, so those need to be changed.

We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to a fleet with an average age of 15 years, but we made it clear that we need more ferries than we have at the moment. That is long-term strategic planning. To deliver that we will need a rolling vessel-replacement programme and a maintenance and upgrade programme for ports and harbours. There is a lot to do, and rather than keep going on, because I am sure that all members in the chamber have read our excellent report, I will say that the Scottish Government needs to listen carefully to what the committee has said, and it needs to implement the recommendations of the plan, be decisive and make clear decisions, because allowing the status quo to continue is unacceptable to the people of Scotland and to the committee.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's 11th Report, 2023 (Session 6), *A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland* (SP Paper 417).

15:36

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I start by thanking the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for securing time for a debate on what is a well-evidenced and considered report. I reiterate the opening points of

the Scottish Government's formal response to the committee, which welcomed the timely report as

"considered, balanced and forward-looking."

I am pleased that, as a Government, we have accepted or noted recommendations to inform current and future decision making.

I want to make clear on the record that, prior to becoming a minister in June, I served as deputy convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee throughout the evidence taking on the inquiry and left the committee before the report was finalised and published. The Government response was rightly issued by the cabinet secretary, but many of the actions are now being led by me.

One of the strengths of the committee's report is its approach of centring the needs and views of islanders who use and depend on these services rather than the interests of the institutions or companies involved. As minister, I am determined that Government, our agencies and the operators must do likewise and engage widely and regularly with island communities as we shape services and contracts, and in doing so be informed by and reflect on the committee's recommendations.

Since my appointment, I have met with many chairs of island ferry committees and a number of committees themselves, and will continue to do so. Most recently, last week, I met the Islay ferry committee online and, in October, I met the Harris ferry committee in person.

I also take this opportunity to thank the hard-working port staff and vessel crews, who are often the most responsive to events and challenges in the network, and I thank the CalMac and NorthLink Ferries back-office teams for the service that they provide.

Many of the report's recommendations were already under way or being considered prior to the committee publishing its report, but the conclusions of the committee will help shape and inform the Government's next steps in relation to some critical elements. The Government's response accepted 43 of the recommendations in full or in principle, including, among many others, the recommendations on reviewing data collection and performance data; the operator in the new contract being required to work with local authorities and communities; identifying ways to support standardisation of ports and harbours; and reconsidering fare policy, islander priority and the impact of the road equivalent tariff.

We also noted 29 of the recommendations, where those were, partly, observations with no further action required. There were only two recommendations that were noted as not being taken forward.

On the headline requests set out in the executive summary of the report, I confirm that we aim to publish the islands connectivity plan later this year, and that it will be a strategic paper covering wider issues than ferries. The vision and strategic thinking for ferry services and ferry-dependent communities is a key part of that, and builds on the pre-consultation paper on the long-term plan for vessels and ports, which was produced in December 2022. We are establishing the governance and delivery structures that are capable of delivering that vision in governance—formerly project Neptune—and on Clyde and Hebrides ferry services 3. The fair fares review is also due soon. The committee wanted to bring a cohesive approach to all of those four elements, and that is what I am doing as the minister. I will announce to Parliament actions on those as appropriate.

The budget for support for ferries rose to a record £251 million, and the vessels and piers budget rose to £189 million in the current financial year. I note that the fulfilment of our long-term plan is dependent on funding allocation decisions that go beyond the current parliamentary session. We are committed to working in collaboration with ferry-dependent communities in informing future vessel procurements.

Liam McArthur: The minister will be aware of the commitment that the former Deputy First Minister gave that the ferries task force looking at internal services and procurement in Orkney was intended to feed into that budget process. Is there anything that she can say by way of an update on that process?

Fiona Hyslop: The ferries task force for both Orkney and Shetland is meeting very shortly, with the Deputy First Minister, who is also the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, chairing that. That is part of the on-going discussions.

On governance, we welcomed the principles set out in recommendation 12 around accountability, transparency, competence, value for money, meeting community needs and supporting the delivery of net zero. Those principles, along with the work of Angus Campbell, who led work on the ferry community consultation engaging directly with communities, will help to inform future decisions on that matter. I place on record my thanks to Angus Campbell for his work.

The committee recommended merging CMAL and Transport Scotland into a new ferries agency. However, it recognised in its work on that and on the CHFS3 contract that the ferries community board had yet to report, but the board recommended CMAL and CalMac be merged.

The Scottish Government agrees with the committee that the islands connectivity plan

represents a real opportunity for fresh thinking on ferry service provision.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the minister agree that the current tripartite set-up should be changed?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, I do, and it can be changed. However, the form that any change would have would require to be robust in terms of the impact that it would have for legal, technical and other reasons. A specific proposal will have to be put to answer the question that the committee put on that governance arrangement.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I am afraid that I will have to move on.

We have already issued a pre-consultation draft on the port and vessel infrastructure plan and, later this year, we intend to launch a formal consultation on that, along with the overarching strategic paper, which will help to bring together the various sections of the islands connectivity plan. That reflects on the committee's recommendations that the "ring binder" approach to developing the plan needs to ensure that it is coherent.

Clearly and understandably, there is a great focus from the committee and wider stakeholders on the appropriate form of contract for the next Clyde and Hebridean ferry service procurement. As I confirmed when I appeared before the committee recently, that is a decision that will need to be made in consultation and agreement with wider Government and Cabinet colleagues. Clearly, there is urgency around that matter, given that we are within a year of the end of the current contract. I will set out the position on that matter as soon as possible, and will make a statement to the chamber shortly.

I again welcome the committee's confirmation around not unbundling the services and again highlight that the Government will not split up the CalMac network. However, one thing is clear: regardless of the form of contract or procurement, there is a need for real and significant change in delivery to put communities at the heart of ferry services, and I am determined that that will happen, whether that involves a clear and revised set of key performance indicators, including lived experience involving actual versus contractual performance around cancellations, or greater local community involvement in decision making around their services.

The Scottish ministers have been clear that the reliability of ferry services needs to be supported by resilience in the fleet. That is why it is important that we are committed to the delivery of six new

major vessels by 2026 as well as further investment in port infrastructure and the initial phase of the small vessel replacement plan. Design work is also progressing on the replacement freight vessels for northern isles ferry services.

Reports to the committee on the four new major ferries for Islay and the Little Minch, as asked for, are due to be with the committee shortly. I can confirm that they are progressing well and that they are all due for delivery at various points between October 2024 and September 2025.

I was pleased to recently open the new terminal at Tarbert in Harris and to note the progress at Lochmaddy and Uig. In particular, I thank the communities and regular ferry users for their patience and perseverance throughout the works, especially during the closure periods that have been necessary to deliver them. The works will help to deliver resilience, replace life-expired infrastructure and increase the range of vessels in the Calmac fleet that can use the facilities.

We have committed to the provision of a resilience vessel to minimise disruption across the network, so the MV Alfred has been chartered for another six months. I thank the crew of the MV Hebridean Isles, along with others in Calmac, Transport Scotland and CMAL, for their work to return that vessel to service in time for the busy winter overhaul period.

The committee produced a comprehensive report, and I have touched on only some elements of it and of our response. In my closing speech, I hope to return to some remaining elements, which will no doubt be expanded on in wider contributions. I thank the committee and its clerks for their work on the report.

15:45

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the members of and clerks to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for what is an excellent report, as has been said, that raises important questions for the Government and the members of the tripartite arrangement.

On reading the report, my first and immediate reaction was that what it says is not rocket science. The report says that ferry services should be efficient, competent, on time and reliable and that they should provide sufficient capacity, charge reasonable fares and be accessible. It says that the administration should be transparent, accountable and competent, provide value for money and be community led. That all seems blatantly obvious to everyone who is on the outside looking in, so why have ferry services been so difficult for the Government to manage? Why have the Parliament, its committees and our

island communities had to wait so long for the Government to act? They are still waiting.

Damning evidence was submitted to the committee's inquiry. The committee heard from communities that businesses are failing, goods are not arriving and urgent health appointments are being missed. The committee heard about constant, never-ending consultation that no action results from. It heard about delays, cancellations and a lack of available tickets. It heard about an ageing fleet that is unreliable and overpriced; about overdue contracts for ferry replacements; and about new solutions such as fixed links, catamaran fleets or more, smaller ferries being discounted for no reason.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): I am interested in Mr Lumsden's comment that ferry services are overpriced. Has he taken into account any of the cost reductions that have come as a consequence of the introduction of the road equivalent tariff?

Douglas Lumsden: I have, but I am sure that, as a Parliament, we all agree that more can still be done.

The lists that I gave include only a small amount of the Government's failings, and I am sure that my colleagues will pick up more. To be frank, if I were a Government minister, I would be embarrassed to come into the chamber today, but I admire the Minister for Transport for coming forward with some positives. I look forward to cross-party working to try to improve the service for our island communities.

As a Parliament, we should not forget that those island communities have been badly let down by the state of our ferries, and it is those communities that are suffering. On the mainland, we are lucky to have choices. Depending on where someone lives and how rural their area is, they can drive, take a train or use a bus. Islanders do not have such choices. I fear that, without a reliable ferry service, depopulation problems on many of our islands will accelerate. The human cost, which the committee's convener mentioned, is most important. We need improvements, and we need to send a message to our island communities that change is coming.

A clear message in the report is that the Government should look again at the administrative arrangement of the tripartite structure. I ask the minister to be very clear about how the Government will take that forward and what consideration has been given to the committee's recommendations on that.

We are clear that the current structure is flawed in many ways. Communities are confused about who is responsible for which bit of the service and

who is accountable. Much more transparency is required.

The minister should give us an update on the plans to include local representatives on the boards and management groups of ferry services, to ensure that the voices of local people are heard loud and clear in the day-to-day running of services.

As the convener said, recommendation 28 of the committee report states that contracts should be longer than those that are currently offered and be offered on a 10-year basis. Will the Government give an indication today of whether that will be the case for future contract rounds?

One message that came through clearly in evidence was the need to think a bit more out of the box when it comes to linking up our island communities. The Government needs to give greater consideration to a number of issues: the benefit of smaller vessels running more frequently between islands; more flexible ticketing options for locals making essential journeys; penalties for companies that book space but do not turn up; subsidised travel for those travelling for educational purposes; and fixed links between smaller islands that are close to their neighbours.

The Government promised that the islands connectivity plan would be in place by the end of 2022. It is good to hear that the plan will be released later this year, but why has it taken so long? Is the Government on target to achieve the aim of reducing the average age of ships in the fleet to 15 years by the end of the decade? Perhaps the minister could include that commitment in her closing remarks and give our island communities an assurance that that will be the case.

Let us be clear: an ageing ferry fleet has huge implications for our remote communities. They rely on a service that provides them with goods and services, and with vital education links for our young people. There were 1,678 sailing cancellations in 2021 to 2022, which was up from 1,064 the year before. Every one of those cancellations means that vital goods and services were not available to our island communities. Businesses lost money, children missed education and goods did not arrive. Those are not just numbers; we are talking about people's lives and livelihoods.

When considering the awarding of contracts for ferry services, I must return to my list of the obvious. I am still flabbergasted that this needs to be said. In 2017, Audit Scotland told the Government that it had to improve its procurement process; to ensure that lessons are learned from previous processes; to build in sufficient time to

the process to prepare documentation; to provide bidders with

“clear, good-quality and timely data”;

and to ensure that there is a

“sufficient number of people, with the right expertise, to effectively manage ferry contracts”.

I hope that all that is in place.

In closing, I want to highlight one short but incredibly important paragraph on staffing in the committee report. The report rightly recognises the importance of staff across all aspects of the ferry service from booking officers to on-board crew. In particular, it recognises their work throughout the Covid pandemic to maintain the vital link for goods to the islands. Any threatening behaviour to any member of staff is unacceptable, and I support the ferry operators in dealing quickly with any incident involving staff feeling or being threatened.

One aspect that came out clearly was that in no way were any of the staff responsible for any of the failings in the service that was being provided. The need for investment to train and maintain staffing levels was clear, but the staff themselves are held in high esteem. They are doing the best that they can with the ageing tools that this Government has given them.

I look forward to the minister's response to the committee's report, which is one that she helped to shape. It is a damning indictment of a failing service. It has failed our most remote communities with an unreliable, inconsistent and inefficient ferry link, bringing untold economic damage to fragile communities.

The report sets out a series of recommendations that should be obvious to anyone looking in, yet, time and again, this Government has failed to deliver a service that is reliable, efficient and has a capacity to match demand; that is locally based and inspired; and that meets the needs of communities.

In our discussions, the committee heard a lot about consultation fatigue. Our island communities are fed up being asked what they want. It is not rocket science. They want ferries that work, that run on time and that are affordable. It is time for this failing Scottish National Party-Green devolved Government to stop talking and to start acting. The report demonstrates just how much it has failed to do that, and I hope that the minister has come today with some answers, not more platitudes.

15:54

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):
This is an important debate. I thank the committee for its work in carrying out the inquiry and for its

very informative report, which we are debating today.

It would be an understatement to say that the people of Scotland feel badly let down by the way in which our ferry services are currently managed. The impacts of poor services on island communities are well documented. The social and economic impacts have been particularly devastating.

The committee states:

“The root causes of the current problems include an ageing fleet, lack of resilience, increased usage and a pass-the-parcel of responsibility culture in governance structures”,

coupled with a

“lack of political leadership on these matters”.

On governance, the committee states:

“The tripartite arrangement”

between Transport Scotland, CalMac and CMAL

“is widely perceived as enabling a ‘pass the parcel’ culture in which no one takes ultimate responsibility for the effective delivery of taxpayer-funded ferry services.”

The project Neptune report, which looked at the issue, points to a lack of clear roles and responsibilities, which causes “conflict between senior personnel” and, as a result, a

“lack of a joint approach and an aligned position”.

Although the committee says that

“No clear consensus has emerged from this inquiry as to what form”

governance should take, it is clear that the

“tripartite arrangement is not working”.

The committee goes on to recommend that the Government

“should give consideration to a CMAL-Transport Scotland merger, to create a ‘Ferries Scotland’ as an arm of Transport Scotland.”

It is clear from the report that changes are needed. It is important that the Government tackles the matter by setting out what it considers to be the options and how it intends to proceed.

Edward Mountain: Will the member give way?

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Rowley: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is Alex Rowley taking an intervention from Edward Mountain or Graham Simpson?

Alex Rowley: I will take an intervention from Mr Mountain.

Edward Mountain: I thank Alex Rowley for giving way. There are lots of permutations, but does he agree that, given that the Government does not know what it is legally entitled to do at this stage, we are stuck, with nowhere to go?

Alex Rowley: That is why we need clarity, which the committee has asked for. The evidence that has been presented suggests that, as has been said, the status quo is not on the table.

If any new body were to be established within Transport Scotland, it would be important for it to be properly resourced and to have the expertise and knowledge to guarantee that the current failings would become a thing of the past—there should not be a continuation of the present.

The committee also examined issues relating to the next contract for the Clyde and Hebrides ferry service. The report states that putting the services into a single bundle would have many benefits, including

“greater service resilience, economies of scale, the ability to maintain relief vessels and to redeploy staff and vessels to deal with periods of disruption.”

The committee points out that those are not being achieved under the tripartite arrangements that are in place just now, so those arrangements must be reviewed and changed as soon as is practical.

Fiona Hyslop: My understanding was that the Labour Party was in favour of keeping the CHFS contract as a single contract and was not in favour of unbundling. Are you suggesting that there should be unbundling?

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

Alex Rowley: I am just coming to that. On the question of the next contract, the committee says that it

“understands the Scottish Government’s preference is to make a direct award for Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services and recognises the benefits of doing so.”

It would be good if the Government could clarify whether that is, indeed, its position. If that is the Government’s preference, it is important that it sets out its understanding of the law following Brexit. Can the minister clarify the specific procurement regulations and elements of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 with which a direct award must comply? That is important, because that will clearly inform the final decision on whether to accept the committee’s recommendation of a direct award or whether to undertake a highly risky tender process for the CHFS contract. Scottish Labour supports the principle of a direct award of the next contract, which is why it is important that the Government clarifies its position and its understanding of the legal position post-Brexit.

The report “Financing and Delivery of Lifeline Ferry Services in Scotland: A Critique of the Project Neptune Report”, which was commissioned from the University of Glasgow by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, highlights that

“key elements of the Scottish Government’s flagship policy of Fair Work are delivered via companies like CalMac”.

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Rowley: I do not think that I have time.

The report states that CalMac is

“a leading provider of good quality jobs, security and career progression to island and mainland communities where such jobs are even more scarce than in urban areas.”

Therefore, the wider social and economic value of a publicly owned ferry operator must be taken into account when decisions are made on the awarding of the new contract. I suggest that the committee’s view that the contract should be of 10 years in length is right.

As stated earlier, the ageing fleet is highlighted as a major cause of the current problems, and the committee notes that

“previous commitments on fleet renewal have not been met.”

I expect that members will have the chance to debate exactly what went wrong with the ferries that are being built on the Clyde, but the message must be that the Government must get its act together. The committee suggests that

“The design of new ferries and ports and harbours should be standardised”,

and I look forward to the Government’s response to that. It is clear that we need to have a fully costed and deliverable ferry replacement plan because, without that, the rest is all academic.

Islanders are being let down, workers are being let down and Scotland has been let down. The Government must get its act together and deliver a modern ferry service that is fit for purpose and that meets the needs of 21st century Scotland.

16:01

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I, too, welcome the debate and thank the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for its work on the issue. I also thank the clerks of the committee for their crucial work behind the scenes. The committee’s comprehensive report will go some way to addressing the present complexities surrounding Scotland’s ferries and the need for a modern and sustainable ferry service.

Ferries are a lifeline service for islanders. During the consultation stage, I submitted views from

Shetland, as did other local stakeholders, including the Stewart Building Transport Group. Earlier this year, I asked Shetlanders for their views on the external ferry service between Lerwick and Aberdeen. It was clear from the more than 1,000 responses that were received that we need 21st century services for 21st century passenger and business needs. We need sufficient capacity for freight and passengers, accessible cabins, affordable prices and the ability to book up to a year in advance.

Staff work hard to assist passengers and keep things running, which has been an uphill battle over the past few years, not least with Covid disruption. Bad weather often delays sailings, but staff and crew expertise ensures that livestock and perishable freight can move and reach markets when it is safe for sailings to resume. Freight capacity can constrict the northern isles’ contribution to Scotland’s economy. Similarly, across Scotland, the agriculture, fishing and aquaculture sectors are impacted when sailings cannot go ahead due to vessel breakdown and lack of resilience. Haulage businesses, crofters, farmers and seafood exporters experience additional costs, and seasonal pinchpoints for livestock exports, which are well known to Transport Scotland, exacerbate the issue.

Coastal communities on the west coast have been let down. Businesses are forced to close, tourists are unable to travel—perhaps never to return—shops are unable to restock their shelves and there is misery for those living in the islands. Funerals are missed, health appointments are disrupted and there are extra travel costs to stay on the mainland. Small communities are impacted disproportionately. People in Orkney and Shetland see what has happened on the west coast and fear a repetition on the northern isles route. Plans must be in place today to secure the viability of communities tomorrow. We need a programme of renewal, and outgoing ferries must be retired in good time before they are unable to run a reliable service on the route. We need a swift move to carbon-neutral ferries to help dramatically reduce Scotland’s carbon emissions.

You will be aware, Presiding Officer, of my support for short subsea tunnels to connect islands in Shetland. In the chamber, I have often laid out the anticipated benefits of such tunnels, including the environmental impact of reducing ferry emissions in the islands. However, new ferries will still be needed in Shetland. That renewal of vessels needs to go ahead now, as operational limits are pushed, with the average age of the Shetland fleet being around 35 years. Our Nordic neighbours put us to shame, as, for some time, they have had electric ferries, which provide reliable transport and cut emission outputs. We can look to that sensible, workable

model for sustainable and low-emission inspiration.

I highlight the recent announcement that under-22s will receive two free return journeys a year on island to mainland ferry routes. Although that is a welcome expansion of free travel, island young people are still disadvantaged compared with their mainland counterparts. The policy amounts to an island student paying to get back to university after the Easter break, while a student living on the mainland can travel for free on buses whenever they like.

The inequity for young people who travel on interisland ferries continues, despite such ferries being used like local buses. The policy means that some people get free travel while others in the same age group do not. For example, the only way for someone under 22 who lives on Bressay to get off the island is by ferry. There is no free bus that will take them across the stretch of water to Lerwick. I want Scotland's interisland ferries to be included in the free under-22 travel provision. Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament have previously called for that.

I hope that the Scottish Government can be persuaded to further extend its islands to mainland offer. When I have pressed the Scottish Government on that, I have been directed to the fair fares review, the outcome of which is long awaited. The ferries need to be at the heart of the Scottish Government's transport and net zero plans and serve the needs of islanders.

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

16:07

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I am pleased to speak in the debate. I thank the clerks, my committee colleagues past and present and everyone who gave evidence to the committee. Without their input, the inquiry and our recommendations would not have been possible.

The inquiry was more than a year long. The committee wanted its inquiry into a modern and sustainable ferry service for Scotland to be a chance for communities to relate their experiences and to give their views on potential solutions for the future. We wanted to hear about the current and evolving needs of ferry users and to put to the Scottish Government considerations for how to design future services to best meet those needs.

The report contains 74 recommendations that the committee felt were essential to ensure a sustainable and reliable ferry service for all. Those recommendations will, I hope, assist the Scottish

Government in ensuring that our ferry services are fit for purpose, centred on the needs of ferry-dependent communities and responsive to those needs.

During the inquiry, we heard from island residents who try to get over to the mainland in winter, when the weather is unpredictable, and in summer, when the ferries are fully booked with tourists. That is great for the businesses that need visitors but not so great for the resident who needs to get to the mainland for a medical appointment.

A reliable and affordable ferry service is a lifeline for our island communities. Ensuring that folk have access to the mainland for services, shopping and leisure and to visit friends and family is key to the future success and prosperity of our islands. A lot has already been said in the chamber, even today, about the failures of the ferry service, especially in recent months. However, for me, the report is about looking forward and not backward.

I hope that the recommendations that are in front of us will be seen as a positive step in addressing the concerns of various communities regarding the connectivity of the islands. I also hope that we can get cross-party agreement that the needs of our island communities must be at the heart of our decision making regarding their ferry services.

Ferry services must be shaped by the communities that rely on them, and the success of our ferry services going forward will rely on the Clyde and Hebrides operators being responsive to the needs of island communities and providing the services that they require at the times that they need them. For example, we heard at committee that some folk were able to get a ferry ticket but were unable to get their car on to the ferry, meaning that their onward travel on the mainland was impossible due to a lack of public transport connectivity in some places.

I also welcome the recommendations about the input of local authorities into shaping the ferry services that will serve their communities. As a former local councillor, I recognise the valuable input and local insight that councillors will have in shaping a ferry service that best serves their communities. They are the ones on the front line, with the most first-hand experience of the challenges that their constituents face. Closer working between the operator, local authorities and communities is key to ensuring the success and longevity of our ferry services.

I truly believe that it is not just the islands that need a modern, economical and sustainable ferry service. An improved ferry service benefits the whole of Scotland. As I said, it is vital that we now look forward, taking into account the views that the

communities and ferry users provided to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. We should focus not on what has gone wrong in the past but on what we can do to improve the connectivity of our island communities with the mainland in the future.

I appreciated the opportunity that the inquiry gave me to hear at first hand about the daily issues that our island communities face with connectivity to the mainland. I look forward to hearing the response from our transport minister, who, as a former member of the Net Zero Energy and Transport Committee, heard at first hand the issues with connectivity to our island communities. I know that she will do everything in her gift to ensure that a sustainable and reliable ferry service becomes a reality in the near future.

16:12

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the committee for its work. It is a thoroughly decent and thorough report, all 161 pages and 74 recommendations of it, although I appreciate that not every one was a direct recommendation. It seems to me that it is a genuine cross-party effort, as these things very often are, and it made me quite nostalgic for my days on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. It will come as no surprise that, like many members, I have been speaking about what a modern and sustainable ferry fleet ought to look like in this country for more than seven years.

When I picked up the report, I was a little bit depressed, because some of it made for grim reading, showing how little has changed over the years and through so many debates about the same issues. It talks about the ageing fleet, the lack of resilience, the lack of new ferries, the lack of responsibility, the lack of governance, the lack of political leadership, the lack of meaningful data and the endless churn of Government ministers. I have to ask the Government whether we have learned anything from the multiple reports of 2017, 2020 and 2023, from the various parliamentary committees, from Audit Scotland and from independent experts.

However, the latest report focused on three very distinct areas. It rightly tried to look forward to the future, and that is what I want to speak about today. First, of course, I have to identify the root causes of so many of the issues that we face today. The report did justice to those to whom it matters—the island communities and ferry users themselves—who were absolutely clear when they said that services are not good enough and need to change. We all knew that already. It was also disappointing to read that the work of the committee was, in my view, hampered by a lack of data when it was gathering evidence. I was

entirely unsurprised to learn that, in the committee's own words,

“CalMac's criteria for measuring reliability are opaque, poorly understood and apparently not widely trusted within ferry-using communities.”

Far too often, I read words such as “fatigued”, “damaged” and “hindered”. Those words jumped out of the pages of the report at me. How on earth can we measure operator performance if the parameters that we use to do that are not to be trusted? How on earth can we have a frank conversation about how to make direct awarded contracts to that same operator if we cannot measure the success of its existing contract? Perhaps that is for a debate in this place on another day.

However, the biggest issue that fills my inbox—and probably the inboxes of most members with an interest in island communities—is reliability. CalMac reports only what is required of it in the contract—that is, its contractual reliability statistics. It does not include, for example, proper information for islanders about cancellations due to weather. We cannot control the weather, but we can control something that is, in my view, more important: the vessels' ability to deal with that weather. Too often, cancellations are due to the inability of vessels to deal with adverse weather.

As we all know, we have an ageing fleet with an average vessel age of 25 years, and the whole system is operating with no spare capacity. What does that mean? When there is a last-minute breakdown or an unexpected maintenance issue that means that a vessel is taken off a route, where does CalMac find another? It takes a vessel from another route. The report describes the result as a “cascading” effect, which is one way to put it. An Arran resident described it to me, more accurately, as the island wheel of misfortune, and that is before we consider the exploding costs of maintenance, which have risen sharply over the past few years. That money could be used to build or buy new vessels.

However, the past is the past. The report challenges the Government quite directly on what needs to change. Of course we need to build or buy more ferries; of course we need a younger fleet of vessels; and of course we need to change the ineffective governance structures that currently exist. We all agree on those things. In the past, I have spoken at length about the unholy alliance of the so-called tripartite agreement between CMAL, CalMac and Transport Scotland. We all know that the blame shifting and the lack of governance are the reasons why hull 801 is still floating in Port Glasgow and is not sitting in Brodick right now. The project Neptune review, which was a good piece of work, agreed. It said that CalMac and CMAL should merge. It seemed to be met with

quite a mixed response from the Government, however, which pushed back using issues such as pensions as reasons not to make progress on that.

The real question is whether ferries Scotland would solve all the issues. Would having that single body really streamline decision making and end the problems that we have? In my view, we can tinker around with the agencies and the lines of responsibility all we like, but, if we do not have the required fleet of vessels and port infrastructure, the system will not be fit for purpose. The committee has made that abundantly clear.

The final word on the subject should go to the islanders. That is why so many people on the island of Cumbrae were demonstrating last week about the inability of Transport Scotland and CalMac to properly consult them. It is no surprise that they do not feel listened to, because they are not being listened to. They are sick of endless consultations with no tangible results.

Scottish ministers have a lot of questions to answer in response to the report. If they are to reject any of the recommendations, they must explain why in full. If they are to accept all the recommendations, they must deliver on them—end of.

16:18

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): This Parliament has, very understandably, had several debates in the past couple of years on ferry services. For obvious reasons, they have, completely legitimately, focused on the very real problems that services have faced. Equally legitimate, however, is the need to look to the future, and that is what the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report does—and, I hope, what this debate is doing. I am therefore grateful to the committee for the work that it has done and the substantial report that it has presented to the Parliament.

As others have said, CalMac's shore staff and crews do an outstanding job. They are not the ones we are criticising today, but there have been plenty of reasons to criticise wider aspects of Scotland's ferry services in recent years, and I have certainly done my fair share of that. It is worth stressing, however, what I hope is the consensus that our island communities simply could not exist without the substantial and entirely merited public funding that ferry services receive. I will illustrate what I mean by that. I was genuinely shocked to discover recently what a ferry service looks like when it does not have a Government that is willing to give it that support.

Last month, I met local representatives from one of England's very few inhabited island groups—the

Scilly Isles. They explained to me that the United Kingdom Government provides no subsidy at all to their ferry service, leaving them with an operator that sails for only six months of the year, does not accept cars and charges foot passengers £200 a time to travel to the mainland.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does Alasdair Allan recognise that we have private ferry operators in Scotland that do not receive subsidies? One of them, Pentland Ferries, is currently providing a ferry to help CMAL to plug gaps in routes.

Alasdair Allan: I accept those facts, although I am not quite sure what they have to do with the point that I am making. The reason why I gave the example is to point to the importance of publicly subsidised services.

Over the past 16 years, £2.2 billion has gone into Scotland's ferry services and infrastructure. I do not point that out to detract from the genuine problems that continue in a constituency such as mine, not least the recent issues on both the Sound of Harris and the Sound of Barra, where the interisland vessels are rapidly approaching the end of their working lives. For that reason, I have made a case to the Minister for Transport for the replacement of those vessels to be brought forward.

However, the focus of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report is, as I say, on the future and on real and tangible progress. Therefore, I note the substantial upgrades to vital infrastructure in my constituency that have been completed, including the piers at Stornoway, Tarbert and Lochmaddy, as well as those in Ullapool on the mainland and Uig on Skye, which serve our routes.

Those examples are relevant to one of the primary recommendations in the committee's report: namely, the importance of increased standardisation of port infrastructure, where practical, and of vessel design. The benefits of building vessels to more similar specifications, such as the four that are variously under construction or under order in Turkey, will include lower maintenance costs and quicker repairs, with standard parts allowing easier replacement.

My constituents in the islands of Harris and North Uist have long called for dedicated vessels for Tarbert and Lochmaddy, and the Scottish Government has listened. One of the new vessels that are being constructed will be allocated to each of those two routes, improving capacity and, crucially, helping the network's overall resilience, as well as representing a significant reduction in the average age of major vessels in the fleet.

In its report, the committee recommends that the Scottish Government considers how public ferry delivery organisations can include

“meaningful representations of the island communities they serve.”

I remain firmly of the view that significantly more seats on the relevant boards should be occupied by people who live on islands and therefore rely on ferries in their own lives. That would ensure that more decisions were informed by local knowledge and experience.

Concessionary travel for young people is another element that the committee and many others have recommended be explored by the Scottish Government. I am very pleased that action has already been taken by the transport minister, with the recent announcement of four free ferry journeys each year for all islanders under 22 years of age.

Graham Simpson: Does Alasdair Allan think that four free journeys goes far enough?

Alasdair Allan: I certainly think that that goes a long way towards what the committee has recommended. I am sure that communities will continue to work with the Government to see whether more can be achieved. As I said, it goes a substantial way towards achieving what the committee seeks from the Government.

Another key recommendation in the committee's report is the simplification of Scotland's ferry services' governing structures. Recent consultation with island communities showed that there was a desire for CalMac and CMAL to be merged, while the committee favours an approach that would see Transport Scotland and CMAL merged. What is clear is that there is agreement that the current tripartite structure is not working and that restructuring will help to streamline decision making, improve accountability and provide better transparency, all of which our island communities want.

16:24

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to the debate and thank the committee for its thorough report. The consistent message is that Scotland has an unreliable ferry service because it has an unreliable ferry fleet. Islanders repeatedly tell us that their livelihoods, and indeed the very future of life on the islands, are affected by frequent mechanical failures. Last winter, those living on Arran faced food and fuel shortages due to the unreliability of sailings and supermarket shelves were empty of vegetables and much else over the festive season.

I welcome the minister making clear that change is needed. The report considers proposals for

reorganisation and I fully understand why committee members feel that the tripartite structure does not work. As someone who was involved in debates before the previous reorganisation, which cost tens of millions of pounds, and who campaigned against that reorganisation and is therefore no supporter of the current structure, I say that the Scottish Government's history of poor decision making and its broken procurement model lie at the root of the lack of reliable ferries. I ask the minister to inform our debate by advising Parliament how much any future reorganisation might cost.

I welcome the committee's recommendation of a direct award, which would provide certainty. I have asked various transport ministers whether they believe that they can legally make a direct award—a question that has been asked more than once today. I therefore also ask the minister to respond to that question, in order to inform our debate. I also urge the Scottish Government to look at governance structures and to put islanders and trade union representatives on the board.

Unbundling, which, to be clear, Labour believes is just privatisation by another name, would be a grave mistake and would leave operators grasping for what little profit can be made on lifeline routes.

Graham Simpson: Apart from putting islanders on boards, what does Labour want to change about the current situation? I am confused.

Katy Clark: I hope to make that clear during my contribution.

The Scottish Government's ferry services procurement policy review concluded that an in-house operator is

“capable of delivering similar levels of operational efficiency, innovation and service improvement to those which might otherwise be obtained from tendering.”

Despite that, ministers still spent taxpayers' money commissioning Ernst & Young to scrutinise how ferries are run. The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has since concluded that Ernst & Young's project Neptune report failed to engage sufficiently with island communities or with the workforce.

I welcome the fact that the committee's report does engage with communities and with the workforce and I also welcome the report's references to the current, poor, procurement approach. CMAL has searched the globe for five years and examined 650 second-hand ships, but only the Alfred has been chartered, while the Chieftain is now leased by CalMac. Four projects to build ferries have been outsourced to Turkey, a country in which, according to the Trades Union Congress, workers face random arrests and unions operate in a climate of fear, which certainly

makes a mockery of the Scottish Government's supposed fair work procurement policy

The committee's report says:

"Efforts by CMAL to purchase or lease existing vessels abroad are not working and should not be relied upon."

If we agree that that is unsustainable and, as the minister says, that change is needed, where is the Scottish Government's sustainable alternative? The Government's draft islands connectivity plan contains very little detail on rebuilding shipbuilding capacity anywhere in Scotland, but rebuilding that capacity will be essential if the Scottish Government is to abide by its commitment to dramatically reduce the average age of the fleet.

As the tendering process opens for the small vessel replacement programme, I hope that the minister can provide some assurance that islanders, local communities and the workforce will be centrally involved in the decision-making process, so that vessels are commissioned that meet the service's needs and the wider socioeconomic needs, which Alex Rowley spoke about in his speech. I have to say, as somebody who has represented island communities over many years, that islanders consistently do not feel that they have been listened to or, indeed, consulted.

Standardised vessels require standardised ports. I ask that the minister provides an update on the Ardrossan harbour redevelopment, which is essential for the Ardrossan to Brodick route.

I welcome the debate and the opportunity to consider the long-term future of Scotland's ferries, and I urge the Scottish Government to come forward with its own proposals.

16:30

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the committee's report, which calls for a comprehensive vision of a high-quality service for all ferry-dependent communities, and I know that my Arran and Cumbrae constituents will welcome it, too.

The understandable frustration of island communities has long been recognised, and it is present throughout the report. I look forward to seeing meaningful action being taken by the Scottish Government to create a resilient, transparent and reliable ferry service. I am also pleased that the Scottish Government will take forward 43 recommendations, with 29 having been noted.

The ageing nature of our ferry fleet is a key issue that causes regular delays and cancellations. Only yesterday, I was unable to travel to Cumbrae for a meeting with local government committee colleagues due to a

technical fault with the MV Loch Fyne. Although CalMac had the MV Loch Shira in operation on the route less than 90 minutes after announcing the fault, difficulties were undeniably caused for those waiting, not least because it was communicated that the ferry would not sail for longer than transpired.

The continuing delays surrounding the MV Glen Sannox and the recently named MV Glen Rosa have failed to instil confidence in our ferry communities, and as those vessels continue to meet issues impacting timing and budget, a number of Scottish islands are being denied a full, flexible year-round service. Those delivery problems suggest difficulties throughout replacement programme processes, including funding, procurement, design and specification.

The Scottish Government's £695 million funding to progress ambitious fleet-renewal plans was welcomed in 2021. However, as islanders wait for new vessels to come into operation, frustration grows. An achievable rolling vessel-renewal programme is required to build islanders' confidence in the service and ensure that delays and cancellations are significantly reduced.

Yesterday's announcement to continue operating the MV Alfred in the Clyde and Hebrides ferry service network for a further six months, providing much-needed additional resilience over the winter period, was welcomed by islanders. Nevertheless, news that the MV Caledonian Isles may be approved for deployment to Islay or Mull has created concern that the Alfred will be used to provide a single-vessel service to Arran with a reduced timetable over the winter period. I hope that the minister will be able to confirm that that will not be the case.

The rescheduled timetable allowing the MV Caledonian Isles to participate in the sea trials was announced only days before its implementation. My Arran constituents would appreciate frank and regular updates and opportunities to provide feedback on the situation, to ensure that decisions are made with ferry users and local island businesses in mind. The Alfred has only half the capacity of the Caledonian Isles, so I share concerns that timetabled sailings are already vulnerable to weather-related cancellations.

Arran and Cumbrae rely heavily on tourism, and an improved ferry service would significantly boost island businesses and, in turn, employee livelihoods. A rolling programme of investment in new ferries would ensure that the network no longer operates at full capacity, which would prevent problems cascading through the service when a vessel is inoperable.

The introduction of the road equivalent tariff for the Clyde isles in 2014, for which I had long

campaigned, more than halved the cost of visiting Arran by car. That greatly boosted visitor numbers and Arran's economy. Capacity was increased, with the six-week two-vessel summer service extending to six months, and the dilapidated MV Saturn, which the Scottish Government inherited, being removed from the fleet. It had a 14.2 per cent cancellation rate, which is eight times the fleet average. Even so, summer capacity remains at a premium, and the Glen Sannox capacity is a reduction to 852 passengers, which increases that concern.

It is essential that CalMac provides accurate performance metrics to drive improvement and, in turn, ensure that accountability is accepted when issues emerge. Considering the project Neptune report, it is essential that governance structures are streamlined and transparency improved. Decisions made following the report's key findings must recognise both the network feedback provided and the detailed study, which was informed by more than 50 ferry-linked communities, demonstrating a Scottish Government commitment to working in collaboration with ferry users.

Graham Simpson: Kenny Gibson sits on the Ardrossan harbour task force. I wonder if he can give us an update on progress there.

Kenneth Gibson: I cannot give an immediate update on where we are at this precise moment: it is a moveable feast. There have been a number of issues, particularly relating to the fact that the Tories privatised the harbour some 30 years ago, which means that the Scottish Government is not able to build at the harbour or redevelop it without having to negotiate with Peel Ports, which is driving a very hard bargain. For instance, even when a deal is agreed after a long time, inflation eats into it, and Peel wants the public sector to meet the shortfall. In actual fact, the roots of the situation go back to the Tories' privatisation of the harbour. I hope that we will have meaningful progress in the weeks and months ahead.

The committee refers to the need for meaningful engagement with communities throughout its report—something that the Isle of Arran ferry committee has called for over many years. Islander seats on the boards of CalMac and CMAL could only be advantageous. That would allow islanders' knowledge and lived experience of island life to influence decision making, which would in turn improve customer focus.

Increased public engagement would help CalMac to ensure that timetabling decisions meet the needs of both islanders and visitors, boosting island economies while ensuring that timetables are in sync with other modes of public transport and allowing ferry users to continue their journey in a timely manner following their crossing.

In my constituency, the volunteer members of the Arran ferry committee and the Cumbrae ferry users group, which represent community and business sectors, effectively voice ferry-related matters on the two islands. They are dedicated to working with CalMac, CMAL, the Scottish ministers and others to improve services and, importantly, to increase the engagement of ferry service providers with islanders.

Change is urgently needed. As members of the Isle of Arran ferry committee explained to the First Minister when they met him in Brodick on 23 August, change must start at the top of the company operating the contract. For Arran, the current situation represents an all-time low regarding engagement and communication with community representatives. Any suggestion of a direct award to the current operator, even with significant management restructuring, would not be well received by the communities served. They assert that customer respect and customer care are totally missing, and that they must be improved first.

I welcome the Scottish Government's decision to extend the free ferry service for young people to all island residents under the age of 22, allowing islanders to save money and removing cost barriers to transport. If Graham Simpson had intervened on me, rather than intervening earlier on Alasdair Allan, he would know that I am asking the Government to consider increasing the number of journeys permitted, given that the young persons free bus travel pass has no restriction on journeys made throughout the year. I agree with Beatrice Wishart in that regard.

The Scottish Government's new vision for a high-quality ferry service must make it clear that the prosperity of island communities is the priority. Communication and an opportunity for constructive feedback are key to achieving that, as is a comprehensive rolling programme of investment to deliver a fleet that meets the need of islanders and the lifeline services on which they are reliant.

16:37

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I start by thanking all the ferry-dependent communities, as their evidence has been absolutely central to our inquiry. I also thank the workers, who operate in what are often incredibly difficult conditions to connect our island communities to each other and to the rest of Scotland.

For me, the central conclusion of the inquiry is that the experiences of those ferry-dependent communities need to be at the heart of how services are designed, delivered and monitored in

future. I very much welcome the comments made earlier in the debate by the Minister for Transport, and I acknowledge her early work to engage intensively with those communities. Indeed, I recognise that now is a time for intensive engagement with them. It is clear that there has been an erosion of trust over a number of years, and that communities themselves should be involved in the co-production of services, which includes their ability to propose new services and alterations as appropriate.

Ferries, unlike trains and buses, do not have a regulator or a customer champion who can ensure that services stick to agreed standards. If bus services do not stick to timetables, the traffic commissioner for Scotland can, and sometimes does, step in. There is no such regulator for ferry services, however. For years, ferry-dependent communities have relied on ad hoc parliamentary scrutiny or consultation exercises in order to be heard. That has led to a situation where people's expectations have often risen, only for them then to be let down. There was a strong sense of consultation fatigue throughout our inquiry.

In the absence of ferry services that communities can shape to meet their own needs, some communities have even gone as far as proposing their own services, and they have made the case that the CHFS bundle should be unpicked.

It is welcome that the Government has resisted calls for unbundling, but I can understand where some communities are coming from in making them. The view of many people who gave evidence was that the tripartite arrangement between CalMac, CMAL and Transport Scotland was not working and had led to a pass-the-parcel approach of transferring responsibility. As we have heard from the committee's convener, it had no consensus view on the exact model that it would recommend for the future. If it were to emerge that there will be a new ferries Scotland body that would link CMAL with Transport Scotland's functions, I am sure that many people would welcome that, but only if it resulted in more accountability, transparency, competency and responsiveness. If a 10-year direct award for CalMac were to emerge, it will be critical that a change in culture based on the principles of good service takes hold. The involvement of unions and community members at board level will be important to effect such culture change.

I note that the Government has rejected the option of a ferries commissioner as being overly bureaucratic. I recognise the intense parliamentary scrutiny on budgets for commissioners that exists at the moment. However, the decision puts the emphasis back on any new structure that emerges to show that a commissioner function is

unnecessary. The Scottish Parliament is not set up to scrutinise the minutiae of timetable changes and individual reliability issues. From time to time, such issues will arise in parliamentary questions and through committee work, but they should be dealt with first through customer operator forums. With that in mind, I welcome the Government's commitment to continue the ferries community board and to ensure that the next CHFS contract comes with clear key performance indicators.

I also warmly welcome the fact that there will be a renewed focus on accessibility, with a role for the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland in the on-going development of services. Recording the reliability of services will help to rebuild trust, but that data should reflect the real experience of ferry users. Understanding and communicating the reasons behind cancellations will also be important, especially when cancellations come from problems with other services that have cascaded down the system.

The committee also considered ferry ticket prices, and I was pleased to hear the recent announcement of the extension of the free ferries scheme to all under-22s. I look forward to the Minister for Transport's concluding the wider fair fares review. I recognise that the Government has the most ambitious scheme of concessionary public transport fares anywhere in the UK and that, in these financially difficult times, the minister will be wrestling with difficult choices. However, offering help to young people to continue living on our islands is a shared priority for the SNP and the Greens.

The principle of road equivalent tariff remains important, but the model of implementation and any possible extension need to take account of unintended consequences, while remaining firmly focused on supporting island residents first.

The procurement of new ferries is a highly charged issue, but it is important to note that vessels being built in Turkey are on track for launch next year and in 2025. As we move forward, the climate emergency must feature strongly through our choosing all sustainable transport options. That will mean looking carefully at whether fixed links make sense in terms of both lifetime cost and lifetime carbon emissions. Like Beatrice Wishart, I hope that the small electric vessels that will come through the replacement programme will be far easier to design and build than hulls 801 and 802, and that the low-carbon ferries plan will strongly drive our future options.

Our ageing ferry fleet and the difficulty of procuring boats on the international market have dominated the performance issues for island communities. However, as the light appears at the end of the tunnel and new ferries are on their way, we now have an opportunity to put communities

first and to redesign service delivery in a way that is accountable and responsive. That is what communities deserve, after years of waiting.

16:43

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the debate, which is on a subject of such importance to my Highlands and Islands region, both as convener of the Parliament's cross-party group on islands and as an islander myself. I thank the committee, its clerks and all its witnesses for their work in conducting the inquiry and helping to produce the report, which, in its first few lines, succinctly summarises the problem as being that our

“ferry services are not good enough and need to change.”

I doubt whether anyone who lives on any of our islands or in one of our ferry-reliant communities would argue with that.

We need change and we need it urgently. Over the 16 years that the SNP has been in power, our ferries network has lurched from crisis to crisis and from scandal to scandal. The focus today for many will be on the west coast routes, but I have long warned that the crisis engulfing those services will eventually have an impact on other areas such as in the northern isles where I am from.

It is already happening. The MV Alfred, a relatively new ferry that was built on time and on budget and operated by a private company without any Government subsidy, has had to be chartered to plug the gaps in CalMac's operations. That has meant that Orkney, my home, has seen capacity reduced with a smaller and older ferry providing cover. Yesterday that charter was extended, meaning that a key Orkney route will continue to rely on that older vessel and its reduced capacity for most of the next summer season. I understand that the cost of that to the taxpayer will be around £15 million in total. That is £15 million to charter for 15 months a vessel that is reported to have cost between £14 million and £17 million to buy new. What could better highlight the utter failure of the SNP's procurement processes and the financial consequences of its panicked response to those failures?

It is not just the islands that suffer. One of Scotland's busiest ferry routes is across the Corran narrows in Lochaber. Its usual ferry, the 23-year-old MV Corran, has just spent an entire year out of service. Its cover vessel, the 48-year-old MV Maid of Glencoul, broke down, was reintroduced with restrictions, and then broke down again. The communities served by those vessels have been left without that vital link through the busiest time of the year.

I want to make it clear that that is a Highland Council-run service—[*Interruption.*] It is a Highland Council-run service, but the council seems to have no clear timetable on delivering a solution, while successive SNP transport ministers have just washed their hands of the problem. I was able to use the crossing a few months ago as part of my summer surgery tour and having travelled through local communities and met residents and local businesses the impact of the disruption was clear.

Footfall in local businesses was reported to be considerably down and some businesses were considering whether they could even continue. Local accommodation providers and hospitality businesses have seen bookings cancelled at the last minute because there was no ferry to carry their guests, with others struggling to take long-term bookings because confidence in being able to reach the area had plummeted. There were real concerns about depopulation for the area if a reliable ferry connection could not be delivered.

Fiona Hyslop: I, too, met communities in the Ardnamurchan peninsula and heard their concerns. Would the member welcome the fact that CMAL has been working with Highland Council to look at how it can help the council in future procurement?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I would welcome that, but we need to make sure that those meetings are more than just talks and hand-wringing—which has often been the case—and instead actually look to deliver a solution. That will be absolutely vital, because those local communities need to see action from the SNP-led administrations in Edinburgh and in Inverness.

It is vital, as the report recommends, that local authorities and the Scottish Government collaborate to ensure that communities can rely on our lifeline links, and vital that fixed links such as bridges and tunnels, which many people want to see in the longer-term across the Corran narrows, are seriously considered by the Scottish Government, as others have mentioned today. Stronger consideration for fixed links would certainly find favour in other areas, such as in Shetland, as Beatrice Wishart highlighted. In the summer, in Shetland, I met campaigners for tunnels, as well as the local council, who see fixed links as a viable and realistic option. However, it will need Government help to support and facilitate that.

The report is extremely welcome, but in itself it will change nothing. We know that change is needed. That is clear in the report, in the testimony that we heard from the cross-party group on islands and from many of the speakers in the debate. However, change requires an admission and an acceptance from the Scottish

Government that it has got things terribly wrong so far.

Is it a scandal? Yes. The United States got to the moon quicker than it has taken this SNP Government to plan and build the two ferries. It still has not delivered. Is it a crisis? Yes. Worse than that, it is a tragedy for the ferry-reliant communities. My concern is that the cancellations, restrictions and unreliability that we see now will only get worse. More islanders will be impacted, more businesses will be damaged, and the very future of some of our most fragile communities could be at risk. As the report says, ferry services are not good enough and need to change.

16:49

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind members that my wife works part-time for CalMac.

I am pleased that the motion before us is to note the report, not to support it, because I certainly cannot support everything in it. I will start with two brief points. First, the layout would be helpful to a reader who is exploring the issue for the first time, and secondly, when the Opposition parties call for a ministerial sacking in the future, I am sure that the report will be referenced.

The executive summary provides a good understanding of what is covered in the report and, importantly, highlights the challenge of providing standardised ferries and ports. However, the report fails to explain how that would be done. It also fails to recognise what comes first and how it would be paid for. Page 57 onwards does not provide the answers.

The job that CMAL has undertaken in relation to ports infrastructure certainly fulfils that task. The point that appears to have been forgotten is that ferry procurement in the past was based on the existing infrastructure, instead of planning ahead. That could tie in with the proposed shift to 10-year contract awards.

Recommendation 29 of the report mentions the Scottish Government

“ensuring that it delivers real improvements for communities.”

In the past, CalMac was possibly not challenged anywhere near enough, but the current contract award had 350 suggested improvements, which is indicative of how little attention had been paid to modernising the business until Martin Dorchester became the chief executive.

The first of the key points for my constituency and me are recommendations 21 and 22 on the direct award. I support that in principle, but I recognise the many hurdles that it would face. I also support a direct award for the small vessels

programme to be built at Ferguson Marine, for that matter.

However, recommendation 63 will sound alarm bells in my constituency. The potential to tie in moving the headquarters staff from Gourock to elsewhere in the network would be challenged across my constituency. I am sure that there would be some understanding of moving a small number of positions, but a root-and-branch removal of CalMac from Gourock would not be accepted. I note from the RMT briefing for the debate that it supports the direct award, but it is silent on the jobs that could leave Gourock, which I am sure it will end up campaigning on in the future.

The executive summary mentions an evaluation of the road equivalent tariff. My reading of that leads me to suspect that it is about increasing costs for business while offering up cheaper fares for younger passengers. The socioeconomic impact is mentioned in recommendation 25, and it would certainly be of interest to hear whether the islands business community would pay more to ship their goods to the mainland in order to subsidise younger passengers. I realise that the Scottish Government is undertaking a fair fares review to consider all aspects of travel, but I am sure that businesses would not want to be penalised, especially if they are making a profit. On that point, I reference recommendation 49 of the report.

Recommendation 11 on the tripartite relationship is the second key point of the report for me and my constituency. It is clear that there has been a long-held vendetta against CMAL and, by extension, its workforce, even after Audit Scotland's positive report in March 2022. The vendetta was obvious during the previous parliamentary session and, sadly, it continues today. However, it is clear that the relationship between all three tripartite partners needs to be more transparent, which project Neptune aimed to address. Sadly, project Neptune left more questions than answers, which was clear at the two briefings that I attended along with other MSPs from across Parliament.

Recommendations 15 and 16 highlight suggestions of merging CMAL with either CalMac or Transport Scotland, based on the project Neptune report. I have grave concerns about such suggestions. The committee's report highlights the rationale for breaking up CalMac in 2006, which is very helpful in terms of the historical element of why we are where we are. However, in comparison, CMAL's focus on investing in port infrastructure is testament to its skills in relation to that long-overdue task.

Merging CMAL with Transport Scotland to create a Ferries Scotland could be worthy of merit,

but it should not happen at any cost. That is where the local socioeconomic impacts come into consideration. CMAL is based in Port Glasgow, in my constituency, and employs 50 people. Not everyone lives locally, but the staff contribute to the local economy. If a structural change were to happen that placed the workforce elsewhere, it would have a serious socioeconomic impact on the town and my constituency.

I do not believe that the authors of the report fully considered the impact of recommendation 16 being pursued. As co-chair of the Inverclyde socioeconomic task force, alongside the council leader Stephen McCabe, I cannot ignore how devastating the loss of 50 jobs would be to Port Glasgow.

If a merger occurred, as per recommendation 16, or some form of new structure were implemented, there would need to be a no-detriment policy for my constituency. Why should my constituency be negatively impacted when it is, sadly, already top of the list in respect of many negative socioeconomic factors?

On something else that has been touched on in the chamber before, I do not agree with the calls to shut Ferguson's and base the yard down at Inchgreen dry dock. Even without considering the vast amounts of capital money that would be required for that, it would have a devastating effect on Port Glasgow town centre. Local businesses have already told me that they would shut. The town centre would be decimated if the yard were to relocate. The town would never recover, and the population decline would increase at a rate not seen since the decimation of the shipbuilding industry under the Tories in 1979.

Although there are some aspects of the report that will be positive for other parts of the country, the report raises grave concerns, and it could be detrimental for my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches. I call Rhoda Grant.

16:55

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the committee for its work on the report, and I thank ferry and port staff for the services that they deliver.

The ultimate responsibility for the Clyde and Hebrides ferry fiasco lies squarely with the SNP Government. Its relentless incompetence has left island communities waiting for years for new lifeline ferries and taxpayers picking up the ever-increasing bill, which is likely to be over £400 million by the time that we are finished.

Shetland and Orkney interisland ferries have similar issues. The councils on those islands do not have the funding to replace their ferries—Liam McArthur and Beatrice Wishart have made that point. The same is true of the Corran ferry, which belongs to Highland Council. Again, that is ageing infrastructure. The island connectivity plan needs to include those ferries as well.

We know about the problems. The fleet is ageing. The average age of the CalMac vessels is 37 years old. The Scottish Government has committed to lowering that to 15 years old by 2030. We need to see a detailed plan for that that says how the Scottish Government will achieve that promise.

There is a lack of resilience in the system. Breakdowns are common, there are no spare parts, and there is no spare capacity. We need political leadership to make the difference, and that has not been forthcoming in the past while, with very few transport ministers staying in post for over 18 months.

Katy Clark made the point that that lack of resilience in the system led to food and fuel shortages. That happens all too often.

Many members have talked about the tripartite system and the need for restructuring, because that system does not work. As Alex Rowley said, that ends up with people passing the parcel of blame to other organisations in the tripartite system.

Just about every speaker in the debate has made the point that decisions have to be made closer to the community. Alasdair Allan talked about islander seats on the board. The committee made the point that trade unions should also be on the boards of the companies.

I am not convinced that the answer lies with Transport Scotland, because it seems to be more distant from communities than anything else and, indeed, it may well be part of the problem. However, whatever new structure we have, it needs to have the resources and expertise to deliver the services, as Alex Rowley said.

I turn to the award of the contract. Edward Mountain told us that there are only 16 months left of the contract. There is no time to put it out to tender. However, we have long advocated the direct award of the contract. Indeed, in the previous parliamentary session, my colleague David Stewart talked about the Teckal exemption and how that would have exempted those services from being put out to tender. Alex Rowley and Katy Clark asked about the current legal advice post-Brexit and whether that is now possible. We urge that it should be, because any disruption will cause more trouble to our islands. The contract needs to run for an extended period so that people

know who is delivering the service and that it can receive proper investment.

We also need to consider all who deliver the service. We should be committed to fair work in every contract, so that everybody who delivers the service has the same terms and conditions—the RMT made that point in its briefing for the debate.

We need standardised designs for harbours, ports and ferries. Having three interchangeable designs for ferries would mean that harbours could accommodate them; the minister made that point when she referred to Tarbert's new harbour development. If our shipbuilders knew what designs were to come forward, that would allow them to plan and invest for the long term and deliver ferries more cost effectively.

We should look at delivery and maybe listen to people in the community on the Isle of Lewis, who asked for two smaller ferries, rather than one large ferry, to get better efficiency benefits and better interchangeability when boats are in dry dock in the winter.

We must learn the lessons of the past and make sure that we do not repeat them. We need to make sure that our ferry services are fit for purpose and are accessible to all users. That applies particularly to the northern isles interisland ferry services, which are not accessible to disabled people.

The ultimate responsibility for this fiasco lies with the SNP Government. From it, we need transparency and collaboration with local communities to deliver a ferry service that is fit for the future.

17:01

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank the committee for its outstanding work in producing the report; I recognise the contribution of all the committee's previous and current members.

I will talk about the report, but we cannot discuss ferries without looking at the wider issues. The upshot is that Scotland's islanders are being let down by the SNP, and the situation is reaching a critical point. This fine report is just the latest to be produced by a parliamentary committee. After previous reports, nothing happened.

The report starts by talking about leadership. If we had had leadership, we would not be in the current predicament with an ageing and unreliable ferry fleet and paralysis of decision making that means that the Scottish Government is ducking tackling the big decisions. For example, what are we going to do about the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract? The current contract has just 11 months to go. Will that go out to tender? If

not, why not? How long will the next contract be for? If it is for 10 years or more, as the committee suggested, will the ferry operator be responsible for owning the fleet and buying new ferries? That would be similar to the successful model that operates in British Columbia, where dual-fuel ferries are successfully run.

It cannot possibly be argued that the current rather bizarre set-up, in which one part of the Scottish Government buys and owns the ferries and another runs them, works well. That is all with Transport Scotland sitting above that and reporting to a succession of transport ministers going back a long way. I hope that the current incumbent will achieve something that is meaningful—a ferry system that works. Maybe we will find out about that next week.

To come back to the questions that I asked, why does the Government rule out private sector involvement? Why does it rule out islanders taking on services? Why is it boxing itself into a corner when that can have only one outcome—the same failed model that we have now? That is the very model that is putting island economies at risk and making people think about leaving islands.

It is not as if we do not have other models in Scotland—we do. Councils run ferries and so does the private sector. The one bit that gets all the headlines, for the wrong reasons, is run by the SNP. Today, Labour figures such as Katy Clark have said that they want all that to continue.

The committee said:

"Scotland needs modern, economical and sustainable ferries. The Scottish Government should set out how it will deliver on its commitment to reduce the average age of vessels to 15 years by 2030."

Well, indeed. The committee also said:

"Scottish ferry services must be reliable."

As Douglas Lumsden said in his excellent contribution, that would be good, wouldn't it?

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The member mentioned that the only time that ferries are in the news is when there is an issue to do with CalMac. Does he not remember when P&O Ferries sacked its workers? That is a private company.

Graham Simpson: That point is rather irrelevant to this debate, but I think that everyone in the chamber criticised the actions of P&O at the time.

The committee also called on the Government to make ferries more affordable for young people. It has gone some of the way towards doing that, but providing four passes a year is not the full-time arrangement that is needed. We would never put up with that on mainland buses, which is the

equivalent. I urge the minister to go much further—a point that was made by my good friend Kenny Gibson and Beatrice Wishart.

The committee agreed that the tripartite arrangement needs to change but could not agree on what should replace it. I imagine that some members were maybe waiting for a steer from the Government—they still are. As time runs out on the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract, no one can plan ahead. Therefore, we are, possibly by deliberate default, heading towards more of the same.

The minister has a lot of decisions to make by the end of the year and no shortage of reports and consultations to fall back on. We had project Neptune, which told us nothing that we did not know already. We have had Angus Campbell's review. We have also just had the musings of Barry Smith KC, who asked whether there was anything fraudulent in the procurement of the MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa—an allegation that, precisely, no one has made. We still do not know what Mr Smith was paid to produce his report. We do know that the former procurement manager at CMAL, George MacGregor, said that his claims that senior staff broke procurement rules and the yard should not have been shortlisted were not included in the report. Is that not just the sort of thing that a King's counsel should have been tasked with looking into?

Those two ferries have swallowed up a huge chunk of a budget that could have gone on more new vessels. If the SNP had not been hellbent on giving the work to a yard that was plainly not up to the job of building two large ferries, islanders would have been enjoying travel on new ferries now, and other routes could have been enjoying new ferries, too. What a scandal. It is certainly a scandal, all right, but—

Stuart McMillan: Just close the yard, then.

Graham Simpson: I can hear some chuntering. I will come on to that.

However, in true SNP style, no one has taken the blame, no one has been sacked and no one has resigned because of it.

The Scottish Conservatives have argued that the current tripartite system should end. The committee has argued for that, too, and the minister has agreed today that it is not fit for purpose. We have called for longer contracts, and the committee has done so, too. We have said that CMAL should be scrapped. The committee does not go quite that far, but it suggests that there should be a new body—ferries Scotland.

We have criticised the Government's dithering over the awarding of the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract. As I have said, in all

likelihood, that will lead to CalMac getting it again. We have said that we need an on-going ferries replacement programme in order to lower the age of the fleet. We have also called for clarity over the future of the Ferguson Marine yard. That was not part of the inquiry. Only Neil Gray can address that, and he is, rather typically, dithering. Maybe we will find out more about that next week.

At the heart of this are islanders. They are the ones who are suffering and they are the ones whom we should be looking out for.

17:08

Fiona Hyslop: I again thank the committee for its report. There was a range of views on it. Graham Simpson called it "outstanding", Douglas Lumsden said that it was "excellent", and Jamie Greene, who was a bit more lukewarm, said that it was "decent". However, I hope that, in reading the Government's response, members will recognise that it has accepted 43 of the recommendations. We also heard a critical view from Stuart McMillan.

This has been a good debate because sincere, informed perspectives and different views have been aired. It is clear that issues around the delivery of ferry services remain an important topic for all parties. It is incumbent on all of us to continue working together to improve the current position in the interests of all those who rely on the services.

I am pleased that we all agree on the impact that the forthcoming islands connectivity plan can have. The plan represents an opportunity to address a number of issues through our approach.

I want to turn to those issues, some of which have been raised by members in their contributions. First, we recognise that a ferry journey is often only part of an overall journey, and it is therefore important to consider onward and connecting travel as an essential element. In particular, we need to look at how we encourage more journeys across Scotland to be undertaken using low-emission vehicles, public transport and active travel. I also point out that the strategic transport projects review 2 refers to tunnels. The islands connectivity plan will have a workstream devoted to aspects relating to onward travel.

We are also conscious of ensuring sufficient opportunities and facilities for interchange at individual ports and of ensuring that there is sufficient scope in timetables to allow connections to be made. In particular, the needs of disabled travellers must be taken into account, and we must benefit from their input in designing decisions. Mark Ruskell referred to that. There is already engagement with communities on those issues when timetables are reviewed, but people with lived experience and knowledge of services

are invaluable in informing improvements that are made to those services and facilities. And, yes, that means that we expect people from the islands to be members of boards.

We have a clear objective to ensure that the development of replacement tonnage and infrastructure plays a key role in decarbonising operations and the pathway to net zero, to which Beatrice Wishart and Mark Ruskell referred. Again, an element of the islands connectivity plan will deal with that. We are already taking significant action in that area by investing in more efficient vessels and looking at electric vessels for the small vessel replacement programme where the technology can support that. At the same time, we are modernising that part of the fleet in other ways, including by improving accessibility for people with disabilities. I assure Alex Rowley that the strand of work on vessel replacement will contribute to our future thinking in relation to the islands connectivity plan.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to address a number of points that members made in the debate, if Paul Sweeney does not mind.

I have now been Minister for Transport for six months, and I have spent a lot of time engaging directly with ferry stakeholders, including communities, CMAL, operators and trade unions. I recognise all the efforts that people are putting in, and the suggestions that are being made, to improving ferry services. I have also heard about the direct challenges that they face. Their input in providing an outline of the strategic direction that is needed to move to a sustainable and reliable service across our networks will inform my decisions and that work.

Edward Mountain: I appreciate that the minister has been in her role for six months. Is she now in a position to tell us what she is going to do about the award of the new contract? Will the contract go out to tender or will it just be awarded to CalMac? We would like to know, because that is a key question.

The Presiding Officer: There is a little bit of time in hand, minister.

Fiona Hyslop: The issues that have been raised will be addressed in a statement that I hope to be able to give to the Parliament once that is announced by the Parliamentary Bureau. To be clear, I will set out as many answers as I can to questions on the future of the CHFS contract when I make the statement to the Parliament.

I place on the record my thanks to the ferry committees, the ferries community board and all the representative bodies that give their time to

represent ferry users and that work in the interests of improving services. I know that the committee heard directly from a number of those bodies.

Improvements are already being made. There has been the recent development of a pilot project on island essential travel that will involve a different approach to releasing bookings on the CalMac network. That should allow greater opportunities for island communities and those who require to travel at shorter notice. The project involves retaining a proportion of deck space on services to Coll, Tiree, Mull and Iona and releasing those bookings closer to sailing time. I particularly thank the communities that were involved in shaping that work. We will look to see whether that approach is successful before rolling it out further.

We also continue to listen to communities in relation to the provision of additional vessels in the fleet to minimise disruption in the event of an outage of a major vessel for any period. I am pleased that arrangements relating to the MV Alfred have been agreed between CalMac and Pentland Ferries, and communities recognise that it is helpful that the MV Hebridean Isles is back to support services.

There was a reference to, and question about, Ardrossan harbour. I am pleased that many members referred to ports and harbours, which are very much part of the issue. The procurement process for the Ardrossan harbour redevelopment has been paused in order to deliver a refreshed business case. It is a complex project. Additional infrastructure works have been identified and work to reassess project scope and costs has begun. All funding partners are involved in that exercise.

Jamie Halcro Johnston and Beatrice Wishart, among others, referred to local authority ferries. We fund those ferry services. We have agreed to support the local authorities with their revenue funding, with a fund of £178 million over the past five years. That has increased fairly recently to support the operation of the services that are in their remit.

On the tripartite issue that Graham Simpson addressed, I was asked whether it should be changed and my answer was yes—that is the specific quote, in case he ever wants to use it again.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to finish, unless we have some time, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: We do.

Fiona Hyslop: I will give way to the member.

Douglas Lumsden: On the tripartite agreement, clarity is required about whether it could be changed or whether it has to remain,

legally. Can the cabinet secretary say whether it can be changed?

Fiona Hyslop: A number of issues are involved, which depend on different moving parts in the system. When we ask for legal advice, it is on a specific proposal. My view is that it is possible to change the tripartite arrangement in some way but, on the legal and technical impact of that and whether it is wise and advisable to do so, that will be part of the diligence work that I would undertake in looking at any of this.

I remind everyone that there are four parts to the process. There is the contract issue for CHFS, the islands connectivity plan, the fair fares review and the governance issue. One of the committee's recommendations was about how we ensure that there is coherence with all those moving parts. I assure members that I have been spending my time making sure that there is order to that, and I will, of course, inform Parliament when we are ready to do that.

Stuart McMillan: Will the minister take an intervention?

Paul Sweeney rose—

Fiona Hyslop: I want to move on, if that is okay.

I want to address the issue of local authority ferries. I reiterate that the Deputy First Minister has been chairing task forces looking at the options and costs for the replacement of ferries and infrastructure that are owned by Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council. That work is on-going—the meetings of the task forces are on-going in this month, for Orkney and Shetland.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the minister give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to address some of the points that were made in the debate, if the member does not mind.

Alex Rowley asked about procurement compliance. Of course, any future procurement would have to be compliant with the current subsidy control legislation, and that can be set out at the time.

Paul Sweeney: Will the minister give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I can see that the Presiding Officer is asking me to wind up.

I record my thanks to the committee for its work in preparing this forward-thinking and positive report. People will read it in different ways, but I think that it gives a direction and a way forward. I assure members that the Government will continue to work through the recommendations and, along with communities and key ferry stakeholders, seek to improve the ferry services

that we deliver. I will continue to work constructively on the issue and other transport issues with the committee, and I again thank it for producing an evidence-based, well-considered and timely report that I think shows the Parliament and its committee structure at their best.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ben Macpherson to wind up the debate on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

17:18

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. I joined the committee recently and, for clarity, was not part of the committee or present during the inquiry. However, I am pleased to speak to the body of work that my colleagues have undertaken, which, as has been widely acknowledged in the chamber today and elsewhere, was thorough and comprehensive. That has been demonstrated by the discussion and the range of contributions that we have heard.

I thank everyone who has been involved in the publication and assimilation of the report, including our clerks and everyone who gave evidence. I also thank all members who have taken part in the debate. If any of my fellow committee members in particular wishes to add or emphasise anything in the minutes ahead, I encourage them to intervene on me.

The convener outlined the context for the committee's inquiry. He spoke of its conclusions on the future of the governance model for the delivery of ferry services. Specifically, the committee called for a

"comprehensive vision for a high quality service for all ferry-dependent communities"

to be set out in the islands connectivity plan. That is vital, and I will highlight some of the elements that the committee recommended for inclusion in the final plan. They start with the fundamental need for more capacity on our ferry networks, which starts with investment and a rolling programme, as others have said, of vessel and harbour upgrades.

The committee's report recommended that the Scottish Government should mirror the UK commitment to ensure that, by 2025, all vessels that are ordered for use in UK waters are designed with zero-emission propulsion capability. The Scottish Government's response indicates that CMAL will consider that "where possible". A new UK plan is anticipated this year, and international counterparts are already operating fully electric and hydrogen ferries, as Beatrice Wishart emphasised in her speech. The committee urges the Scottish Government to demonstrate ambition,

and we are grateful to the minister for setting that out in her response and in her speeches.

We extend that ask for ambition to all vessels that are in need of replacement in Scotland. Local authorities must be supported in the procurement of low-emission vessels. The low-carbon aspect of the islands connectivity plan is essential to that, but the committee felt that it was not being sufficiently prioritised. Indeed, almost a year after the first element of the plan was published, it is still being developed.

Another key area considered by the committee was fares, including for businesses and freight, as was emphasised by Graham Simpson, for example. We noted calls from stakeholders on the need to conclude a review of freight fares, and we look forward to the publication of the much-anticipated fair fares review later this year. Also due later this year is the second strategic transport projects review delivery plan, which will outline how we can achieve integrated transport to and from ferry terminals.

Graham Simpson: I thank Ben Macpherson for taking an intervention. I know that he wanted members to intervene, so I am happy to help out and to spin it out as long as possible to give him a hand.

What is Ben Macpherson's view of the Government's offer on under-22 ferry fares? He will be aware that only four passes a year are being offered. Does he agree with other members that that offer should be extended?

Ben Macpherson: I will state the committee's view shortly. I note the contributions from other members. The debate has provided a good forum to discuss those issues.

Paul Sweeney: Does Ben Macpherson recognise that the 30-year cross-Government shipbuilding pipeline identified in the national shipbuilding strategy refresh is critical to the Scottish shipbuilding enterprise? Does he also recognise that, to maximise the economic opportunities of that pipeline of orders, there needs to be a consistent, stable design and a consistent, integrated approach to procuring ferries in the Scottish shipbuilding industry?

Ben Macpherson: I thank the member for that contribution and I know that the minister will have been listening attentively to it. The member has engaged significantly on those matters, not just with regard to shipbuilding but with regard to other aspects of Scottish industrial strategy, and I commend him for his interest in that.

The committee was of the view that ferry departure and arrival times must marry up with public transport options for travelling to terminals. That will reduce car kilometres and help to reduce

demand for car spaces on ferries. That demand has been growing in recent years, which is an unintended consequence of the road equivalent tariff.

Fiona Hyslop: The committee identified that the RET had been a success but had had unintended consequences, such as an increase in the number of passengers on ferries of 11 per cent and an increase in the number of cars on ferries of about 20 per cent. That has had consequences for the availability of space, so we might want to think about what vessels can or should carry in future, and what the end-to-end of different vehicles might be in terms of electric hire and so on, particularly as tourists start to look for more green options for travel.

Ben Macpherson: Those are important points, and the committee was also grateful to consider them. The fair fares review is also considering an evaluation of the RET from 2021. The committee sought assurances that any changes to and expansion of the RET scheme resulting from that would not have further unintended consequences. Those are points of consideration, as we appreciate the minister has outlined today in response to the report.

The views of young people were important in the inquiry, and the committee thanks the Scottish Youth Parliament for its work on ferry services and for meeting the committee to share its findings. Members were also pleased to hear the views of young people on visits in the Western Isles and Orkney, and the committee recommended that young people should have concessionary fares for ferry travel. In some places, after all, catching a ferry is just like catching a bus, as members have emphasised. Therefore, the extension of the national ferry concessionary travel scheme to islanders under the age of 22 is a welcome start, and the committee looks forward to hearing how that can be built on when the fair fares review report is published.

The committee takes the view that it is unacceptable that some of Scotland's ferries are not equally accessible to everyone. Therefore, the committee called for an audit of vessel accessibility to identify priorities for investment, and we are glad that the Scottish Government will consider that.

The final theme of the report was about ensuring that ferry services are shaped by the voices and experience of those who use them. That process must include staff and trade unions. The committee heard calls for representation from island communities on the boards of public ferry delivery organisations, and the Scottish Government requires an understanding of island life as a key criterion for appointment. However, the committee is of the view that "an

understanding of” and “lived experience of” are very different.

Increased regulation and oversight of the activities of public ferry delivery organisations is needed. The committee considered that that could involve an independent ferry regulator, and the ferries community board went further and recommended that. The Scottish Government has ruled out such a regulator, but that does not remove the need for oversight and a champion for passengers, and the committee calls on the Scottish Government to outline how it will provide that.

I turn to the ferry services that are delivered by councils. The committee strongly supports the principle of local management of lifeline ferry services. However, it also recognises the scale of the challenges that councils face in running services and replacing their ageing assets. Commitments by the Scottish Government to funding the operation of ferries have been well received by local authorities. The committee called for effective collaboration between the Scottish Government and local authorities on vessel procurement. It also called for long-term capital and revenue support to ensure that communities have a reliable local ferry service now and in the future.

The committee heard calls for the option of transfer of responsibility for ferry service plans to remain on the table in the islands connectivity plan. In addition to requiring new vessels, some local authorities also wished to pursue fixed links, such as tunnels and bridges, for longer-term reliability. Again, the scale of the up-front investment that is needed requires collaboration between the Scottish Government and councils. As the committee said in its report, unless capital is forthcoming from the Scottish Government, few, if any, projects are likely to progress. The committee recommended a review of the feasibility at sites around Scotland.

In conclusion, over 15 months, service users told the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee that ferry services in Scotland are not what they should be, and that that needs to change. The committee believes that

“Leadership in the form of long-term strategic thinking and investment is required to bring all Scotland’s ferry services to an acceptable standard.”

The committee hopes, therefore, that its forward-looking, solutions-focused work will contribute to delivering an improved ferry service for all Scotland’s islands communities, and I urge that Parliament notes the report.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on a modern and sustainable ferry service for Scotland.

Decision Time

17:30

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today’s business. The question is, that motion S6M-11075, in the name of Edward Mountain, on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, on a modern and sustainable ferry service for Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee’s 11th Report, 2023 (Session 6), A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland (SP Paper 417).

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Rural Estates (Wellbeing Economy)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-07793, in the name of Finlay Carson, on welcoming the contribution of rural estates to Scotland's wellbeing economy. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the report, *The Contribution of Rural Estates to Scotland's Wellbeing Economy*, by Scottish Land and Estates; believes that this report, for which the research was carried out by BiGGAR Economics Ltd and Scottish Land and Estates, is an innovative example of a whole sector measuring its outputs against Scotland's National Performance Framework's National Outcomes rather than just through traditional economic metrics; considers that the report describes and quantifies how rural estates drive local economic development through agriculture, forestry, tourism, sporting, recreation and renewable energy generation, act as stewards of the natural environment, protect and enhance biodiversity, support the transition to net zero, provide homes and create sustainable new communities, provide a gateway to nature, and function as anchors of communities and support community-led projects; further considers that the report also identifies areas in which there is scope for estates to increase their contributions across the National Outcomes, and provides an improvement framework to complement the research; recognises Scotland's rural estates as, it considers, key delivery partners of the Scottish Government across a wide range of policy areas, including improving outcomes for people, jobs, and nature across the country, including in the Galloway and West Dumfries constituency, and commends the sector for what it sees as its commitment to this innovative work.

17:32

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to bring this members' business debate to the chamber, and I thank those members who supported the motion. I know that they, like me, believe that it is of vital importance that the contribution that Scotland's rural estates make to our wellbeing economy is recognised and applauded. I also thank Simon Ritchie for his briefings, given that this is his last week with Scottish Land & Estates, and I wish him well in his new role with the Woodland Trust.

I was very fond of the "Monarch of the Glen" television drama, in which the laird wanders around on his magnificent estate, sporting obligatory tweed plus-fours and stopping occasionally to sip a little bit of malt whisky from the hip flask as he takes in the fine scenery. That was perhaps good for viewers, but today, in most cases, it could not be further from the truth.

To go back to reality, in February this year, Scottish Land & Estates published what can only

be described as a landmark report on "The Contribution of Rural Estates to Scotland's Wellbeing Economy", which highlights the social, economic and environmental contributions that are made by rural estates and communities the length and breadth of Scotland, including in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries.

As a groundbreaking piece of research conducted in partnership with BiGGAR Economics Ltd, Scottish Land & Estates has produced a unique report that outlines the contribution of estates far beyond traditional financial economic outputs. The report gives a picture of how rural estates measure their outputs against Scotland's national performance frameworks and the associated national outcomes, rather than simply using traditional economic metrics. In effect, it quantifies how our rural estates drive local economic development through agriculture, forestry, tourism, sport and recreation and renewable energy generation.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Would Finlay Carson add to that list the fact that, so often, rural estates support local education facilities and schools, which employ teachers, local grocery stores, which employ people, and so on?

Finlay Carson: Absolutely. I agree, and I thank Kate Forbes for her well-made intervention. We have seen the educational programmes that some estates have rolled out. It is one of the first sectors to undertake such research, and it is certainly the first time that the wider contribution of land-based businesses has been assessed in this way.

The aim of the report is to establish a baseline of the rural estate sector's contributions to Scotland's national outcomes. As we know, the Scottish Government has set 11 outcomes to measure progress towards a wellbeing economy. The Government has made it clear that its priority is to establish a wellbeing economy, defined as

"a society that is thriving across economic, social and environmental dimensions, and that delivers prosperity for all Scotland's people and places."

The research, by leading economic consultancy BiGGAR Economics, revealed that rural estates contribute to at least seven of the 11 national outcomes. They provide homes for 13,000 families and land for 14,000 enterprises, in addition to attracting 5.4 million Scottish residents each year to enjoy the natural environment.

In regards to the environment, rural estates account for 58 per cent of Scotland's renewable energy generating capacity. The contribution that rural estates make to Scotland's natural capital asset base arises from estates' agricultural, forestry and renewable energy operations and the contribution that they make to Scotland's carbon

sequestration potential and nature-based tourism economy. The total value of the assets underpinning that contribution is estimated to be a staggering £35.1 billion.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Could I add field sports to the list of the substantial, major and excellent contributions of rural estates? Field sports make an invaluable contribution to the rural economy, support a huge number of employees and provide great entertainment to people who travel to Scotland for the best field sport opportunities that the world has to offer.

Finlay Carson: Absolutely. I am feeling a bit inadequate, with members adding these other fantastic value-added elements that estates provide. As my committee takes through the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill, we have been appreciating the value of sporting activities on estates.

Four out of five estates are engaged in conservation through sustainable agriculture and land management, and they also get involved in habitat restoration and wildlife conversation—sorry, conservation. These are quite staggering statistics. My goodness, I am lining up the words that I can trip myself up on.

Crucially, estates generate an estimated £2.4 billion a year for the Scottish economy and support around 57,300 jobs—around one in 10 rural jobs—providing employment in areas where opportunities can be scarce. They provide high-quality jobs, paying on average 95 per cent of their staff at least a living wage, and 86 per cent of the positions are contractually secure.

Estates have adopted a buy-local policy that makes rural economies more resilient, and improves the wellbeing of those who rely on them. On average, estates purchase almost three quarters of supplies from their local area. In turn, they support a healthy stream of business start-ups, which is a hugely important component of a thriving economy, especially when it involves young enterprises.

There is clear evidence from the research that estates are agents for social, economic and environmental development, providing the kind of private investment that will allow the Scottish Government to deliver on its priorities. In the words of Shona Glenn of BiGGAR Economics:

“The findings show that the contribution goes well beyond economic output and supporting jobs. Scotland’s estates are doing much to drive the creation of a wellbeing economy.”

Scottish Land & Estates rightly insists that it is critical that those who are involved in Scotland’s land reform debate should recognise the value of

estates to modern-day Scotland rather than becoming mired in historical arguments.

I agree with the former SLE chairman Mark Tennant that the role of estates in supporting green jobs, local businesses and economies, supporting mental and physical wellbeing and stewarding Scotland’s natural capital should be recognised more widely. He said:

“Many of the estates involved in the research are able to achieve what they do—such as peatland restoration, clean energy or innovative food production—because they operate at a large scale ... Scale is important for delivery of ambitious Scottish Government targets and priorities regardless of who owns the land ... We want to see any land reform debate based on the realities of modern day ownership and management. Rural estates are vibrant and progressive in their approach and see themselves as key to Scotland’s sustainable future.”

I will briefly highlight the excellent work being carried out at Barwhillanty estate in Castle Douglas, a diverse estate that offers sustainable food production and tourism stays and experiences. As well as producing garden vegetables, meat and wood fuel for the local community, the estate has moved successfully into agritourism by offering off-grid yoga and wellbeing retreats, weddings and lifestyle courses. The estate has created affordable housing, making a consistent investment to improve the quality of homes—a subject that we debated just last week. Many other estates are following suit, playing an important role in building resilient rural communities.

Finally, I come to my concerns. Rural estates have a significant positive impact. So, whether we are considering our climate change plans, the Scottish Government’s plans for the natural environment or its crofting legislation, the new Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, the proposed land reform bill, the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Act 2023 or the current Wildlife Management and Muirburn Burn (Scotland) Bill, we must not be naive or ill informed and must not allow historic and outdated prejudice to lead to bad legislation that would curtail the ability of rural estates to build on their substantial contribution to Scotland’s wellbeing economy.

Those estates deserve our recognition and I am thankful for the opportunity to applaud them for all that they do for our rural communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I gently remind those who have not yet pressed their request-to-speak button to do so as soon as possible if they intend to speak. I call Fergus Ewing to speak for around four minutes.

17:41

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I congratulate Finlay Carson on bringing the debate

and begin by taking the first opportunity that I have had to pay tribute to the late Philippa Grant, who sadly passed away in a tragic incident on the A9 more than a year ago. Philippa was much loved in her own community and she achieved huge things in the Highlands. She exuded good cheer and lived a very full life. She attended every committee meeting dealing with our national parks legislation 24 years ago, which was when I got to know her. We will miss her, as will her family.

I also had the great privilege of slightly knowing the late Donald Cameron—clan chief of Lochiel and father of our Donald Cameron—who passed away more recently. Donald senior was the Lord Lieutenant of Inverness and overcame serious illness to achieve great things in the City of London and in his community of Lochaber, where he was loved and respected for his huge commitment to that community. His father and grandfather were Lords Lieutenant before him, keeping the county of Inverness-shire in the family. Donald will be hugely missed and I am sure that Donald junior is with us in spirit here this evening, if not in person.

I had hoped for rather longer than four minutes, Presiding Officer, and seek your patience.

To sum up what I want to say, there is a big danger of the Scottish Government missing a series of opportunities. I do not say that in any negative sense, but my experience of working with estates shows that they make an enormous contribution to my part of Scotland, some more than others.

Most estates are really businesses first. It does not matter whose name is on the land certificate or the title deeds; what matters is the use to which the land is put. In that respect, it seems to me that the arguments of the past and the quarrels of centuries-ago history should always be remembered and celebrated or drowned with your sorrows, whatever your view is, but they should not govern our approach now, which should be to get the best for Scotland from its landed estates.

There are two opportunities, one in housing and one in energy. Regarding housing, I have made this part of my speech on at least two previous occasions in this chamber. Working in partnership with the estates, which already happens to some extent, could happen much more. There is unrealised potential, on a massive scale, for estates to contribute to dealing with the housing shortage in rural Scotland, if planning permission can be relaxed and provided that there is some element of support, whether grant or loan funds. I suggest that the Scottish National Investment Bank could help there.

I also suggest that the minister should dust off two plans that the Labour-Liberal regime proposed

in the early days of devolution: the agricultural business development programme and the agricultural business improvement scheme, both of which stimulated rural investment with a bit of grant finance. The enterprise companies ran those.

Housing is a big opportunity, and permitted development would really open up the overly restrictive approach that there is to planning in rural Scotland, which is treated as being in a sort of aspic, compared with urban Scotland, in a way that reflects outmoded attitudes.

The second opportunity is in energy, where there are enormous opportunities to build on what we were able to achieve during my tenure as energy minister, namely by encouraging not just community benefit at £5,000 per megawatt, but community ownership. If a developer has 20 turbines, add another two and get the SNIB to pay 10 per cent of the capital costs. The developer will not be getting them for free; it will be paying for them. Ten per cent of the capital costs will be paid by SNIB and 90 per cent will be levered in from commercial lenders. That happened when I was minister, albeit not from the major banks, which fell short, I am afraid, but from Triodos Bank, the Co-operative Bank and Close Brothers.

That went well until renewables obligation certificates were scrapped, and I think that it could make a comeback now. The developers have nothing to lose and a lot to gain, because if they have a stake in ownership, communities are far more likely to support wind farm developments than to object. In addition—and this is the main point—that would create a financial legacy for our children and our children's children.

Presiding Officer, I do not know whether I have more time, but I can certainly fill it. That would not be a problem.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You do not really have more time. You must bring your remarks to a conclusion.

Fergus Ewing: I will not test your patience.

I say thank you very much indeed to Mr Carson. It is excellent that we have had this opportunity, thanks to him. I very much hope that we will grab golden opportunities to work better, deeper and more frequently with landowners of all sorts in Scotland—farmers and estates. There is a golden opportunity here and, sadly, the window of opportunity can rapidly slam shut on your fingers if you do not take the opportunity when it is available.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ewing. Those were two fine eulogies, which I whole-heartedly welcome. Such speeches always enhance the chances of increased flexibility in

terms of speaking time, but there are limits. I call Brian Whittle.

17:47

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will try not to test those limits too much. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and congratulate my colleague Finlay Carson on bringing this important topic to the chamber.

Scotland has a significant rural population that I am sure we all want to support and help to thrive. After all, our rural economy is Scotland's kitchen, and I have spoken on many occasions about the world-class produce that it supplies.

What does a wellbeing economy mean for our rural communities? Our rural communities need what everybody else needs: a safe place to live, work and play, with good access to schools and health services such as GPs, dentists and hospitals. They need to be able to travel, especially on public transport and, of course, they need good road and rail networks for that transport. They need links to good jobs and careers that will keep them in those rural communities.

However, it seems to me that, at every turn, the Scottish Government is undermining our rural communities. It undervalues their huge positive impact on our economy, let alone the wellbeing economy that our rural estates create. As Finlay Carson said, one in 10 rural jobs—57,000 jobs—are in those estates, adding £2.4 billion to our gross value added. What is even more impressive is that the average length of service from staff sits at 15 years.

The Government wants to attack those estates and break them up with the land reform bill that is in the offing. We also have a constant attack on our food producers from the Green brigade, blaming farmers for global warming, when our food producers are delivering real change in emissions through their own efforts, with no help and much griping from the Scottish National Party-Green alliance. Keep talking our rural economy down and you will wake up one day and it will be gone. Then where will our food security come from? We will have to import produce that has not been subject to the same scrutiny that our food producers adhere to. How very green.

We heard last week that the cull for cow and bull slaughter is up 11 per cent, which raises concerns for critical mass and the viability of our livestock economy.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is interesting that Mr Whittle makes a blanket statement about the SNP and the Greens talking

down the rural sector, but never once in this chamber have I talked down our rural economy. I would like you to acknowledge that.

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

Brian Whittle: I thank Emma Harper for that intervention. It would be really useful if all your colleagues would follow your example.

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

Brian Whittle: My apologies.

Scotland's red meat sector supports more than 39,000 jobs in Scotland and generates roughly £839 million in GVA. People on the ground are worried for the future of the livestock industry. A combination of an ageing population, low business margins and market uncertainty created by Government policy is putting new entrants off. Farming is seen as a lifestyle, not necessarily as a business, but people still need to be able to make ends meet. There is a minimum threshold of livestock that farms must have to make livestock farming profitable. There is real concern on the ground that a lack of replacement in breeding cattle could spell the collapse of the livestock market and associated economies very soon, and there is a disconnect between those on the ground and those making policy. That is you, Scottish Government.

Profitable farms spend money on rural and local economies. Profitable farms underpin the rural economy. Profitable farms have the money to invest in environmental schemes. The framework Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is causing uncertainty in the market, and people on the ground need to know what will be in the secondary legislation so that they can plan for future markets in time. Adding in the inadequate investment in transport, including roads, rail and bus routes, electric car charging points, hydrogen transport and facilities for heavy goods vehicles, all leads to an inability to attract business and jobs, the end result of which is the migration of people from rural to urban areas.

When the Scottish Government comes up with a policy of independence being required to deliver an inward migration that could solve rural and island depopulation, it fails to grasp that its policies have systematically attacked and devalued our rural communities and have caused that depopulation over the past 16 years. Much as I welcome Màiri McAllan's announcement about the U-turn on highly protected marine areas, one cannot help but recognise the huge amount of Government and industry time that was wasted in coming to an inevitable conclusion. All that the Scottish Government achieved there was to disquiet a whole industry.

Too many rural policies are created by urban-based, green-ideology-driven politicians, who care nothing about pragmatism and realism. The SNP has allowed that to happen. For the sake of our rural communities, our rural estates and our food producers, the Scottish Government must ditch the ideologically-driven policies, get a dose of practicality and pragmatism, ditch the Greens and start creating a policy that supports our rural economy before there is nothing left.

17:53

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Finlay Carson for the opportunity to debate the contribution of our estates to our economy.

How we use our land matters. It matters to those who live on the land, those whose livelihoods depend on working that land and those who enjoy its rich diversity. We have a duty to ensure that the custodians of that land manage it in a way that contributes to our country's wellbeing. Given that more than 4.1 million hectares of land—more than half of rural Scotland—is owned by Scotland's more than 1,000 rural estates, it is clear that those estates are key players in delivering on that duty.

The Scottish Land & Estates report "The Contribution of Rural Estates to Scotland's Wellbeing Economy" is a useful and timely contribution to the debate about the role of estates in delivering for jobs, nature and leisure and about how they will ultimately contribute to delivering a low-carbon future. The very fact that the research has been carried out is an important step forward.

The BiGGAR Economics research shows that estates provide homes for 13,000 families and land for 14,000 rural enterprises. They bring 5.4 million day visits by people who enjoy the natural environment. They account for more than half of Scotland's renewable energy-generating capacity and provide vital carbon sequestration. They generate £2.4 billion of GVA per year for the Scottish economy and support about 57,300 rural jobs.

In my South Scotland region are positive examples of estates that provide diverse contributions, from the biodiversity improvements from new hedgerows, ponds and native woodland regeneration at the Roxburghe estate in the Scottish Borders to the positive tourism offer mentioned by Finlay Carson—everything from yoga to wellbeing retreats—at the Barwhillant estate near Castle Douglas and the sustainable farming and food production that provides quality lamb and award-winning wool at the Castlemilk and Corrie estates near Lockerbie. The latter have strong ties with the local community through the Lockerbie Wildlife Trust, which manages the

fantastic Eskrigg nature reserve. All three estates that I mentioned are important providers of affordable housing and vital jobs to their local rural communities.

However, the report for Scottish Land & Estates is right to highlight that there is more to be done. The fight against the nature and climate crises, the depopulation of our rural communities, the barriers to affordable housing and the scourge of low pay in rural communities always require us to re-evaluate how we manage our land.

Those of us who represent rural communities will have represented constituents who are tenants of homes or farms on estates, or who are neighbours to estates, and have found themselves in dispute because of how land was being managed. In some cases, it has taken changes of estate ownership to inject a new lease of life into land through a new approach, such as happened at the Tarras valley nature reserve in the Eskdale valley, where the community raised an astonishing £6 million to fund a community buyout of 10,000 acres of Langholm moor from Buccleuch Estates.

Brian Whittle: Does Colin Smyth agree that his colleague Mercedes Villalba's plan to limit the amount of land that can be owned to 500 hectares is completely and utterly unworkable?

Colin Smyth: That is not what the proposed bill says. It sets out a public interest test for sales of land over a certain amount. Any landowner should not be frightened of a public interest test for the use of their land. It is important that land is used in the most productive way that also meets communities' interests.

I was highlighting the community's action to tackle such issues at Tarras valley, near Eskdale, which is visionary and impressive. It has driven the way forward on peatland restoration and, with the Woodland Trust's support, it is expanding native woodland and restoring ancient woodland. The educational opportunities that are now being provided on the moor, which were not there before, are part of the inspiring vision and plans for the community.

However, other changes in ownership are a growing threat, such as the rise of so-called green lairds. That is why a public interest test is vital. Because Scotland's land market is largely unregulated, that allows companies to buy huge swathes of land so that they can claim green credentials by offsetting their carbon, with little contribution being made to the wellbeing economy.

It is therefore vital that, as the Parliament turns its attention to important legislation on land reform, we seek to ensure that the ownership of land and how we use it are determined productively and are ultimately in the public interest. There is no doubt

that, after that legislation is passed, Scotland's rural estates will still be important players in delivering the work that will be needed to achieve a wellbeing economy.

I end by thanking the estate workers, who deliver many of the outcomes that are in this important report. It is their skills and their graft that maintain the land, manage the environment and create the wealth that benefits so many people in our community. I thank estate workers past and present for the contribution that they have made to those achievements.

17:58

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Finlay Carson on bringing this important debate to the chamber and on his speech. The debate is important because our estates are some of the least understood places in Scotland, especially by the urban-centric signatories to the Bute house agreement.

When we visit an estate, as I had the privilege of doing recently at Glenogil in Angus, we experience elements that are the very definition of wellbeing—fresh air, abundant wildlife and the kind of scenery that reminds us all that Scotland really is the most beautiful country on earth. However, when the SNP-Green Government refers to Scotland's estates, it is as easy to imagine it referring to some kind of pre-Victorian pantomime involving wicked landowners and rich visitors, which is unrecognisable to anyone who lives on or visits a modern Scottish estate.

Of course, it is not simply a matter of who owns the land—previous speakers have made that point well. The SNP-Green Scottish Government's deplorable ignorance about rural matters is legendary. It has failed to deliver an agriculture bill that contains anything of substance—it is simply a shell. The Government holds Scotland back with its ignorant and anti-science ban on gene editing, and it has failed rural Scotland by failing to roll out superfast broadband.

Beyond the SNP-Green Scottish Government's general neglect of rural Scotland, estates, landowners and wildlife managers are under siege by a Government that is intent on their destruction through its intrusive and ill-informed regulation of wildlife management—the very management by highly skilled land managers and gamekeepers, often with decades of experience, that keeps estates going and brings in millions of pounds to local economies, along with all the social infrastructure that Kate Forbes mentioned.

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Does Stephen Kerr disagree with licensing? Most sporting estates across Europe

have a licensing regime. Is that what he objects to?

Stephen Kerr: I object to unnecessary licensing. I object to unnecessary Government interference. I object to people who know nothing about rural Scotland trying to interfere with how rural Scotland is managed.

Grouse shooting generates more than £23 million for the rural economy and supports more than 1,000 full-time-equivalent rural jobs in Scotland—and far more besides, because those jobs allow young families to stay in rural areas and allow other local tourism-related businesses to emerge. That is achieved without mainstream agri-environment scheme subsidies or significant financial support from the Government.

Wellbeing on shooting estates extends to the many species of birds that live there. There are professionally managed havens for many moorland ground-nesting birds, such as the curlew and the golden plover. When predator control was carried out, lapwing, curlew and golden plover were found to fledge more than three times as many young in comparison with when it was not carried out. Those are the same skilled practices that the SNP-Green Government seeks to suffocate, with clueless virtue signalling and pandering to urban elites.

I have spoken mostly of fauna, but I will conclude by referring to how sporting estates promote the wellbeing of flora—specifically heather, which is the most potent symbol of Scotland. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, moors that stopped grouse shooting lost 41 per cent of their heather cover, while moors that retained shooting lost only 24 per cent.

That path, that bothy and that cottage are not in good condition by chance. They have been cherished and nurtured across centuries by generations of custodians who have cared for, improved and embellished those naturally lovely places to make them the national treasures that they are today. For the SNP to seek to thwart those on rural estates who do so much to keep the Scottish countryside beautiful and functional for visitors, and economically and socially viable for local communities, shows how little it knows about the vast swathes of our country that it claims to speak for.

18:03

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Scottish Land & Estates for the helpful briefing for the debate and for the work that it does to support Scotland's estates, which play a crucial role in Scottish society and the wellbeing of our nation. I congratulate Finlay Carson on securing the debate—it is really important that we are here to

discuss the issue. I give a peedie mention to the fact that I am co-convenor of the cross-party group on wellbeing economy, as well as co-convenor of the cross-party group on rural policy with my colleague Edward Mountain.

Given that Scotland's 1,125 rural estates cover a combined 4.1 million hectares—around 57 per cent of Scotland's rural land—those who are familiar with the sector are well aware of its contribution to the Scottish economy and society. It is important that we highlight that as good news. However, outwith the sector, the contribution is not well recognised or widely understood. I want to touch on some of my engagement with estates across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders on the important role that they play in supporting our rural communities, rural economies and in promoting and protecting biodiversity and wellbeing.

Rural estates generate an estimated £2.4 billion each year and support thousands of jobs, as has been mentioned by members. That makes a significant contribution to Scotland's economic growth—an important indicator of economic progress—but it is an even more important contribution to Scotland's rural communities. I welcome the fact that many of Scotland's rural estates—around 64 per cent—pay staff at a wage that is on average equivalent to or higher than the national living wage.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: Yes, if the member is quick, because every time he stands up, he makes a speech.

Stephen Kerr: Frankly, I am not sure that I would be allowed to do that. Emma Harper was quick to intervene on my colleague when he cited the SNP, the Scottish Green Party and the Government and their ignorance of rural Scotland. In her conversations with the people whom she mentioned in her speech, did they not tell her what they tell us all about how they feel about the SNP-Green Government?

Emma Harper: I thank the member for the intervention—it wisnae as short as I had hoped. In my engagement with the estates, they have been very respectful and polite. We have been frank in our discussions about how we take forward what we need to do on land use and other things that I will come on to.

The jobs that are supported by rural estates sustain populations in some of our most fragile rural communities, but the contribution that estates make to rural communities is wider than that. The evidence that has been presented by Scottish Land & Estates shows that rural estates provide homes for around 8,250 private tenants and

around 4,700 agricultural tenants across Scotland. Those homes underpin many rural communities, enabling people to live in parts of Scotland where housing options would otherwise be limited. Rural estates also lease land to around 1,400 crofters and farmers. Those enterprises form the backbone of many Scottish communities and therefore play an important role in creating the thriving resilient communities that are envisaged in the Government's national outcomes framework.

Since my election in 2021, I have been able to visit and engage with estate owners and managers of the land across Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. Recently, during the October recess, I visited Dalswinton estate and met Peter Landale to discuss how Scotland's estates work to support rural communities and rural housing and meet Scotland's net zero targets in the face of the global climate and biodiversity emergencies. We discussed how to define sustainability, and Peter described efficiency of production, animal welfare, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, quality and community. The cabinet secretary, Màiri McAllan, took a question from me last week about the sustainability definition.

I am conscious of the time, but at Dalswinton estate, just like at Raehills estate near Moffat, which I visited early in the summer, we talked very frankly about what can be done for rural estates to support biodiversity and tackle the climate emergency. Dalswinton estate provides the local community cafe in the village to Emma Pagan rent free to provide a space for residents and visitors. Emma is also an amazing florist. Another thing that Dalswinton estate has been good at is providing business space for Claxton's whisky production, so that Claxton's can grow and expand its business in the south of Scotland.

I will stop there, but I welcome the debate. Mr Carson's motion was very positive, and that is what I wanted to focus on today.

18:08

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We have heard good contributions throughout the debate. I will not repeat all the comments that others have made, but I will highlight the briefing from Scottish Land & Estates, which highlights the work that estates do in creating employment, providing social housing, investing in renewable energy, promoting biodiversity and conservation. That is very welcome.

Too many times in the chamber, our discussions on land use patterns are characterised by ignorance, misinformation, prejudice and bigotry. The debate has been a welcome counterbalance to that, with a focus on facts and reality. I hope

that, when we have future debates, we will hear more of that and less of the other.

To give an estate in my region as an exemplar of the contribution that estates make, I cite Atholl Estates, which is based in Blair Atholl, Perthshire. It is involved in a range of activities, including agriculture with in-hand and let farming, forestry, tourism, renewable energy projects, traditional sporting activities—which we should not lose sight of—short-term lets, provision of social housing and start-up units for small businesses. All those together provide direct employment for 90 people in a rural community, all of whom are paid at least the real living wage. That is an enormous economic contribution, and it is a level of employment that would not be possible in a rural area with other land use patterns.

On top of all that, Atholl Estates has an excellent record of engaging with the local community and supporting local community events.

That pattern of land ownership and mixed land use through a traditional estate sustains a level of employment that would not be possible with other land use patterns. Over recent years in particular, we have seen the growth of what are called green lairds, which is a pernicious development in rural Scotland. We see large corporates buying up large tracts of land, denuding them of human life and activity, and removing employment. That is a very regrettable step.

That is sometimes dressed up with the best of intentions—with trying to meet climate change targets with so-called rewilding. Rewilding is simply taking productive land, making it barren and driving away human activity and employment.

Colin Smyth: Does Murdo Fraser agree that the rise of so-called green lairds means that we need better regulation when it comes to the sale of mass amounts of our land? Lots of those sales are carried out in private, and local communities do not even know that they are taking place. They cannot even declare an interest in purchasing that land, because that is in effect done off the books. It is important that there is more openness and more public interest testing when it comes to the sale of those estates, or we will see the rise in green lairds continuing.

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

Murdo Fraser: I would like to see a revision of the whole policy approach towards meeting carbon targets, which rewards large corporates for buying up productive areas of rural Scotland and turning them over to so-called rewilding or to forestry and the planting of Sitka spruce in large numbers. It takes land out of potential agricultural and sporting use.

Planting more trees is good for the climate, but let us not kid ourselves. Planting trees destroys employment because, once people who come in as contract workers are employed to plant trees, those trees are left for 10 or 15 years, and no workers are needed to look after that land for many years to come. If land that was used for agriculture or sporting interests is turned over to forestry, jobs are taken away.

We see that on the Glenprosen estate in Angus. Jobs have been lost on what was a productive, mixed-use estate that sustained employment. Jobs in the local community and families living there—families whose children were at the local school supporting the local community and the local economy—have been lost, and they will not be replaced in our lifetimes, because trees are being planted.

We need to consider those issues extremely carefully. We need to see vibrant local communities and people employed in rural areas, and the best way that we currently have to deliver that is through the traditional mixed-use Highland estate. That is what we are debating, and that is what we should champion. We should be very careful about promoting other types of land use that are destroying employment in areas in which we need it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious of the number of members who still want to contribute to the debate, so I am minded to accept a motion under rule 8.14.3 of the standing orders to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Finlay Carson to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Finlay Carson*]

Motion agreed to.

18:13

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): A wellbeing economy serves people and the planet, and it puts our human and planetary needs at its heart. It requires a huge economic and social shift. I am delighted to see so much engagement with those ideas across the political spectrum today.

The principles of a wellbeing economy underpin the nature restoration fund, which is helping Scotland's species, woodlands, rivers and seas back on the road to recovery as well as improving the health and wellbeing of local communities. Greens in government will deliver £60 million through that fund during this parliamentary session to directly support jobs and nature, particularly in our rural communities.

As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I have had the privilege of seeing pioneering nature restoration projects up close. When Dundreggan estate, which is now managed by Trees for Life, was operated for farming and forestry, it employed just one person. Once the rewilding centre there is fully operational, it will employ 28 people in sectors from hospitality to administration, operations and wildlife management. Rewilding can mean re-peopling.

The continuation of game shooting on 120 of Scotland's estates relies on practices that cause environmental damage and harm the nature that our people treasure. How can a wellbeing economy include killing thousands of wild animals each year to optimise conditions for killing grouse for sport? How can a wellbeing economy include setting our hills on fire, inhibiting the spread of sphagnum moss, polluting rivers, causing our precious deep peat to dry out, releasing pollutants and carbon, and contributing to climate change?

How can we afford for our land to have so little positive impact? Game shooting accounts for less than one tenth of 1 per cent of our rural employment. The economic and social costs of ecological degradation are felt by everyone, while the profits of such exploitation have flowed to very few. That must change. Community and estate-led conservation and tourism projects demonstrate how successful new jobs in conservation, wildlife management and wildlife tourism can bring work and life back to our rural communities.

Finlay Carson: Before the member committed to speaking in this debate, did she read the report that Scottish Land & Estates published?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Ariane Burgess the time back for that intervention.

Ariane Burgess: I am using other information that I have.

The wildlife tourism sector alone generates £276 million every year for the Scottish economy, and public access to Scotland's land is key to that growing sector's success. Societal shifts are challenging. We are talking about moving on from outdated ideas of what Scotland's countryside should look like—I was glad to hear Tories also describing that—and reimagining how it could look if we prioritised nature, the environment and rebuilding our communities.

Wild deer grazing on our hillsides are a familiar sight, but there is increasing evidence that reducing deer levels and maintaining that could lead to a net increase in employment, as well as enabling the restoration of Scotland's rainforest. That requires a joined-up approach that involves not just working with landowners but ensuring that local people are skilled in wildlife management and that there are local markets for venison.

Estates can be partners and innovators, whether that is through trialling technology to enable no-fence grazing or through developing highly efficient self-build housing, as in Rothiemurchus. From Moray Estates to Highlands Rewilding in Bunloit, Beldorney and Tayvallich, landowners, land managers, workers and rural communities can be world leaders in accelerating nature-based solutions to biodiversity collapse and climate breakdown, all while helping to rebuild local economies in a way that addresses social and environmental inequality. That is the meaning of a wellbeing economy—let us make that happen.

18:18

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I praise my colleague Finlay Carson—also known as Hector MacDonald—for securing tonight's debate and I praise Sarah Madden from SLE and BiGGAR Economics for putting together the report.

The people who live and work in rural Scotland and their estates, as well as their families and the wider community, should be in no doubt that the Scottish Conservatives value their contribution to Scotland's economy. We have heard some complete nonsense from the Green Party. I am absolutely shocked that Ariane Burgess has not recognised or read what the report has to say about the contribution that estates and rural Scotland make, given that that is what we are debating.

One in 10 rural jobs are on rural estates, which are the engine rooms of rural growth and form the backbone of many of our rural communities. It is worth highlighting the significant role that they play in building resilience in our communities. The SLE report says that 83 per cent of our rural estates provide practical support to communities in times of need. My goodness, we have needed them. When storms Arwen and Babet hit, they were there to cut and clear trees, and they are there when there is snow to clear, allowing people to get to shops and ensuring that children can get to school. That role is an important one as we head towards what will probably be another hard winter.

However, no one thanks them for that, and no one cares, particularly on those benches over there. The estates must stand up for themselves, and that is exactly what the SLE report does. Across rural Scotland, people feel forgotten by the SNP-Green coalition, which remains completely out of touch with their priorities.

Today's debate has shown that there is a lot of concern about the future of rural communities. Fergus Ewing referenced last week's debate on rural housing, which highlighted many of the reasons behind that. We could allow rural estates

to provide us with solutions to some of the problems that we face. Emma Harper referred to estates in the Borders; I point out that a single estate in my Borders constituency—the Roxburghe estate—provides almost 200 residential properties to families and estate workers. Nationally, estates provide more than 13,000 homes, and I know that they would do even more to tackle the issues around the lack of affordable housing in rural communities, given the opportunity to do so. However, rural estates and farms have one arm tied behind their backs, because of this Government's archaic planning system, which is stifling the development of the right homes in the right places. Permitted development rights need to be extended, too.

The estates are right to push back on damaging rent controls. After one year, it is clear that those measures have served only to drive up rents and drive out investment. Barriers such as the additional dwelling supplement prevent them from providing homes for rural workers.

All of that must be set in the context of an SNP Government that has cut the housing budget, short-changing our rural communities. Our rural estates are up against it with this lot. With the SNP and Greens in power together, some are even considering divesting themselves of their involvement in the private rented sector. If the properties go, as Kate Forbes has said, the schools will go and the pubs will go. At this point, I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, because I have got one.

The kirk—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry—does the member want to intervene?

Emma Harper: I do. I seek clarification on whether the member has got a school or a pub.

Rachael Hamilton: Just look at my entry in the register of members' interests.

This evening, we have heard so much that is good in relation to what rural estates are doing. They are supporting livelihoods, enhancing biodiversity, working towards our net zero future and creating resilience in our rural communities.

However, I reiterate Stephen Kerr's point that rural Scotland is being left behind by the metropolitan elites who signed the Bute house agreement. Central belt mandarins are saying to our rural estates—our country custodians—that what they are doing is wrong, and then they are telling them what to do. I wonder what consideration is being given to their wellbeing. They are under attack from a Government that simply does not understand them, as is reflected in the plethora of poorly evidenced legislation that the Government has introduced and which is coming down the track.

I had a lot more positivity to give to tonight's debate, but, given the contributions that I have heard, particularly from Ariane Burgess, I have had to change my speech to stand up for rural Scotland. I will continue to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Finally, I call Edward Mountain. Please be brief.

18:23

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I will keep my comments brief, Presiding Officer. I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests—I have a 500-acre farm in Moray. Before anyone makes any comments, I do not have an estate, although I did spend 15 years managing estates.

I want to make a point to people who have spent time criticising estates. Most rural estates that I managed—and there were quite a few—that did not have hydro or wind farms had to rely on the owner's income to make things happen. It was not unusual for me to go back to some of the bigger estates annually to ask the owner for £600,000 or more to make the estate function over the next year. That £600,000 is not pre-taxed—it is taxed income that the owner has to provide to make the estate work. We need to understand that and the fact that a lot of owners have altruistic motives. We can argue whether foreign estate owners are the right people to own land but, without them, there would be no estates and we would not be achieving the amount that is being achieved.

I will conclude with this: having been involved in the management of upland estates, I weep when I leave the chamber in the evening, having heard people pontificate about how they know about managing an estate, managing deer or peatland management from reading about it in a book. They should get out there on the ground and do it. It is hard work, and they might learn more from doing that than they will from just getting ink on their fingers.

18:25

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Richard Lochhead was supposed to be responding to the debate, but he has sent his apologies, so I will respond on behalf of the Scottish Government.

I have enjoyed listening to the debate. I pay tribute to Finlay Carson for lodging the motion and for his excellent speech, outlining the breadth of positives that estates across Scotland offer rural communities.

I welcome the approach that was taken in the report commissioned by Scottish Land & Estates. "The Contribution of Rural Estates to Scotland's

Wellbeing Economy” sets out a positive vision of not only how rural estates contribute to Scotland’s rural economy but how they might support our transition to a wellbeing economy. The Deputy First Minister discussed that opportunity during our visit to the Rottal estate yesterday.

Speaking of visits to estates, I take this opportunity to remind Finlay Carson of a visit that we both made to the Glenfeshie estate when we were members of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee in the previous session of Parliament. On that estate, some rewilding had been done on a tranche of land that had been really degraded, and we saw old photographs that showed that the land had mainly been heather. It was not the type of rewilding that was characterised by Murdo Fraser—although I know exactly where those criticisms lie—but it was absolutely incredible to see the work that had been done and the flora and fauna that were there as a result. Many species that had not been seen for a very long time were coming back. It was a superb visit.

Scotland is leading the wellbeing economy agenda on the international stage. It is one of the founding members of the wellbeing economy Governments network, and our unique position in relation to our landscape and topography gives us a head start in that regard.

Access to nature is a key tenet of wellbeing. It is not for nothing that, these days, general practitioners are offering social prescribing in the form of access to nature; it really makes a difference to a person’s health. In our view, economic activity should be geared from the outset towards the creation of a fairer, more sustainable and healthier society.

Making a just transition to a net zero, nature-positive, wellbeing economy is a strategic priority for the Scottish Government, and other Governments across Europe are learning from what we are doing. That is why the principle of a wellbeing economy is central to the Government’s three interconnected missions on equality, opportunity and community.

I now want to talk about some of the contributions that members have made during the debate. Fergus Ewing has been a passionate advocate for rural Scotland throughout his entire life, and there were very wise words from him. His points about housing were particularly pertinent. Are we doing enough to ensure that those in rural Scotland can build their own housing? We can compare that with the situation in other jurisdictions where people have the opportunity to build unique housing, so we should look at that. I certainly find that to be the case in my constituency, too.

Fergus Ewing: I am very grateful for the minister’s warm and generous remarks and for the way in which she is addressing the debate generally. However, is she aware that the clock is ticking? We are more than halfway through this session of Parliament, and it takes a while to do things. If we are going to have permitted development rights, the Government needs to get on with it. The Minister for Housing, Mr McLennan, is sympathetic to the proposals, so I hope that there can be cross-ministerial support for them. We have heard that there is also support from other political parties, so will the minister go away with her colleagues and give consideration to urgently bringing forward proposals on permitted development rights?

Gillian Martin: I am glad to hear that Paul McLennan has been sympathetic to the proposals. Even in my energy portfolio, I have been looking at community benefits in that space. Rural housing is a real pressure point for the Highlands and Islands, in particular, and given that the area will be hosting a lot of energy infrastructure, there might have to be something there in terms of community benefits.

However, I am going off piste. Coming back to the subject of estates, I will just say that, during the summer, I visited a community energy operation in Penpont, in the region that Emma Harper represents. Buccleuch Estates, as a partner, had given over the land for the generator, as well as access to the water that it owned. That is an example of an estate working with the local community for real benefit, and it was great to see it.

Emma Harper also mentioned the licensing of land to crofters, which is something that I am very much aware of. It was great to hear both Murdo Fraser and Emma Harper mention the fact that many estates pay the living wage. Given that it is living wage week, it is a good time to mention that.

Brian Whittle concentrated quite a lot of his remarks on farming. I had a wry smile, thinking of him reading the “Building a New Scotland” paper at bedtime last week. It was also great to hear Colin Smyth mention the contribution that estates make to carbon sequestration and biodiversity. A lot of our estates play host to quite a lot of our peatlands; indeed, Mr Smyth will know that peatland restoration is part of my portfolio.

That feeds into what Rachael Hamilton said about flooding, in particular. She mentioned the response to flooding specifically, but our peatland and moorlands can mitigate flooding, too, and we ignore that aspect at our peril.

Ariane Burgess talked about public access to land, which is really important and goes back to the wellbeing agenda. The land of Scotland might

be owned by particular individuals or whatever, but it is our land—our country. I am reminded of a great lyric from that other son of Perthshire, Dougie MacLean, who said:

“you cannot own the land
The land owns you”.

We are all visitors and custodians of the land, and it will remain long after we are all gone.

Edward Mountain made a good point about the huge investment that many landowners make in their estates. That point was made to me and Finlay Carson at Glenfeshie, where we heard about how the economics work there.

Before I sit down, I want to say a little bit about community wealth building, which is a key tool to help us achieve an economy focused on delivering wellbeing, growing local wealth and giving communities a greater stake in the economy. It was great to hear today about how estates are involved in that through the leasing and giving of land and through helping local businesses set up. They make a contribution, and I was heartened to hear of such examples.

As I am running out of time, I will simply say, in conclusion, that the debate has provided an excellent opportunity for us all to reflect on the work undertaken by BIGGAR Economics on behalf of Scottish Land & Estates in the report that Mr Carson mentioned in his motion. That includes the approach that it has taken to assessing the contribution of the estates of rural Scotland, and what they do to enhance our own wellbeing and Scotland’s national performance more generally. I will continue to ensure that we work with Scottish Land & Estates, as a key delivery partner for the Scottish Government, to improve the outcomes of the people and communities of rural Scotland and drive forward the delivery of the Government’s vision for a wellbeing economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:33.

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