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Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 16 November 2023

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 16 November 2023

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. As ever, I would appreciate succinct questions and answers to allow as many members to get in as possible.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Medication Shortages

1. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder medication shortages, as referred to in the national patient safety alert of 27 September. (S6O-02736)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): It is anticipated that the global shortage of medicines used to treat ADHD will be resolved by the end of December. The shortages are caused by a combination of manufacturing issues and an increase in demand. The pricing and supply of medicines is a reserved matter for the United Kingdom Government, and we continue to engage with that Government.

The Scottish Government recognises the impact of the global shortages on people living with ADHD and their families. NHS Scotland has robust systems in place to manage medicine shortages when they arise. Anyone affected by the issue should speak to their clinical team.

Daniel Johnson: I remind members of my ADHD diagnosis and the fact that I take medication for my ADHD.

This situation has caused a huge amount of anxiety. A diagnosis and medication are what bring order to what have previously been chaotic and troubled lives for many. Although it is good to hear that the minister expects the situation to resolve itself in December, what clarity does she have on that? Critically, what practical information is being given to people? I do not know whether I should be ordering more medication, because there is advice not to stockpile. Most critically, for people on lisdexamphetamine, there are serious medical consequences if they suddenly stop taking their medication. Have people on lisdexamphetamine been written to, and is medical supervision and assistance being provided to them?

Jenni Minto: I absolutely appreciate the impact that the situation is having on individuals who require this medicine and on their families.

I spoke with my officials yesterday to confirm the timeframe, and that is the timeframe that they confirmed. Earlier in November, the Scottish Government held an extraordinary meeting of child and adolescent mental health services lead clinicians across health boards to share approaches that they were taking. They agreed to continue collective discussions on managing the shortage and on how to communicate effectively with patients.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): One of my constituents recently reached out, fearing that she will no longer be able to access ADHD medication for her son. As we have heard from a colleague, life can be extremely difficult for these patients, so it is critical that they receive regular updates so that they can plan ahead and navigate this difficult time. With that in mind, are there any other steps that the Scottish Government could take to help to keep families informed of progress towards resolving the shortage?

Jenni Minto: To reiterate, I absolutely appreciate that the medicine shortages are very concerning for patients who are affected and their families. As I said in response to Daniel Johnson, in November, the Scottish Government held an extraordinary meeting of CAMHS lead clinicians to discuss a collective approach to the shortage of ADHD medication. At that meeting, national health service boards shared the approaches that they were taking, and the group agreed to continue collective discussions.

The Scottish Government will continue close dialogue with all health boards to manage the shortage and provide support when needed.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I ask whether the minister has a handle on two things. First, there are reports that assessments are ceasing to take place in some parts of the country. Is that happening? If so, how much is it happening and what is she doing about it? Secondly, some people have been put on alternative medicines but they have not been nearly as effective. Does the minister have a handle on that as well? Does she understand the full position?

Jenni Minto: I have not been informed of the issue in the first part of Willie Rennie's question. We will chase that up with officials.

As I understand it, any decision to change medication will be a clinical one and will be taken on a one-to-one basis. I am happy to check on that question as well.

Human Rights Bill

2. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans for a human rights bill. (S6O-02737)

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): The Scottish Government will introduce a new human rights bill before the end of the parliamentary year. The bill's consultation concluded in October, receiving almost 400 responses. I am grateful to the people who responded, and I look forward to continued engagement on the bill as it is drafted.

The bill will incorporate more internationally recognised human rights into Scots law, which is a task that has been given greater urgency by the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty, who, last week, accused the United Kingdom Government of breaching its international obligations with regard to fundamental economic and social rights.

Ruth Maguire: Equal rights for men and women is a fundamental principle of the UN. Men's violence against women and girls is both a cause and manifestation of inequality. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women—CEDAW—is unequivocal: states must address trafficking and prostitution if they are to eliminate discrimination against women. How will the Scottish Government's incorporation of human rights charters into Scots law assist women who are subject to such violence and inequality?

Emma Roddick: The Scottish Government is committed to eliminating all forms of violence against women, which is why the bill will break ground for women in Scotland by incorporating CEDAW into Scots law, alongside three other UN treaties.

Incorporating four international treaties is a complex and technical endeavour, and we want to deliver a clear and accessible bill. To navigate the complexities, ministers are considering applying a procedural duty to certain rights in the bill, including those that relate to CEDAW. That would mean that, when delivering services such as housing or education, public authorities would have to consider the protections that the treaty gives women in areas such as health and family life, and they would be held accountable if they did not.

Community Audiology Services

3. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to carry out its commitment to put community audiology services on a par with free community eye care services. (S6O-02738)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government remains fully committed to enhancing community audiology services. We continue to work closely with national health service boards, social care and the third sector to develop fully integrated and sustainable audiology services that are located closer to the local communities that are being served. Our approach will be informed by outcomes from the recently published national audiology review.

Graham Simpson: The "Independent Review of Audiology Services in Scotland", which I assume is what the minister was referring to, noted:

"there are many areas ripe for improvement, and there is a huge appetite for change."

It found

"multiple, systemic problems within audiology services in NHS Scotland."

Will the minister set out a timeline for such improvement?

Jenni Minto: I, too, welcomed the publication of the independent review of audiology services, and we are now carefully considering its recommendations. We are clear that the review is an opportunity to refocus audiology services in Scotland, to learn from mistakes that have been made and to shape a better future for audiology as a whole.

We will provide an update to the Parliament in due course. In the meantime, in response to the concerns that have been highlighted by the independent review, the Scottish Government has provided additional funding to health boards to support further training in auditory brainstem response assessments for staff working in paediatric audiology services.

Motorway Signage (Winter Preparations)

4. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Transport Scotland about motorway gantry signage ahead of winter. (S6O-02739)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Traffic Scotland is a service that is provided by Transport Scotland to ensure that journeys on Scotland's roads are as safe and smooth as possible by gathering real-time information on Scotland's trunk road and motorway network. That information is shared with road users on a number of platforms, including overhead gantry signs, to reduce the disruption that is caused by trunk road closures, congestion, events, road works, adverse weather, accidents and other incidents.

When gantry signs are not being used for such higher priority messages, there are two sets of

background safety messages that are displayed, which are changed to coincide with summer traffic and winter traffic. Those messages are reviewed annually by Traffic Scotland. During the recent storms, the motorway gantry signs were utilised to inform the public of severe weather warnings.

All of this was discussed at the Transport Scotland winter service launch, which I attended recently.

Liz Smith: I am asking this question because I have had representations from Mid Scotland and Fife constituents that there are frequent instances of gantry signs not displaying time-sensitive information. Just one example, which I have seen for myself on several occasions, is the three M90 gantry signs on the south side of the Queensferry crossing that, between 9.30 and 10 o'clock-ish, tell motorists that there are queues at Hermiston Gait and on the city bypass when that is not correct. It probably was correct an hour before. Can we do something about the displaying of time-sensitive information? It is important for the decisions that motorists make.

Fiona Hyslop: The member's constituents make an important point. I am sure she will be aware that that is an operational matter for Transport Scotland and Traffic Scotland. I am happy to relay her concerns to them, but she can also write directly to them about that operational matter.

Climate Change Mitigation (Peatland)

5. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the role that peatland plays in climate change mitigation and adaptation. (S6O-02740)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government's position is that peatlands play a critical role in mitigating and adapting to the climate and nature emergencies. Peatlands are essential to our journey to net zero and to increasing our resilience against a changing climate.

Around 75 per cent of our peatlands have been degraded by drainage, extraction, overgrazing, afforestation and development. We have invested £250 million in restoration and are dedicated to achieving our targets in that regard. We are working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that our peatlands continue to contribute to our climate goals, while supporting biodiversity and sustainable land management.

Finlay Carson: My constituents in Galloway are again facing a tidal wave of applications for new wind farms in an area that already has a disproportionately high number of existing wind

turbines, with many more approved and awaiting construction.

Building on potential sites north of Newton Stewart will inevitably result in disturbance to peatland, which will, in turn, have a significant impact on water levels in the River Cree and the Penkiln burn. Newton Stewart and Minnigaff suffered serious flooding in 2015. Many homes were lost and businesses are only now recovering.

Although renewable energy is important, peatland preservation and restoration are equally important, as the minister set out. Will the minister assure my communities that peatland, and its role in flood prevention, will be given priority over inappropriately sited wind farms?

Gillian Martin: Work is currently under way to assess the operation of and, if necessary, update or replace the carbon calculator. The Scottish Government will ensure that adequate tools and guidance are available to inform the assessment of carbon impacts arising from proposals to develop peatlands and other carbon-rich soils.

I am delighted that Finlay Carson recognises the importance of restoring and protecting peatland. He will be keenly aware that the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill proposes the licensing of muirburn on peatland and I hope that his interest is a signal that the Conservatives will support the Government's bill, which will limit the destructive burning of peatland, for all the reasons that he identifies.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): NatureScot's peatland action programme grants funding to landowners to carry out peatland restoration, often by hiring private contractors. That means there is less scrutiny of working conditions, value for money and environmental impacts. Why is the Scottish Government outsourcing peatland restoration, rather than investing in democratically accountable and unionised public sector jobs?

Gillian Martin: If Mercedes Villalba has any concrete evidence of instances of concern regarding working practices in peatland restoration and wants to write to me about those, I would be happy to look at them.

A75 and A77 Improvements

6. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish a delivery plan for improvements to the A75 and A77 trunk roads. (S6O-02741)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The delivery plan for the strategic transport projects review 2 is currently being prepared and will contain details of future improvements on both the A75 and A77.

This Government is already delivering improvements to both roads. This year alone, we will deliver more than £3 million-worth of vital structural maintenance on the A75 and resurfacing works worth £1.4 million on the A77.

We have been in discussion with the United Kingdom Government on the A75 specifically for more than a year, since it said that it wanted to fund aspects of the A75 improvement work through UK-wide connectivity funding, but no funding has yet been delivered by the UK Government for improvements to the A75. Clarity about funding is key to determining the timelines and plans for those projects.

Colin Smyth: I hear what the minister says about discussions with the UK Government about the A75, but the commitments regarding work on both trunk roads were made by the Scottish Government in its strategic transport review and the A77 does not feature at all in the UK Government's connectivity review.

Does the minister accept that there is real frustration in the community, and from businesses such as the ferry companies operating from Cairnryan, about the fact that we do not have a clear timeline or a clear commitment to funding the promised improvements to those trunk roads? Will she agree to meet a cross-party delegation of members and representatives of local campaign groups, in order to hear why improving those vital road links is so crucial to the economy of the south-west of Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: I have already heard representations—from industry, in particular—on a number of occasions, and I think that Colin Smyth's points about Cairnryan are well made. If diary commitments permit, I would certainly be interested to meet the campaigners.

However, I reiterate that the interested parties from whom I have heard so far have said that they really want action on the realignment at Springholm and Crocketford. That is the piece of work that we understand that the UK Government wants to help to fund. There are other areas that we have been supporting and funding, not least the fact that we have supported six maintenance programmes on the A77 in this financial year alone.

As I have said to many members who have asked such questions, it should be remembered that the Maybole bypass, which has made a big difference to people who use the A77, was delivered by this Government.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The A77 is a key road for businesses and the thousands of local people who rely on it to commute to work and to visit family and friends. The number of accidents on the road is very

concerning. Public safety is at risk, and we need to see action. Will the Scottish National Party Government invest to improve that vital route, or does it plan to cut the budget for roads again next year?

Fiona Hyslop: I refer the member to my comments about the Maybole bypass. There has also been the Symington and Bogend Toll work, the Park End to Bennane project, the Glen App wide single carriageway and the Haggstone climbing lane. In addition, this year, £1.4 million has been invested at the Kirkoswald south gateway, south of Turnberry, north of Turnberry, Turnberry and Treeswoodhead Road. That investment continues. We are committed to supporting people who use the A77 and the A75.

UK Government Migration Policy (Impact on Scotland's Economy and Workforce)

7. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of United Kingdom Government migration policy on Scotland's economy and workforce. (S6O-02742)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): The UK Government's immigration system does not meet Scotland's distinctive needs, as Scotland's population story differs from that of other parts of the UK. All sectors of the Scottish economy are experiencing labour shortages as a direct consequence of Brexit and the ending of free movement across Europe.

The national strategy for economic transformation's skilled workforce programme sets out the actions that we are taking to work with employers to address labour and skills gaps. Our recently published paper "Migration to Scotland after independence" sets out proposals to introduce a welcoming immigration system that will increase our working-age population and address our skills shortages.

Keith Brown: The cabinet secretary may know that, at a recent meeting of the Parliament's Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, Professor Pacquin of the national school of public administration in Quebec confirmed that arrangements in Canada allow the National Assembly of Quebec to make decisions about economic immigration that meet Quebec's specific needs, and that that has produced substantial economic benefits for Quebec and for Canada.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that if the Scottish Parliament had similar powers, that would allow us to address the issues that we face under current UK Government policy, such as the

declining population and skills shortages that the cabinet secretary mentioned, and that, in the absence of reform of the immigration system, only independence offers us the opportunity to fully implement our own distinct system tailored to the needs of the people of Scotland?

Neil Gray: Absolutely—yes. Keith Brown makes a very salient point. This Government has consistently argued for the devolution of migration powers to the Scottish Parliament. The UK Government has blatantly ignored that. Its immigration system is not designed to meet our needs and it is having a damaging effect on Scotland's economy and communities.

Scotland has distinctive needs. Our population story differs from that of the rest of the UK. I agree that it is only through independence and having full powers on migration that Scotland can have the opportunity to devise a humane, principled approach to migration that is needs based and that delivers positive outcomes for our communities, public services and the economy, rather than one that tries to send people to Rwanda, contrary to the view of the courts.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

Michael Matheson (Expenses)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Michael Matheson ran up an £11,000 bill on his iPad and claimed the costs from the taxpayer. It was over the Christmas break, and £7,300 of that bill covered a single day, which was a public holiday. To put that into context, to run up those charges, the health secretary would have needed to have sent 8,000 emails in that one day—that is, an email written and sent every 10 seconds continuously for 24 hours—all while he was in Morocco on holiday. Does the First Minister really believe that Michael Matheson ran up all those costs on parliamentary business—yes or no?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There is clearly more to say on this issue, which is why Michael Matheson has agreed to make, with the agreement of the Parliament, a personal statement later today. I have no intention of pre-empting that statement. He will lay out in full detail what has happened in relation to use of his iPad.

Michael has, of course, agreed to pay back the full amount. He has admitted to making an honest mistake and, of course, he will elaborate on that and certainly reflect on it. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I understand that, in our politics, the very first place that we all go to is to think the very worst of each other. I hold my hands up—I have often been guilty of that, too. However, honest mistakes do happen. Michael has been a member of this Parliament since its inception. All of us who have worked with him know that he is a man of honesty and, indeed, of integrity. Instead of rushing to besmirch each other's characters, perhaps our politics would be a little better if we gave each other the benefit of the doubt.

Michael will lay out in full what has happened in relation to his iPad. The central point is that he has already agreed to pay back—I think that he has, in fact, already done this—the full amount that was incurred on this expense.

Douglas Ross: Humza Yousaf said that it was an honest mistake. He is 50 per cent right with that. He also said that he has no intention of getting into this. Well, I have no intention of letting the First Minister off with that argument, because this goes to the heart of his Government and his actions, and to the impact that this is having on people across Scotland. This morning it emerged

that Michael Matheson had cancelled a Government visit to a Glasgow general practice surgery. The health secretary has stopped doing his job because of this. That really matters when Scotland's national health service is in crisis and we are approaching winter.

It matters if there has been an attempt to dupe taxpayers into paying £11,000. For nearly a year, Michael Matheson was happy for the taxpayer to pick up the bill. He made no attempt to repay it until he was caught. His story is farcical beyond belief.

I will repeat my question to the First Minister. Can he guarantee that Michael Matheson ran up all these costs on parliamentary business—yes or no?

The First Minister: Again, Michael Matheson will lay out in full detail what has happened. He has already said, of course—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: When a question has been put to the First Minister, I am sure that we all want to hear the response. We cannot hear the response when people are shouting from their seats.

The First Minister: The response is that there is clearly more to it. Douglas Ross is absolutely right on that. What I will not do is pre-empt the personal statement that Michael Matheson has, with the Presiding Officer, agreed to make later this afternoon. He will lay out in full detail what has happened. However, importantly, when Michael Matheson was made aware of that mistake, he took corrective action, and that corrective action was, of course, to repay the full amount.

I disagree entirely with Douglas Ross on the idea that Michael Matheson has been doing anything other than concentrating on the job at hand. That is why, this morning, he was able to announce—we were able to announce—that we have secured the future of community link workers posts in Glasgow, with additional investment of £1.2 million. On top of that, he is the health secretary who ensured that Scotland was the country where there were no junior doctors strikes, and who secured annual funding of £100 million to help to reduce waiting lists.

Michael Matheson is absolutely concentrating on the job at hand, but he will lay out, later this afternoon, the full detail of what has happened in relation to his parliamentary iPad.

Douglas Ross: The health secretary is not doing his job. We know that he refused to comment on shocking accident and emergency waiting times this week because he was worried about questions about his personal conduct. Yes, we need to hear from the health secretary, but this

now goes beyond his actions. The First Minister has put his personal reputation on the line.

When the story broke, Humza Yousaf said that the £11,000 bill was a “legitimate expense”. He said that the money did not need to be repaid to the taxpayer. He called Michael Matheson a

“person of integrity and character”.

He said:

“I ... absolutely take Michael at his word.”

He gave him his 100 per cent backing. The First Minister claims that Michael Matheson's word is more important than the facts, but Humza Yousaf's integrity is at stake here.

I put a direct question to the First Minister, and he cannot just refer to the statement this afternoon. Does the First Minister still believe, as he did last week—even now, with all the evidence—that the £11,000 bill was a legitimate expense?

The First Minister: First of all, to get a lecture on principles and integrity from the party that gave us Boris Johnson is quite something. In a week when Douglas Ross's party's flagship policy on Rwanda was torn to pieces by the Supreme Court—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: First Minister.

The First Minister: —it is hardly a party to be lecturing anybody on principles—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: First Minister.

It is absolutely impossible to hear any question or response at the moment, because there is far too much noise coming from members. I ask them to desist.

The First Minister: As I said, it is clear that more has been discovered in relation to the iPad and the expense. Michael Matheson will make that clear in a statement later this afternoon.

I have absolute confidence in Michael Matheson as the cabinet secretary for health, and I will tell members why. On top of ensuring that we resolved the issue around community link workers posts in Glasgow and that we resolved the junior doctors strikes—*[Interruption.]*

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Deflection! Deflection!

The Presiding Officer: I ask you, Mr Hoy, to ensure that that is the last remark that I hear from you when you are not on your feet and have not been called to speak.

The First Minister: Conservative members do not want to hear it, because it is contrary to their claims.

Michael Matheson is the health secretary who announced £15.6 million of additional funding for the hospital at home scheme this year to deal with winter pressures. He is the health secretary who announced £50 million of funding for the Scottish Ambulance Service, and who is entirely focused on ensuring that the national health service recovers through what will be one of the most difficult winters.

As I said, Michael Matheson, upon discovering what was an honest mistake, paid back the expense in its entirety.

Douglas Ross: It was not “upon discovering” something. He claimed it—he claimed £11,000 from the taxpayer.

All that I have asked Humza Yousaf is this. Does he still agree, as he did last week, that that is a legitimate expense—yes or no? Does he agree that those costs of £11,000 were run up purely on parliamentary business—yes or no? I have asked that three times, and three times I have not had an answer.

The fact is that the First Minister should have immediately launched an investigation into the matter. He should have demanded that Michael Matheson hand over the device to be examined. Instead, he is the last person in Scotland who still believes his health secretary’s ridiculous claim.

If the story changes to be about family or personal usage, that still will not cut it, because it will be nearly a year after the claim, and a week into the scandal. The evidence shows that Michael Matheson claimed £11,000 of taxpayers’ money when he knew that it was not for parliamentary work. It was not just a mistake—it was dishonest.

Will Humza Yousaf do the right thing and sack Michael Matheson, or will he wait for his resignation?

The First Minister: As I have already demonstrated in my responses to Douglas Ross, Michael Matheson has been concentrating on ensuring that our NHS recovers through what will be one of the most challenging winters that it has faced. That is evidenced by the fact that, over the past few weeks, he has been working diligently to ensure that we are able to fund community link workers posts in Glasgow. I am pleased that we have been able to get a resolution on that matter.

This is, of course, a matter between Michael Matheson, as an MSP, and the parliamentary authorities.

Douglas Ross: He is your minister. You are backing him.

The First Minister: The Parliament has, of course, made it clear that it has investigated the matter—

Douglas Ross: No, they have not.

The First Minister: —but I have, in fact, answered Douglas Ross’s questions.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross!

Douglas Ross: They have not investigated him.

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, First Minister.

The First Minister is answering questions.

Douglas Ross: He is not!

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross! You have had an opportunity to put questions to the First Minister. It is extremely important that we carry out our business in an orderly fashion and show one another courtesy and respect.

The First Minister: I have answered Douglas Ross’s question. My answer was that, clearly, more has come to light, as Michael Matheson will make clear in just a couple of hours’ time. That is why he took the decision to repay the full amount of the expense. Michael Matheson will lay that out later this afternoon.

He will then continue to do what he has been doing for weeks and months, which is ensuring that our NHS gets all the support that it needs during one of the most difficult periods in its history.

Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board (Corporate Homicide Investigation)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** While the health secretary fights to save his job, the crisis in the national health service continues. Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board has been named as a suspect in a corporate homicide investigation into the deaths of four patients, including 10-year-old Milly Main.

For years, Milly’s family have sought justice but, years on from the case first being raised, no one has been held to account and no one has lost their job. The chair, John Brown, who has overseen the scandal, comes to the end of his term in a few weeks. However, despite being chair of the only public body in Scottish history to be named a suspect in a corporate homicide case, he is to be kept on by the Government as an adviser on NHS good governance. An adviser on NHS good governance—you could not make this up.

What message does that send to grieving families, and what does it say about the First Minister’s judgment, that the man who presided over this scandal will continue to advise his Government?

The First Minister: First of all, my thoughts and condolences continue to go to the families who

have been impacted and affected. Let me pay credit to Anas Sarwar, who I know has provided support to many of those families who have been so tragically impacted and affected.

Where Anas Sarwar and I vehemently disagree is that I, of course, believe that the Government has taken action. That is why we established the public inquiry in the first place. The entire purpose and point of a public inquiry is to get to the truth of these matters. I obviously cannot comment on a live police investigation. It is important for me to say that individuals have not been named in relation to the health board. In that regard, it is the health board of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde that has, as a corporate entity, been named as a suspect.

I say to Anas Sarwar that, although he may wish to be the judge and the jury in the investigation, it is my job to ensure that I do not interfere or intervene in either the public inquiry or, indeed, a live police investigation. We will hold the board to account when necessary. That is why the oversight board was established in the first place and why we ensured that the 108 recommendations were completed. We will allow the independent inquiry and the independent police investigation to get on with the job that they are meant to do without the Government interfering.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister's judgment is called into question, because Jeane Freeman put those people into special measures and Humza Yousaf lifted them out of special measures and empowered them.

Let me be clear: John Brown should not be advising the Government and he should not hold any public appointments while the criminal investigation and the public inquiry continue. The chief executive of the health board, Jane Grant, has been in post since before Milly died. During that time, she has been paid more than £1 million. She has led an organisation that is now being investigated for corporate homicide, that has gaslit grieving families, shut down and bullied NHS staff, and called into question the results of an independent review that exposed fatal infections in children. She will continue to run the health board while the police investigate her actions and those of the people who report to her. In any other walk of life, suspects would not be allowed to walk free on a crime scene.

Why does the First Minister continue to back, and not sack, the chief executive of the health board?

The First Minister: To be absolutely clear, unless Anas Sarwar has other information that is not in the public domain, individuals such as Jane Grant have not been named as suspects. It is of

course NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, as a corporate entity, that has been named as a suspect. It is a suspect, and it is important that the police investigation is allowed to continue. As I said, Anas Sarwar may wish to be the judge and the jury. It is important that I allow the police investigation to happen without interruption.

Anas Sarwar has made the point that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde was de-escalated. He is right—it was de-escalated—but the entire point is that it was de-escalated because it made improvements in performance following the completion of all 108 recommendations outlined in the independent review. Is Anas Sarwar seriously suggesting that, having completed all the recommendations from the oversight board, no appropriate action should have been taken?

On patient safety, which is at the very heart of the issues, I am pleased that Parliament was able to pass the Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland Bill. On top of that, we have taken many actions in relation to patient safety. I will continue to ensure that we allow the public inquiry and police investigation to take their course unimpeded, without interference from the Scottish Government. At the same time, we will do everything that we can to ensure patient safety in our NHS.

Anas Sarwar: It is such a tragedy that, every week, the First Minister continues to demonstrate how completely out of depth he is in his position.

We have the first ever corporate homicide investigation of a public body in Scottish history, and those are the answers that we are getting from Scotland's First Minister. Deadly mistakes were made, facts were denied, a cover-up is continuing and, to this day, no one—not a single person—has been held to account. Instead, incompetence is rewarded. This is not just the story of that health board; it is the story of the Scottish National Party Government. From deleted WhatsApp Covid messages to the leadership of the health board being allowed to continue in their jobs, it has all been so that the Government can try to save face, while families grieve the loss of loved ones.

First Minister, your choices have consequences. On Monday, Kimberly Darroch, the mother of Milly Main, said:

"I've never been able to celebrate Milly's life like I should be. Anytime I think of Milly, I think of all the pain that day caused and continues to cause. ... I feel that pain the day I lost her every single day because of all of this."

First Minister, for once, do the right thing: sack the leadership of that health board.

The First Minister: I cannot imagine the pain of losing a child. It is every parent's worst nightmare, without a shadow of a doubt. I have, of course,

paid credit to those who have supported Kimberly Darroch, and other families who have suffered such a loss.

What I am interested in is action. That is why the Government established the oversight board. It is why we established the public inquiry, introduced and passed the Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland Bill and introduced the duty of candour. It is why we established the independent national whistleblowing officer—the first of its kind in the United Kingdom. It is why we ensured that there are whistleblowing champions in every single health board. We will continue to demonstrate that leadership.

I always know that Anas Sarwar is faltering when he goes for the personal attacks. It is something that he has done throughout his time as leader of the Scottish Labour Party. I remind him about his version of leadership. Just yesterday, we saw a demonstration of the lack of leadership that Anas Sarwar is able to show. If, in the face of thousands of innocent men, women and children in Gaza being killed, Anas Sarwar cannot even demand that his own Labour members of Parliament back a ceasefire, that is not a version of leadership that I will subscribe to.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-02537)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I have a response to a freedom of information request that shows that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service contacted the Scottish Government four years ago about having to prop up station ceilings because of dangerous concrete. RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—is in 14 of those ceilings, from Milngavie to Portree. The chief fire officer asked for £70 million to fix the ceilings, but ministers actually cut the fire service's capital budget in real terms.

Fire station roofs were the canary in the coal mine for the concrete crisis that is now affecting schools and hospitals, and yet the Government was nowhere on that. It did not tell Parliament about it, it ignored the issue internally and it even cut budgets. Firefighters run towards danger on every job. They should not have to face it when they return to base. Would the Government have ignored dangerous concrete for four years if it had been found in the ceiling of Bute house?

The First Minister: What we and many of our public bodies and local authorities have been doing is following the guidance of the Institution of Structural Engineers. It is important that we continue to align ourselves with that important

guidance, and my understanding is that, in the overwhelming majority of cases where RAAC has been found, appropriate mitigations have been put in place.

Yesterday, I had a meeting with the Scottish Trades Union Congress, at which the Fire Brigades Union made a passionate plea in relation to the budgetary position of the service, in terms of capital and resource, and RAAC was mentioned in those discussions. I will, of course, give those calls absolute consideration, as will the Deputy First Minister, when we work up the budget next month.

What I will say to Alex Cole-Hamilton is that the Government has taken extensive measures and action, alongside our partners in local government and other public bodies, in relation to the RAAC issue. I am happy for the Government to provide Alex Cole-Hamilton with a written response, with all the detail of the actions that we have taken.

Glasgow Low-Emission Zone

4. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the impact of the low-emission zone in Glasgow. (S6F-02550)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government remains committed to tackling air pollution through the introduction of low-emission zones in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. We already know that many drivers have taken action to prepare for LEZs following our awareness-raising campaigns. In addition, we have provided substantial funding to reduce emissions from midlife buses and taxis and supported those who are most in need of assistance to switch to sustainable and less polluting means of travel. More than £10 million has been provided through the LEZ support fund since 2019, resulting in almost 3,000 non-compliant vehicles being disposed of or retrofitted with cleaner technology.

It is too early to comment on the impact on air pollution since LEZ enforcement commenced on 1 June 2023. That is because the data needs to be collected over an appropriate period and analysed. However, we look forward to receiving the statutory LEZ reports on air quality data from Glasgow City Council in due course.

Stephanie Callaghan: It is encouraging that the most recent figures show a drop in the number of fines that are being issued in Glasgow's low-emission zone, which indicates that public awareness is growing. What interactions are taking place between the Scottish Government and other councils in Scotland that are looking to implement similar LEZ schemes as we work

together to move towards a cleaner, greener and healthier transport system?

The First Minister: I was pleased to see the number of penalty charge notices being issued falling month on month since July. I believe that that shows the intended deterrent effect of increasing surcharges for subsequent contraventions of the LEZs.

I am pleased that progress is being made on the other cities' low-emission zones. We know that, when it comes to the challenges of air pollution right across Scotland, these measures are increasingly important. Enforcement of the LEZs will commence on 30 May 2024 in Dundee and on 1 June 2024 in Aberdeen and Edinburgh. It is important that, in the face of a climate crisis that we can all see in front of us almost every day, we do everything that we can to mitigate it. Further, and importantly, low-emission zones are an important public health measure, particularly in some of our most polluted urban areas.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I can tell the First Minister that at least 150 motorists are being wrongly issued fines every month for driving through Glasgow's low-emission zone, and that Glasgow City Council says that it does not know what to do with the colossal sums—£0.5 million so far—that it is raising. Should it not have sorted that out before introducing this botched scheme?

The First Minister: It is hardly a surprise that every time the Government or, indeed, local government brings forward any even small or mild measure to tackle the climate crisis, it is opposed by the Conservatives time and again.

Let us be absolutely clear that all revenue above that incurred in running the LEZ scheme can be used only for activities that help to reduce air pollution or contribute towards achieving our climate change targets. I know that Glasgow City Council will be thinking about where it can spend that money to help to reduce air pollution or to meet its climate change targets.

I say to Graham Simpson and the other Conservatives that they cannot continue to be climate deniers; they have to get with the main stream and support anybody—whether that be national Government or local government—who is tackling the dangers of the climate crisis.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The city of Glasgow, as the most locked-down city in the United Kingdom, desperately needs people to return to the night-time economy. Taxis are key to ensuring that people have confidence that they will be able to get home, but taxi drivers have had to fight for every concession to help them to comply with the LEZ. Taxi drivers tell me that there is only one garage that will help them to comply and the

waiting list goes as far as 2026, but they have only a year to comply. Given that, as the First Minister said, other cities will face the same challenges, will he look into having a national grant scheme? What else can be done to help the taxi trade to comply? Given that Scotland's largest city needs to come out of the pandemic and recover, it is very important to deal with this.

The First Minister: This is, of course, an important issue. We all value the night-time economy and the important role that taxi drivers play in it.

It is important to note that it is not necessary to purchase a new taxi or an electric taxi to be LEZ compliant. For taxi operators who wish to change their vehicle, some older taxis might be suitable for retrofitting. However, I take Pauline McNeill's point. If, as she said, there is only one garage that can help and it has extremely long waiting lists, I will ensure that we liaise with Glasgow City Council to see what support we can provide.

It should be said that the LEZ support fund has provided grant funding for taxi retrofits since 2019. Since it opened, more than 300 taxis have taken up funding for retrofitting. A fund is therefore available, but I take the points that Pauline McNeill has raised very seriously, and we will explore and examine with our partners in Glasgow City Council whether there is more that we can do.

ScotRail Services (Alcohol Ban)

5. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on when the Scottish Government will review its ban on alcohol consumption on ScotRail train services. (S6F-02532)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First, I should acknowledge that there is quite a wide range of views on that issue. My priority is ensuring that ScotRail services are safe and enjoyable for all users and staff, and specifically for women and girls. We know about the role that alcohol often plays in making women feel unsafe. That is why the Minister for Transport has asked officials at Transport Scotland to engage with the British Transport Police, ScotRail, Scottish Rail Holdings and Transport Focus, among other organisations, to ensure that all views on continuing the alcohol ban on ScotRail trains are given due consideration and all impacts are assessed.

Following a meeting last month, we have written to trade union leaders to ask for their views on the issue. We will, of course, update Parliament in the most appropriate way when a decision has been made and we have taken into account all the views of stakeholders.

Douglas Lumsden: It is now three years since alcohol was banned on ScotRail trains as a Covid precaution measure. ScotRail and the British Transport Police have told me that the ban is unworkable. People who indulge in antisocial behaviour are ignoring the ban and drinking anyway. It is the law-abiding Scots who are being penalised. Therefore, is it not time that the Scottish National Party showed some trust in the Scottish public, scrapped this draconian rule and got more people back on the trains, especially during the upcoming Christmas period?

The First Minister: I will say a couple of things in response to Douglas Lumsden's question. I appreciate that there is a wide variety of views on the issue. That is exactly why the Minister for Transport has asked for a variety of stakeholders to be engaged. I have already mentioned some of the stakeholders; they include the British Transport Police, Transport Scotland, ScotRail, trade unions and others. We will give appropriate weight to those stakeholders and—as I am sure Douglas Lumsden will not dispute—we will give particular weight to the voices of women and girls, who are often those who tell us that they can feel unsafe when it comes to antisocial behaviour.

I do not have a fixed view regarding the evidence that will be presented, but if the evidence points towards the ban being lifted, we will explore that and give it appropriate consideration.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): While the ban is in place—and noting that there is antisocial behaviour other than drinking alcohol—can the First Minister say anything about the enforcement of it? I understand that some staff are getting body-worn cameras. Is there any evidence of the effectiveness of those cameras?

The First Minister: The use of body-worn cameras is an operational matter for ScotRail, but it is important to clarify that staff are not expected to enforce the alcohol ban on ScotRail trains; the enforcement of the alcohol ban is a matter for the British Transport Police. The expansion of body-worn camera provision for staff through the roll-out of 900 new cameras across ScotRail is part of a £1.6 million investment in tackling antisocial behaviour on the rail network. That is not specifically targeted at the consumption of alcohol on ScotRail services; it is part of a wider effort across the railways to make staff safer while carrying out their duties and to improve the experiences of the travelling public.

Research indicates that body-worn cameras can positively influence customer behaviour and can reduce a wide range of antisocial behaviours. I am sure that ScotRail will continue to update Transport Scotland and the Minister for Transport on the matter.

Social Care (Pay)

6. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what immediate action the Scottish Government is taking to address the reported crisis in social care, in light of the letter from the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland stating that the social care pay uplift is insufficient. (S6F-02538)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I place huge value on those in our social care workforce and the exceptional care that they provide. I am fully committed to improving their pay. To reflect that, the £12 minimum pay rate from April 2024 represents an increase of more than 10 per cent from the £10.90 minimum rate that was introduced in April this year, and those workers have had a 14.3 per cent increase over the past two years. For workers in children's services, who previously received the national minimum wage, the increase will represent a minimum increase in pay of 15.2 per cent compared with April 2023 levels. We are doing all that we can within the devolved responsibilities and budgets to address the cost of living pressures. However, as a result of 13 years of Tory austerity, there has never been greater pressure on our public finances. If only we had full powers over our budget, we would not have to be at the whim of an austerity-driven United Kingdom Government.

Jackie Baillie: I am pleased to hear how much the First Minister values social care. He will know that vacancies for social care staff are up and that turnover is up. Some providers are handing back contracts, because they are unable to deliver quality care due to a lack of staff. The First Minister announced that social care pay would rise to £12 from April 2024, but that is now the uprated rate for the real living wage, so any advantage has been eroded. Does the First Minister believe that social care staff deserve the bare minimum in pay? If not, will he include revised proposals in the budget to properly value our hard-working social care staff?

The First Minister: We do value our hard-working social care staff, and that is why we have agreed to increase their pay by more than 10 per cent from the £10.90 minimum rate that was introduced in April this year. I fully accept, having engaged with the social care workforce, that they want us to go further and to go faster. I completely respect and understand that. We are, of course, constrained by our budget.

I remind Jackie Baillie that it was her colleague Anas Sarwar who said that he had a presumption against income tax rises. Jackie Baillie seems to be asking us to increase significantly the pay of social care workers to £15 an hour. That would cost the Government an additional £1.2 billion. On the one hand, Jackie Baillie and the Scottish

Labour Party are saying that we cannot raise revenue in any way, shape or form but, at the same time, we have to find £1.2 billion to increase the pay rate to £15 an hour.

We will engage with the Scottish Labour Party. We are in the run-up to the budget. However, if Jackie Baillie is asking us to spend in the order of £1.2 billion, she has to tell us, if she has any credibility whatever, where we will find that money from.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries.

Ferry Services (Isle of Arran)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Last Friday, technical faults meant that both ferry services to Arran—between Ardrossan and Brodick, and between Lochranza and Claonaig—were off, with cancellation continuing into Saturday. Given the continuing impacts of ferry disruption, what economic assistance will the Scottish Government consider to enable businesses on Arran to survive what is already proving to be a very challenging winter?

The First Minister: I thank Kenneth Gibson not only for his question, but for his invitation to me to speak to business and community representatives on Arran earlier this year. Having had those conversations, I absolutely recognise the severe impact that that disruption has, regrettably, had. The best thing is for Caledonian MacBrayne to ensure that such disruption does not happen. That is why the Government is absolutely committed to investing in our ferry services and delivering six new major vessels to Scotland's ferry network by 2026.

The chartering of the MV Alfred is a further example of that commitment. CalMac was able to redeploy the vessel last weekend to pick up services on the Ardrossan to Brodick route.

That being said, on my visit to Arran I heard very clearly from people in the community there that they want better engagement with CalMac. I will ensure that the Minister for Transport provides Kenneth Gibson with updates on how that conversation has been going.

Child Disability Payment (Processing Times)

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Today it has been reported that processing times for child disability payment applications have risen to more than 100 days. That represents just the latest failure of Social Security Scotland to deliver for people who are in need. Does the First Minister believe that those shocking delays embody “dignity, fairness and respect”?

The First Minister: I understand that Jeremy Balfour has been invited to visit the agency if he wishes. I do not know whether he has taken it up, but the invitation to him to do so remains. The agency will be able to talk him through the numerous actions that it is taking to reduce processing times.

I do not disagree with Jeremy Balfour that the processing times are far longer than we want them to be. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and I have spoken at great length and in great detail about a number of actions that the agency is taking. I will ensure that she responds to Jeremy Balfour with full details of those.

The positive aspect of the most recent statistics is that, for many of our benefits, the redetermination rate here in Scotland is much lower than that of the United Kingdom.

I accept that the agency might be taking slightly longer to process applications at the moment, but it is really important that we get the right decision the first time round in as many cases as possible. I will ensure that Jeremy Balfour receives a full update from the cabinet secretary on the actions that we are taking.

Closure of BT Call Centre (AIness)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): As the First Minister will know, yesterday the BT Group confirmed the closure of its AIness base. Some 100 jobs will be lost, which will impact one in 50 local residents in the town. What talks has the BT Group had on preventing those job losses, given that it has benefited from and enjoyed hundreds of millions of pounds of Government funding?

The First Minister: I will ensure that the relevant cabinet secretary engages directly with Rhoda Grant on any support that we are able to provide. These are extremely difficult times for the group of staff involved. We do not want job losses and will do everything that we can to prevent them. If it looks as if they are necessary and will occur, we can engage the partnership action for continuing employment initiative—PACE—and insist on redeployment where possible. However, we want to see whether we can avoid the 100 job losses that Rhoda Grant mentioned. I will ensure that, following First Minister's question time, the cabinet secretary will engage with Rhoda Grant directly.

Public Sector Contracts (Illegal Settlements)

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): By making calls for a ceasefire in Gaza, the First Minister has shown the moral leadership that is completely lacking at Westminster. Although the focus is, rightly, on trying to stop the slaughter that

is happening there, it is clear that more than 180 Palestinians have been killed by extremist Israeli settlers and soldiers in the West Bank, and 1,000 have been forced to flee their villages. The United Nations has identified 97 companies that are complicit in Israel's illegal occupation through its West Bank settlements.

The Scottish Government, rightly, takes a very strong stance against support for any company that is still trading with Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Will the First Minister confirm that any company that is complicit in illegal occupation—whether it be of Palestine or of Ukraine—will be banned from receiving public sector contracts or grants here in Scotland?

The First Minister: It is worth reiterating that it is also the position of the UK Government that such settlements are illegal, and that most of the international community agrees with that.

When Ivan McKee was the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise, he wrote to a small number of companies that were on a United Nations list and had links to the Government or public bodies to ask what steps they were taking in relation to working in illegal settlements.

My understanding is that we are somewhat constrained in what we can do under the devolved settlement, but I make it very clear to Ross Greer that we will examine what we are able to do. Anybody who is profiteering from illegal settlements anywhere—wherever they are, including in the occupied territories—should not be able to profit from public contracts here.

Let us explore what is possible within the limitations of devolution. I join Ross Greer and many others across the chamber in urging the international community to get right behind a ceasefire—of course, a ceasefire now.

Migration

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Our approach to migration and refugees should have dignity, fairness and respect at its core, as opposed to the United Kingdom Government's hostile environment approach, which we currently have to endure.

Yesterday, the UK Government's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda was ruled to be illegal by the Supreme Court. Can the First Minister provide information on any assessment of those plans by the Scottish Government? Will he confirm that more than £140 million of taxpayers' money, including Scottish taxpayers' money, has been squandered on that illegal scheme? Has he heard a single word of criticism from any Tory MSP of the huge waste of taxpayers' money on that unworkable, scandalous and illegal scheme?

The Presiding Officer: I call the First Minister to respond on matters for which the Scottish Government is responsible.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am afraid that all that I heard was a whole bunch of groans from Tory MSPs when Keith Brown mentioned the need for a humane asylum system here in the UK, which is exactly what we need. We need a humane system that does not leave asylum seekers stuck for years in destitution without the right to work.

We recently launched our paper on migration in an independent Scotland; it sets out our approach to migration, which is based very much on the values of dignity, fairness and respect. Migrants who come to this country contribute more than they take; they bring skills and experience that greatly benefit our economy and they enhance our society's diversity.

The UK Government's policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda is morally repugnant and has now been confirmed as unlawful, too. That policy should be consigned to the dustbin of history and should have no place in a modern and humane society.

Ayr Station Hotel Fire

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): It is almost eight weeks since I raised in the chamber the issue of the fire at Ayr station hotel. Ayr station is still closed, the surrounding roads are closed because of safety concerns and local businesses are suffering. I ask again what funding and help the Scottish Government will provide to help to find a speedy resolution.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Sharon Dowey for raising an important issue. All our hearts go out to the communities that have been affected by the disruption from the Ayr station hotel fire. I will ensure that a written update is provided to Sharon Dowey on the actions that we have taken alongside our partners in Ayrshire. I again commend our brave firefighters in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, who diligently and efficiently dealt with the tragic fire at the hotel. I will ensure that Sharon Dowey gets full details of our interactions with the local authority and of the support that we can provide.

Education Reform

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): This morning, the Institute for Fiscal Studies published a report that shows that children in Scotland are falling behind in science and maths, and that the gap between the test scores of the richest children and those of the poorest children has grown. Yesterday, headteachers were the latest group to join a chorus of experts who say that the

Government's inaction on reform is hurting the poorest students. Does the First Minister accept that, with every day that passes while his Government dithers on the key decisions that are needed on reform, he is denying Scotland's children the opportunities that they deserve?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): No—I do not agree with that characterisation at all. We are committed to substantially eliminating the poverty-related attainment gap, but that is being made far more difficult by a Westminster Government that is hell bent on deepening poverty at every stage.

We are making progress on reducing and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. The recent Audit Scotland report and exam results show that the gap between attainment levels in the least-deprived areas and those in the most-deprived areas has narrowed from the 2019 level—the pre-pandemic level. I can send Pam Duncan-Glancy full details about the narrowing of that gap and the progress that we are making.

We are absolutely committed to continuing to narrow the gap. That job would be made far easier if we did not have the headwind of austerity that the Westminster Government has inflicted on the people of Scotland.

Community Link Workers (Funding)

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Community link practitioners play a vital role in general practitioner surgeries, including in my constituency. It is, therefore, welcome that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care has confirmed that the Scottish Government will provide additional funding over three years to help to preserve the existing community link worker programme within Glasgow city health and social care partnership. Can the First Minister provide further information about that funding and how it will be directed to continue to deliver positive health outcomes in communities?

The First Minister: I agree entirely with Ivan McKee's sentiments. Community link workers are absolutely vital to the communities that they serve. Every member who has had the pleasure of interacting with community link workers knows how much they are valued—not just by the communities but by the general practices in which they serve. They are at the forefront of our efforts to address health inequalities.

Since we learned of the risk to those vital services, we and Michael Matheson have engaged extensively over several months with the Glasgow health and social care partnership to find a solution. I am pleased to confirm that we will provide that partnership with £1.2 million to sustain full provision of community link workers. As Ivan

McKee rightly said, we have offered that funding on a recurrent basis for the next three years.

As I have said, community link workers are absolutely fundamental and vital to tackling the inequality that is too rife in our communities and has been exacerbated by the Westminster cost of living crisis. I hope that the decision to fund the workers for the next three years brings peace of mind not just to the staff whose posts were at risk but, most important, to the communities that they serve.

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

Points of Order

12:46

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

This week, the Scottish Government finally accepted that its claim that Scotland had 25 per cent of Europe's offshore wind potential was wholly wrong. The correct figure is 6 to 7 per cent. Angus Robertson is walking out of the chamber, but he might wish to wait for this moment. Angus Robertson was officially advised to stop using the misleading figure on 28 September 2022, but he continued to state it as truth until at least 18 October 2022, including in meetings with foreign Governments.

Members across the chamber have raised repeated concerns that that was a breach of the ministerial code. The former First Minister swept that under the carpet. What powers does the Presiding Officer have to compel the current First Minister to ask the independent adviser on the ministerial code to establish whether knowingly giving false statistics to foreign Governments is a breach of the ministerial code?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Mr Kerr for his point of order on a matter that he has previously raised and which I have previously addressed.

As members are aware, the accuracy of members' contributions is not a matter for the chair to rule on and is not covered by standing orders. However, as a matter of courtesy and respect, I expect all members always to be accurate in their contributions. The Scottish ministerial code also states that it is of paramount importance that ministers give accurate and truthful information to the Parliament and that inadvertent errors are corrected at the earliest opportunity.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

About two or three minutes ago, an email arrived to tell us that there will be a personal statement from Michael Matheson at 2 o'clock. We in the chamber—and the watching Scottish public—might want to know whether we will be able to ask questions of Michael Matheson once he has delivered his statement. If he is not going to be subjected to questions, I think that the people of Scotland will wonder exactly what is going on in this Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Kerr for his point of order. Standing orders make it clear that personal statements are not debated.

Before we move to the next item of business, I will suspend business to enable the public gallery and the chamber to clear.

12:49

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

Dying in the Margins Project

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10827, in the name of Paul O'Kane, on dying in the margins. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I advise members that we are short of time today and a number of members are seeking to speak in the debate. I hope that I can rely on members to co-operate, given that we will be sitting again at 2 pm. We must allow the parliamentary staff sufficient time to do their job in clearing the chamber, so I ask all members to stick to their time, which is seven minutes for the member opening the debate, four minutes for each member in the open debate and seven minutes for the minister.

I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to please press their request-to-speak button.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the University of Glasgow and Marie Curie research project, *Dying in the Margins*, as well as The Cost of Dying photography exhibition taken from the project; understands that the project ran from 2019 to 2023, and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI); further understands that the project shed light on what it sees as the profound effect that people's socio-economic circumstances can have on their end of life experience; understands that, as part of the project, participants who were living with a terminal illness were photographed by Margaret Mitchell to create images conveying aspects of their end of life experience, and were given a camera to document their end of life experience themselves; considers that the project highlights the important challenges that are faced by people with a terminal illness who are living with poverty, and what it sees as structural disadvantage, including, but not limited to, unsuitable housing, energy costs and lack of income support; commends the bravery of the project's participants, their families and carers, who documented their lives at, it considers, the most challenging time, to inform the public conversation around improving the end of life care for those living with poverty, including those in the West Scotland region, and what it sees as structural disadvantage; recognises the expertise of those who worked on the project, including University of Glasgow researchers, Dr Naomi Richards and Dr Sam Quinn, University of Auckland researcher, Professor Merryn Gott, and Marie Curie Head of Research and Innovation, Dr Emma Carduff; notes that the photography exhibition will be displayed in the Scottish Parliament on the week commencing 13 November 2023, and further notes the encouragement for MSPs to visit it and consider how they can tackle some of the issues that it raises.

12:52

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It is my pleasure to have secured today's debate on the dying in the margins report, which was produced

by the University of Glasgow and Marie Curie. I welcome to the Parliament family members and friends of some of the study participants who are with us in the gallery today. I am very pleased that they have all been able to join us to hear us discuss this important piece of work and the stories of their loved ones, which were shared so vividly in the exhibition and in the report.

That is a really important place to start. A dear friend said to me recently that dying is existential. It comes to us all, and the old adage is that there is nothing more certain in life. Despite all that, it touches the life of each person who is caring for a loved one with a terminal illness, and who is left behind, in different ways. We should reflect that we perhaps have only one mother, one father, one child, one brother, one sister or one dear friend, and their death will impact us in different ways. It can be exacerbated by different factors, with poverty clearly being a huge factor in the way that people experience the end of their life.

I thank all the members who signed my motion, and I look forward to hearing all the contributions in the debate. I put on record my thanks to members who have taken additional steps to highlight the work of the research and the exhibition. I thank Evelyn Tweed for sponsoring the exhibition, which is just outside the chamber. I hope that members have had a chance to see it and to discuss the report with colleagues from Marie Curie and the university.

The existence of poverty and destitution in Scotland brings shame on us all. The research conducted by the University of Glasgow and Marie Curie lays bare that poverty and destitution exacerbate the most distressing and difficult periods in the lives of an individual and their family. At a point when communities and the institutions of our society should be wrapping their arms around people to support them, they are too often let down. That we have allowed a system that means that people in their end of life are worried about whether they can heat their homes instead of spending their final months around family and friends is both unthinkable and unacceptable.

That is why I welcome what the research project has put together, because it really rips the cover off the issue. So often, population-level data can blur the real picture of what is happening in people's lives. This project cannot be accused of that, because of the strong element of case study, because of the photographs and because it relates the experience of people's lives. It is clear that it puts into high definition for all of us—quite literally—the linkage between poverty and terminal illness.

I thank the project team for that work and for the unique method of research. I also thank the

University of Glasgow researchers Dr Naomi Richards and Dr Sam Quinn; the University of Auckland researcher Professor Merryn Gott; and Marie Curie head of research and innovation, Dr Emma Carduff. I additionally thank Margaret Mitchell, who photographed the participants and created the images that have formed the basis of the study. All their hard work, their expertise and, above all, their care and compassion in presenting the issue have allowed us to shine a bright light on this very important area.

It would be wrong not to recognise and thank also those who were at the heart of the research—the participants. I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like to be diagnosed with a terminal illness and to have that put upon you when you are already experiencing huge challenge and difficulty in your life. To follow that up by inviting people into that moment to document it, photograph it, study it and publish it is an incredibly brave decision and one that could not have been easy for many. I thank those who allowed their stories to be told. For those who are no longer with us, we hold them in dear memory today.

I was fortunate to visit Marie Curie's Glasgow hospice over the summer. I got the opportunity to meet a number of the people who were being supported and cared for there. It helped me to reflect on what I had seen in the exhibition, and I met many people who were perhaps in similar circumstances. I met one man who reminded me a lot of Max, who was one of the participants in the study. Max's story was typical of many and as informative as any other. He was an army veteran with experience of homelessness and trauma. He desperately wanted to remain at home, with the freedom that we all crave, but that was very difficult, as his home was a flat up four flights of stairs and lacking in other support provisions. Any time his cancer symptoms got too difficult to manage, he was admitted to the hospice. That was even more difficult for him, because he felt that he had been taken away from his dog, Lily, whom he dearly loved, and out of his own community, where he felt comfortable and secure.

Max's story leads me nicely on to the asks and calls for action that the research makes. Max would have benefited greatly from the third ask in the report, which is to ensure that terminally ill people are offered timely and affordable adaptations to their property. We know from figures available from Public Health Scotland that, from 2021 to 2022, people who were dying spent around 90 per cent of the last six months of their life at home. Those settings are often inadequate, and whether those people can access adaptations can be a postcode lottery. People deserve the dignity of dying in their own home if that is what

they choose, and it is incumbent on all of us to work to make that an option for them.

I am conscious of the time allotted, but there are other substantial and important recommendations in the report that I know colleagues will want to reflect on in their contributions, not least recommendations relating to the cost of energy and the cost of being able to heat a home and to have life-sustaining equipment, if that is required, and the money that is available to support people and their carers.

I hope that, when the minister closes, she will reflect on some of those asks directly and give us a sense of what the Government will do to push the agenda forward. I hope that she will meet me, Marie Curie and the researchers to discuss those issues in more detail.

As I said at the beginning, death and dying come to us all, but they do not impact us equally, because our society remains too unequal. In the most difficult moments of life—at the end of our lives—we must afford everyone decency, comfort and respect. I think that that is the very minimum that we would expect for ourselves and for everyone in our society. I hope that, through this debate and the research project, we can reflect on that going forward from here and make a real difference.

12:59

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Dying is not something that most of us want to talk about, but we must. As policy makers, we have a responsibility to all our citizens from cradle to grave. The cradle bit is easy to talk about—doing all that we can to make sure that every child who is born here arrives in safety, comfort and love. It is not everything, but the box of essentials to help parents to keep each new Scottish baby warm and safe—the baby box—is a good reflection of that wish for an equal start.

We are perhaps not as good at talking about the end of life—perhaps it does not have the same feel-good factor—but we cannot ignore inequity at the end of life. We must have our eyes open, which dying in the margins, the joint study and exhibition that has been undertaken by the University of Glasgow and Marie Curie, helps us to do very well. I am very grateful to them for their work, and I am in awe of the research participants. I welcome to the gallery everyone who is involved.

This first-of-its-kind study, examining barriers to and experiences of dying at home for people who are living in poverty, shares the direct experience of participants through Margaret Mitchell's images and the participants' words. It is hugely powerful. I am grateful to Evelyn Tweed for sponsoring the exhibition in the Parliament.

I also thank Paul O’Kane for securing cross-party support and bringing this important topic to the chamber, giving us all the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. His speech was very thoughtful and a good start to the debate. Members’ business debates can be quite small affairs, particularly after First Minister’s question time, but I want everyone, particularly those in the gallery, to know that a debate can be the start of something and not just an event in itself.

In opening the debate, Paul O’Kane spoke about Max. For me, it was Marie’s story that struck me, perhaps because she was the same age as I was when I had a serious illness, and I reflect on the quite different experience that I had. Marie specifically spoke about the cost of taxis to get to her treatment. I was fortunate to have a family member move in with me and take on the specific task of running me to hospital, which made treatment a lot easier. In my area, Ayrshire, we have an excellent charity called Irvine & Troon Cancer Care, which provides that service for people who need it. It reflects the—I do not like the term—postcode lottery and the different experiences that folk have. We should not have to rely on location-specific charities to ensure that patients can fully take part in their treatment. It would be interesting to hear the Government’s reflection on that.

I support all the asks that are set out in the Marie Curie briefing. As well as actions for the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments in regard to finance, there are probably policy things that can be done more promptly. Paul O’Kane spoke about aids and adaptations, and I consider that action could be taken on those now. A constituent came to me for assistance when she had been injured falling down the stairs. She had had the aid and adaptation done in her bathroom but not yet on the stairwell, which made recovery quite challenging. We can all imagine how bad that would be.

We have a short debate time, and I know that we want to hear from every member who wants to speak, so I will just say that I will commit to working with others on the topic. I will certainly go to my local authority and health and social care partnership to see whether there are policy changes that can happen promptly to make people’s lives a bit better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members who seek to speak in the debate to check that they have pressed their request-to-speak button. If they would do so, that would be helpful.

13:04

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I thank Paul O’Kane for securing the debate. I draw members’ attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests. I am a practising national health service general practitioner, and I directly treat people with terminal illness.

Only two things are certain in life: death and taxes. Although there is often no holding us back from talking about His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, most of us are not very good at discussing death. Have we told our kids our wishes? Do we know our parents’ wishes? Do we even use the words “death” and “dying” instead of euphemisms?

Death is part of life and we all want people to have a dignified death, with the space to get their affairs in order, say their goodbyes and die peacefully and free from pain. Sadly, not everyone in Scotland is at peace when they die. For those in our communities who are living with a terminal illness and are at their most vulnerable, the financial impact of their prognosis can drain a family’s savings, greatly increasing the risk for many of falling below the poverty line. For people with little or no means, or for those who have lost their job because they are sick, terminal illness is not an equaliser.

The risk of poverty is particularly pronounced for women, Scots from minority ethnic communities and parents with young children. Some even incur debts that will be passed on to their loved ones after they die. According to research with Scots in the last year of their lives, which was carried out by Marie Curie in 2019, 26 per cent died in poverty—that is 2,800 working-age Scots. The charity Crisis tells us that, in 2021, 250 people in Scotland died while homeless. Statistics such as those are important because they provide a sense of scale, but behind every percentage point there are people, families and friends.

“The Cost of Dying” exhibition on display here in Parliament shows lived experiences with poignant and often worrying case studies of those who are trying to make ends meet so they can live the remainder of their lives in dignity. I congratulate the University of Glasgow and Marie Curie on delivering the impactful dying in the margins project, which illustrates the profound effect that socioeconomic circumstances can have on end-of-life experience. In Parliament today, we welcome friends and family who participated in that project: Max’s friend Derek, Stacey’s husband Joost and Linda’s daughter Nicola among others.

The question for us here is how to respond in concrete terms to that study. This Parliament can act in areas of devolved policy, and Marie Curie provides a list of suggestions that are well worth

consideration, which include financial support for childcare for all terminally ill Scots, so that families can make the most of the time that they have left together; improved financial support for carers, so that they can focus on looking after their loved ones and making the most of the time that they have left together, without worrying about their finances; and ensuring that terminally ill people are offered timely and affordable adaptations to their property so that they can live the rest of their lives at home, if they wish. Local authorities can review eligibility for council tax support and for discretionary housing support.

As parliamentarians, we must always strive to do better. Having choice, control and the comfort of a dignified death is crucial for the terminally ill, who have already been robbed of so much by their illness. We can do more to help our fellow Scots to make memories with their loved ones and to live as well as they can, for as long as they are able to.

13:08

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am grateful to Paul O’Kane for bringing this debate to the chamber and I pay tribute to Marie Curie, the University of Glasgow and everyone who took part in their dying in the margins project. The research, and the associated photography exhibition “The Cost of Dying”, movingly highlight the experience of living in poverty with a terminal illness.

There is a strong link between premature death and poverty, and I could say much about the consequences of United Kingdom Government austerity on public health and about the role of the economy in preventing excess mortality. However, for those with a terminal illness, we must focus on the here and now and ensure that they have the support that they need to get the best possible quality of life.

Organisations across the country, including Marie Curie, offer vital support to people with a terminal diagnosis and to their loved ones. One key issue is the need to tackle the double burden of income loss and the increased expenditure caused by a terminal illness. Marie Curie found that two thirds of people with a terminal illness rely on benefits, so it is vital that we ensure sufficient support for people who are in that situation, and for their carers. I would encourage people to contact their local money advice service or MSP to ensure that they are getting everything that they are entitled to, including through Social Security Scotland, which has a fast-track application process for people with a terminal illness, with the aim being to start payments within seven working days.

Research shows that most people would rather die at home. However, for many people with a terminal illness, that is not an easy choice. As the dying in the margins work notes, part of the issue—especially nowadays—is to do with the cost of energy. This week, the Scottish Government’s energy minister, Gillian Martin, wrote to the UK Government on the need for a new social tariff mechanism, to be funded from energy windfall taxes, which would support the people who need it most.

Too many people are struggling to meet sky-high energy bills. Those bills are pushing more people into fuel poverty, and the UK Government must do more. For someone with an illness or disability, there are additional challenges. As Marie Curie points out, people with a terminal illness often start to spend more time at home; they also feel colder because of their symptoms, which means that they have a greater need to heat their home. In fact, research shows that, on average, a person’s energy bill will almost double following a diagnosis of motor neurone disease.

Therefore, I hope that the UK Government will listen to the calls for a social tariff to help the people who most need help with energy bills, and that that will be announced soon.

I commend all the people who took part in the dying in the margins research. I was certainly moved by the exhibition that was held in Glasgow, which is on display in Parliament this week. Sadly, most of those people are no longer with us, but I hope that their actions will help us to ensure that we deliver the best possible support for people to prevent more of our citizens from dying in the margins.

13:12

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my party colleague Paul O’Kane for bringing this very much overlooked issue to the chamber.

I am so glad that I had the opportunity to view the dying in the margins exhibition at the Mitchell library in Glasgow earlier this year. Like others, I found it incredibly moving. Although it is, in many ways, a heartbreaking experience, it is necessary for us to be confronted by those images of people dying in poverty. I hope that all MSPs and staff in Holyrood have had the opportunity to see the main exhibition, or even the smaller exhibition that has been mentioned, and have been able to read the report.

The stories that are highlighted by the exhibits are so often left untold, and the individuals concerned naturally felt that they were not being listened to when the last months of their life were upon them. Such an exhibition provides an outlet for people in that position and shines a light on the

warmth as well as the sorrow of the daily lives of people who are living with terminal illness.

As with so many things that we experience across the course of our lives, the process of death is influenced by the poverty and inequality that are experienced by so many. They are the root of the injustice that permeates our society, and for many, that injustice can last from the cradle to the grave.

I simply cannot accept that, which is what drove me to speak in today's debate. We must do more to stop so many having so little while the few have so much. The rich can often afford to stay at home and receive daily care directly in the place where they have lived and prospered, but for people who have suffered through a life of struggling to make ends meet, it is often the case that no such options exist, and their life ends as it proceeded, with a sense of powerlessness.

I find that to be the final injustice, and one that we should do everything to limit. Everyone deserves to have as pain-free and peaceful a death as possible, surrounded by the people who love them, in a place that comforts them and where the choice—rather than being dictated by what can be afforded—is theirs. I am thankful to Marie Curie for all the dedicated support that it provides to people, but the cost of dying often takes over. The exhibition's use of the images enhances the words and what we have said in this debate.

I, too, was touched by some of the experiences of people in the exhibition, including Deep and Max. When I saw the image of Max and read the words, I thought, "Good on him that he did what he wanted to do." We should be supporting that. If our economy did not simply forget about people such as Max, that would not be necessary. However, for many of those in power, it is much more convenient simply to pay no heed to the poverty that blights our society. They forget that it could happen to any of us, and we would then wish for compassion and fairness. Let me be clear: my belief is that we need not have an economy that works only for the rich. We could, rather, have one that ensures that everyone in society has the means to live and die in dignity.

I am conscious of time. I want to make sure that we all look to the conclusions of the report and, as other members have said, that we all work to make sure that we get these things in place.

13:16

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Paul O'Kane on securing this debate. The subject has affected many of us deeply. I am not often distracted during First Minister's question time, but that certainly

happened to me today when I was thinking about this debate.

After visiting "The Cost of Dying" photography exhibition, I felt compelled to speak in this debate. Colleagues have already raised serious issues around energy bills, social security support, timely access to affordable housing, and adaptations. I trust that the minister will address those when she speaks.

Seeing the dying in the margins project's exhibition was a deeply moving experience. It provided a profound visual insight into the harsh realities that people who are living in poverty face at the end of their lives. I am sure that I am not the only one who fought back tears and felt quite overwhelmed by the struggles that the participants faced, and I was also humbled by the resilience that they showed. I thank Marie Curie, the University of Glasgow and especially Dr Emma Carduff, Dr Sam Quinn and Ellie, whom I spoke to that day. Most of all, however, I thank all those who shared their intimate stories and experiences because they wanted to make life better for others. I thank them for that brave and compassionate act, for their insight and for creating such a powerful legacy.

We bear a responsibility to ensure that every citizen enjoys a fulfilling and dignified life right up until the end. However, years of harsh austerity and the cost of living crisis have made a really harsh narrative for the most vulnerable in our society, who face a disproportionate consequence of systematic poverty. The stark reality is highlighted by the "Population mortality impacts of the rising cost of living in Scotland" research that was published in the *British Medical Journal*. It mentions a projected rise in the number of premature deaths, with the rate being four times higher in deprived areas. If we are to fundamentally change people's experiences in the final years of life, we must do more to end poverty in every other year of life.

We have heard quite a bit about the costs of terminal illness. It could happen to any of us, but the lived experience of those who are in poverty in their final moments is starkly different. We have heard a lot about the costs that are associated with terminal illness and how it pushes families into further hardship. One of the quotes that I remember from the exhibition was from Amandeep, who said, "Do we heat our house up or do we eat food? It's very much getting to that point now." His decision to stay at home created a significant financial burden for his mum, who became his full-time carer. It is not unusual that family members need to reduce their work hours or quit their jobs to become full-time caregivers, and when that loss of income is compounded by

the additional costs of terminal illness, there is a double burden on families.

We also heard from Stacey, who should have been reserving her energy but who fought tirelessly for a year to access suitable housing. Stacey did find a home and was then relocated to a hospice. Just weeks afterwards, after Stacey passed away, her partner was asked to move out of the Glasgow property. I am sure that we can all agree that that was not right; surely we can look at doing something to avoid that sort of thing. Scotland must continue to prioritise social security to address economic inequalities, to eradicate poverty and to build financial security for all. Some progressive policies, such as the minimum income guarantee, can play a significant role in that respect.

Nobody should face a relentless battle to meet their basic human needs, and no partner should lose their home when they are struggling with losing their soul mate. I note that, although the Scottish Government is committed to eradicating poverty, today's debate highlights that we have a very long journey ahead of us. We owe it to all the research participants, their families and citizens right across Scotland to take note of and fully embrace the research and use every devolved power that we have to ensure that everyone can live and pass with dignity, respect, comfort and choice.

13:21

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Paul O'Kane for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I also take this opportunity to thank all those involved in the research for and production of the dying in the margins study, especially all the participants, some of whom are sadly no longer with us. All we can do is ensure that we use their bravery in participating in the project to improve the experiences of others and leave a lasting legacy.

I thank Marie Curie for bringing the exhibition to the Parliament and providing a briefing as well as the images from the project. The photo evidence speaks volumes about what the end of life in poverty looks like. As deputy convener of the cross-party group on poverty, I stress that we need an end to poverty in life, but we must also not forget or lose sight of those in poverty at the end of their life. The project will help to ensure that we do not.

Yesterday evening in the chamber, we talked about the impact of pancreatic cancer and how swiftly conditions can progress. One of the calls from the dying in the margins project is to ensure that terminally ill people are offered timely and affordable adaptations to their property. From

experience that has been relayed to me, I know that such things can take far too long. It can be a long-running saga, and it soaks up the time and energy of those who are facing the end of life, instead of their being able to spend that time with friends and family, ensuring quality of life, being able to live well and making memories with loved ones.

The option of moving people from their homes into an already adapted property at the end of life might be a solution on paper, but it is an unwanted disruption to those who wish to stay in the home where they and their families have lived for years. It must be possible to have some creative thinking on how to prioritise or fast-track adaptations for those at the end of life, and medical equipment for individual needs must also be provided swiftly, with any costs mitigated.

The cost of living crisis has pushed up food and energy bills and transport costs, and for those living in poverty, the cost of living has hugely exacerbated the squeeze on already-squeezed budgets. Put simply, it costs money to be unwell. In rural and island areas, those costs represent a greater proportion of budgets. We need a change in the criteria to include those at the end of life, and we should provide increased support to mitigate high energy bills. Although the news yesterday assured us that inflation has now reduced, a figure on a spreadsheet does not lead to milk, bread and other basics falling in cost.

Heating, washing and medical equipment are used more often by those living with medical conditions and at the end of their life. As the Marie Curie briefing highlights, carers are struggling to make ends meet, including 41 per cent of those on carers allowance. Many carers never consider themselves to be carers, as they are partners, parents, friends and children. Indeed, we should recognise that children of younger working-age terminally ill people are vulnerable, too.

Carers' contributions should not be diminished. Their supportive role is critical to the person whom they care for and to wider society, and there needs to be comprehensive support both for those at the end of life and for their carers. Moreover, once the person is no longer with us, support must be available for families and carers, because after-life costs can have a huge impact on top of the emotional cost.

This is all about dignity, comfort, security and respect. Poverty should not be a trap for anyone at any stage in life.

13:24

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank my friend Paul O'Kane for lodging the motion. The study by the University of Glasgow

and Marie Curie, supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Dr Naomi Richards, is all the more important because we know that life expectancy in Scotland is not going up—it is coming down. We know that, by 2040, up to 10,000 more people than now will be dying, with end-of-life support needs, in Scotland; that poverty and inequality are rising and fuelling premature mortality; that people are dying before their time.

The fact that much of that is hidden, socially invisible, out of sight and silent is not acceptable; it should not be politically invisible, out of sight or silent. What this important research does is describe the shame of poverty—not the shame of those who are living in poverty but our shame that we allow it to exist at all.

The story told in the dying in the margins report is both harrowing and uplifting. Margaret Mitchell's images are beautiful. The people in them are beautiful. They bear witness to the real lives of real people in the world as it really is. They are stories, often in the past tense, because most of these beautiful souls are dead, but they are not historical. They are a portrait of what is happening now. It is a mirror up close to the grinding poverty in Scotland today, which strips too many people of human dignity and basic human rights at their time of life, and at their time of death.

It serves as a reminder that being poor is not a simple lack of income and wealth, and that alone; it is also a lack of power. I say to the minister and to members of this Parliament that it is not good enough for us to simply denounce this. The question for those of us with power is: what are we going to do about it?

Are we going to implement the report's key recommendations on housing, on health and on support for front-line workers? What are we going to do to build a compassionate, decent, humane, democratic and equal society? Because there is a vicious cycle at work here: if you live in poverty, you are more likely to get sick and to live in poor and overcrowded housing, which has a direct link to poor health, both physical and mental.

We do not just want the amelioration of poverty: palliatives; we demand fundamental change. We live in an age of extremes: extreme wealth and privilege on the one hand and indescribable poverty, misery and despair on the other. Because it is a self-evident truth that we live in a class-based society, that there is a class system, that the rich are so rich only because the poor are so poor, and that there is a huge concentration of power in the hands of a few.

We need to change that at its very root—to change the balance of power in order to win not just equality of opportunity but equality of outcomes, so that people do not just live and

survive but prosper and flourish. This is about the standard of living, but it is also about the standard of dying. It is about social cohesion and solidarity and about the equal worth of all. Above all else, it is about challenging and changing all the assumptions of the existing social order and replacing them with an ethical, a better and, I would argue, a more socialist alternative.

13:29

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I commend Paul O'Kane for bringing this members' business debate on the dying in the margins project to Parliament. I thank Marie Curie and the University of Glasgow for their work in capturing the stories, both in the written word and in stunning and poignant images, of the lived experience of those with terminal illnesses and conditions as they approach the end of life. Most of all, I thank those who participated in the study—those who were approaching the end of life and their loved ones—for sharing their stories with great openness and incredible dignity and courage.

I was very lucky, as a few of us were, to meet the loved ones of some of those who participated in the dying in the margins study before First Minister's question time today, and I also saw those poignant photographs of participants during the summer, at an exhibition in Glasgow's Mitchell library.

As the convener of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on palliative care, and with Marie Curie based in my constituency, I have a particular interest in the area. However, we must all do what we can to ensure that for those living with a terminal condition and approaching the end of life, in their last few weeks and months, they have as much quality of life as possible and are as comfortable and dignified as possible. We must do all that we can to ensure that people are not dying in the margins.

Inappropriate housing has been mentioned, and it is a clear theme from the dying in the margins project. I know from my constituency case load the challenges with which someone can be presented when they are unable to get swift and suitable adaptations as they approach the end of life. Indeed, I remember a members' business debate that I held regarding the constructive work that we were trying to do on securing such adaptations for people with motor neurone disease. I think that Maree Todd was the minister at that time.

I again request that consideration be given to establishing a fast-track process for those approaching the end of life. Lack of adaptations can lead to social isolation, compromised safety and dignity and loved ones ending up in hospital

or a hospice, as opposed to ending their days at home. I am reminded of Max from the study. Max's friend, whom I was fortunate to meet earlier, was quoted as saying that he did a runner from the hospice to get back to his dog. That made me smile, because my father tried to escape from a hospice just a week or so before he died. He did not succeed, but he was proud that he had the energy to try. Therefore, Max's story landed with me on a personal level.

It is also evident from the dying in the margins project that, even when a housing move is secured, it is often during the last few days of life. I saw that from my constituency casework. We saw how loved ones often do not have security of tenancy when they are bereaved, and the impact that that has on them was highlighted strikingly in the study when Joost lost his wife, Stacey. Our Government has a housing bill coming to the Parliament next year, and that might be an opportunity to address some of those issues. I want to work in partnership with the Government to make that happen.

I also note that Mr O'Kane has requested a meeting, and I look forward to attending. The cross-party group on palliative care should have something fundamental to take forward on a cross-party basis.

There were clear financial issues running through the project's outputs in relation to terminal conditions, and calls were made on the Scottish and UK Governments. I will offer two reasonable requests that were made.

Can we do more in Scotland to support the energy costs of people living with terminal conditions? The additional cost of running medical equipment at home is unfunded by the NHS or local authorities. There are other asks of the Scottish Government in relation to the cost of living. I know that budgets are tight, but can we have a wee look at that again?

There are also asks of the UK Government. If I was diagnosed with a terminal condition while an MSP, my pension would be automatic and I would get a lump sum. People who are diagnosed with terminal conditions in the UK should get their UK pensions early. In my constituency, too many people pay into a pension pot all their life and never draw out a penny because of their life expectancy. That has to change also.

This is not the end of the story for those dying in the margins. Some have now passed, but their legacy will live on. It is up to all of us in the Parliament to ensure that that happens.

13:33

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank Paul O'Kane for instigating the debate, and I thank members for their powerful contributions. I, too, had the pleasure of visiting the exhibition at the University of Glasgow. I use the word "pleasure", because it was a pleasure. The honesty of the photographs and the stories really hit home when I visited the exhibition. There were levels of serenity and acceptance, as well as the colourful clutter of Liz's flat. All the other speakers have mentioned Max's dog, Lily, and his great escape to be home with her. The other thing that really struck home for me was Andy's Post-it notes and the connection that they gave him with his daughter and granddaughter. That was very, very powerful.

I pay tribute to the individuals and their families who took part in the project. I was truly inspired by their courage and strength in sharing their stories at the most difficult times of their lives. I have had conversations with the researchers but, sadly, I have not yet met any of the families. However, in response to Paul O'Kane's request, I should say that I would be very happy to do so. There is a recognition that they were all doing this to try and change things or, as Paul O'Kane said, to "shine a bright light" on the situation, and I thank them very much for that.

As a Government, we are committed to ensuring that everyone has the dignity, respect and care necessary to their condition right up to the end of their life. That is comprehensive care, as Beatrice Wishart described. We want Scotland to be a place where people and communities can come together to support and care for each other—Ruth Maguire's speech really emphasised this—and talk openly about planning ahead for when our health changes, and about dying and bereavement. I am sure that we can all reflect on conversations that we wish we had had with our own family members. I am certainly in that position. I would also like to reflect on what Carol Mochan said about affordability. I had a long conversation with a celebrant who emphasised that and the importance of a funeral as part of the grieving process.

One way to start having those conversations is through future care planning, which involves enabling people to talk with health and care professionals about what matters to them. The conversations are recorded and shared as a plan so that the care and support that the person subsequently receives honour that plan. Through the new palliative care strategy that we are developing, we are prioritising work on future care planning, looking at what information is available, the systems that are in place and what can be done to promote the use of such planning across

Scotland. The strategy will aim to ensure that everyone who needs it receives well co-ordinated, timely and high-quality palliative care, and care around death and bereavement support, based on their needs and preferences. That support will be available to anyone who needs it regardless of age, illness or socioeconomic background.

Being diagnosed with a life-limiting illness is undoubtedly one of the most challenging things that a person can go through. No person or their family should have to worry about their finances at such a difficult time. That is why the Scottish Government ensures that adult disability benefit applications from people with a terminal illness are fast-tracked to provide them with the support that they are entitled to as quickly as possible, as Collette Stevenson noted. We also ensure that those who are terminally ill automatically receive the highest rates of assistance that they are entitled to, with no award reviews. They are eligible for that support straight away, with no qualifying period.

I would like to take the time to recognise the incredible contribution that Scotland's unpaid carers make to our communities. The pressures that many carers face are well known to most of us. Because of that, my Government is investing more than £88 million per year in local carer support through local authority funding under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016. The Scottish Government also recognises the extra pressures on people caring for someone with a terminal illness. We have therefore made sure that they have accelerated rights to support in their caring role.

We recognise that too many people are living in poverty, which is why we are committed to breaking that cycle of poverty in Scotland, as Richard Leonard noted. We are providing more support for social justice than ever before, with our spending on social security benefits forecast to increase by nearly £1 billion in 2024-25. That includes investment to increase the value of our Scottish child payment, funeral support payment and all disability and carers benefits in line with inflation from April 2024, with an anticipated investment of around £300 million. We are also making £83 million available for discretionary housing payments this year to fully mitigate the bedroom tax, to mitigate the benefit cap as fully as possible and to mitigate other UK Government welfare cuts.

We are investing to deliver more affordable and social homes, with £3.5 billion being made available over this parliamentary session. We are taking forward a review of the current housing adaption system, an issue that was raised by Paul O'Kane, Bob Doris and other members. We will

make recommendations on how best to improve and streamline the system.

I am aware of and concerned about the pressure on household budgets, including those of disabled people, who are disproportionately impacted by energy costs. My colleague the Minister for Energy and the Environment continually urges the UK Government to take action—she has done so again this week—by using its financial and energy market levers, just as we are doing within our limited powers and fixed budget.

That is why we continue to call on the UK Government to urgently introduce a social tariff mechanism that would provide a much-needed safety net for vulnerable consumers, including disabled consumers and those who rely on medical equipment at home.

I have an awful lot more to say, but I am aware of the time. However, if the Presiding Officer is content, I will put that in a letter to everyone who has spoken.

I recognise that there is more that we can all do. As I said, we are happy to meet with Paul O'Kane.

I again thank those who allowed their stories to be told and the many people from across all sectors who deliver palliative and end-of-life care. The commitment and dedication that that takes, often in extremely challenging and upsetting circumstances, cannot be overstated. I would like to finish by offering my personal thanks for all that you do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I thank members for their co-operation in sticking to their allotted speaking times. That concludes the debate. I close this meeting until 2 pm.

13:41

Meeting suspended.

14:01

On resuming—

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-11310, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a change to the business programme. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now. I call George Adam to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 16 November 2023—

delete

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

and insert

followed by Personal Statement: Michael Matheson

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: I call Alexander Burnett to speak to and move amendment S6M-11310.1.

14:01

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): Today's business motion gives Michael Matheson the chance to outline his reasons for attempting to charge Scottish taxpayers around £11,000 for roaming charges while he was on holiday in Morocco. It has also allowed the First Minister, at First Minister's questions today, to deflect and avoid questions from Douglas Ross on his understanding of the scandal, including whether he still backs claims that the expense claim was legitimate and for parliamentary purposes only.

The current proposal does not allow for any form of scrutiny of the content of Mr Matheson's statement. At the end of First Minister's questions, in response to Stephen Kerr's point of order, both Mr Matheson and the First Minister intimated that Mr Matheson would be willing to answer questions following his statement. Therefore, the only option that the Parliament has open to it is to suspend standing orders rule 13.1.4 to allow for either questions or debate on the content of a statement.

Given that both the Government and the lead Opposition party have accepted that that should happen, there is a clear parliamentary majority for a suspension of standing orders to allow for that questioning to occur. It is only right and proper that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health

and Social Care is questioned following his statement, given the long and growing list of questions that have arisen over the past week, and which have become a distraction from his role as health secretary.

I hope that the Minister for Parliamentary Business heard the First Minister indicate his willingness for questions to be allowed and is able to support our amendment, without a division, to prevent any further delay to this afternoon's proceedings.

I move amendment S6M-11310.1, to insert at end:

"(b) that the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the Personal Statement: Michael Matheson, Rule 13.1.4 of Standing Orders is suspended."

The Presiding Officer: I call George Adam to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

14:03

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): I will take a moment to go through some of the detail. Mr Matheson made a request to the Presiding Officer yesterday to make a personal statement and offered to take questions.

As members will know, and as the Presiding Officer reiterated during a point of order earlier, taking a statement is at the discretion of the Presiding Officer, who notifies the Parliamentary Bureau. The standing orders are clear that a personal statement must not be debated, so a variation to standing orders is required if members wish to debate the statement today. Therefore, if the Presiding Officer decides to suspend standing orders to allow for questions, I would have no issue with that whatsoever.

The Presiding Officer: The first question is, that amendment S6M-11310.1, in the name of Alexander Burnett, which seeks to amend business motion S6M-11310, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a change to the business programme, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that business motion S6M-11310, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a change to the business programme, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

(a) That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 16 November 2023—

delete

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

and insert

followed by Personal Statement: Michael Matheson

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

(b) that the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the Personal Statement: Michael Matheson, Rule 13.1.4 of Standing Orders is suspended.

Personal Statement

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
The next item of business is a personal statement by Michael Matheson.

14:05

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I thank the Presiding Officer for the opportunity to make a personal statement to Parliament.

I want to address the significant level of interest in the data roaming charges associated with my parliamentary iPad during a family holiday in Morocco between 27 December 2022 and 3 January this year.

First, I want to apologise to the chamber for the cost of the roaming charges. As I set out in my public statement on Friday, I accept that the charges have come about as a result of my not updating the SIM card in my iPad to that of the new contract provider. I also recognise that I should have informed the Parliament's information technology department in advance of travelling of my holiday plans and of the fact that I would be taking two devices. That was my responsibility and I accept it in full.

I therefore think that it is important to set out to the chamber all the facts of what happened and, in particular, exactly how the charges came about. I travelled to Morocco with my family—my wife and two teenage boys—on 27 December. On the first day of the holiday, 28 December, I contacted the Parliament's IT department and told it that I was out of the country and that my parliamentary phone was not working but that my iPad was working. In the course of two phone calls, after an initial effort to get the phone working, the Parliament's IT department advised that it had checked with the network operator, which explained that my data package was suitable for use in Morocco. It also advised that I should try to remove and replace the SIM card from my phone, as the problem might be a fault with the SIM card. Nothing in those discussions led me to believe that there was any risk in using my iPad while in Morocco.

I want to be clear with colleagues that I did not knowingly run up the roaming charges bill; quite the reverse—I checked what I should do before I used my iPad. My mistake—I wholly accept this—was not to have sorted all that out long before I went to Morocco.

In January this year, I was informed of the high data charges that had accrued to my iPad. Of course, I queried the charges and Parliament confirmed that it had contacted the provider for more information. At that time, I handed my iPad

over to the Parliament for it to be checked. It is important to be clear that, throughout this time, I was not clear what had caused the high charges. I had not used the iPad for any purpose other than parliamentary and constituency business and could not understand how the costs could be so high. Parliament confirmed that the network provider was unable to give further details of what had led to the charges. In the absence of a clear explanation of how such a large bill could have happened, I thought it appropriate to make a contribution, through office allowances, of £3,000 towards the cost. Following the publication of my expenses last week, there was significant media coverage of the charges.

It was at that point—last Thursday night—when I returned home that I was made aware by my wife that other members of our family had made use of the iPad data. That was the first that I knew that the data had been used by anyone else. I had previously checked that, but the truth emerged only after the story had been in the news. I should have pressed harder; perhaps I should have been less willing to believe what I had been told. Presiding Officer, I need to be very clear with you and my colleagues that the responsibility for the iPad is mine. The responsibility for the data usage is mine. That is why my wife and I made the immediate decision to reimburse the full costs to the Parliament.

I contacted parliamentary authorities the next day to make clear arrangements to reimburse the full costs of the roaming charges and to issue a personal statement to explain that decision. In my statement, which was issued last Friday, I made no reference to the use of data by my family. As a parent, I wanted to protect my family from being part of the associated political and media scrutiny, which is something that I believe any parent would want to do. I am a father first and foremost. I can see now that it is just not possible to explain the data usage without explaining my family's role. The simple truth is that they were watching football matches.

On Tuesday, I told the First Minister that members of my family had made use of the iPad data. Yesterday evening, I provided him with a full account of the matter and of my intention to inform the Parliament.

Disclosing the information about my family has been extremely difficult. Mistakes have been made by me and by my family, and mistakes have been made in the way in which I have handled the matter. I should have sorted the SIM card and I should have investigated what happened more thoroughly. I accept that, take responsibility and apologise unreservedly. That is why the costs have now been fully reimbursed to the Parliament. That is why I have referred myself to the Scottish

Parliamentary Corporate Body under section 7 of the MSP code of conduct, so that it can consider whether to investigate the matter further to address any remaining questions to the Parliament's full satisfaction. I take very seriously the reputation of the Scottish Parliament, of which I have always strived to be a diligent member since its restoration in 1999. My wish is that I can now focus fully on the vital duties that I have as MSP for Falkirk West and as health secretary. I hope that members will accept my explanation, my self-referral under the code of conduct and my unreserved apology.

The Presiding Officer: Given the Parliament's decision to suspend rule 13.1.4 of standing orders, I will allow a period of around 10 minutes for questions. Any members who wish to put a question should press their request-to-speak button now.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am grateful to Michael Matheson for the personal statement that he has just provided. I can fully see the difficulty that it has caused him. However, questions remain. During his statement, Michael Matheson said that he could not understand how he had racked up so many data roaming charges. He went on to say that he could not explain the data usage—but, of course, he did explain it. He told the Parliament, when he claimed for expenses, that it was a legitimate expense. He promised the Parliament that it was a legitimate expense. He gave the Parliament written assurances that it was a legitimate expense.

If, as has now transpired, his son was watching football, why did he claim that he was doing parliamentary work? If he could not understand at the time or could not explain the data usage, how could he say with 100 per cent certainty to the Parliament, when claiming £11,000 of taxpayers' money, that he was doing parliamentary work? The two stories do not align. It seems that Parliament was misled when he made that claim. Does Michael Matheson agree with that?

He also said in his statement that he looked for £3,000 to be taken out of his office cost allowance. Was that his only request, or did he seek more money and more support out of available budgets?

He said that he made the immediate decision, on hearing from his wife, to repay the money, but in the statement that he made to the media and the Scottish public, he said that the issue was a direct consequence of using an outdated SIM. Did he mislead the Scottish people by using that argument, rather than what we now know to be the case?

The health secretary has belatedly been forced to be honest about the circumstances, but we

cannot ignore or forget the fact that, months ago, he wanted the Scottish taxpayer to pay £11,000 for his roaming bill. That roaming bill was accrued not due to parliamentary duties, which he claimed, and, therefore, he falsely claimed that money. Will the health secretary accept that?

Michael Matheson: In my statement, I was clear that, at the time when I was notified of the high charges associated with my iPad, the Parliament's IT department contacted the network provider to try to find out more details about how the costs had been associated with my iPad. Unfortunately, the network provider was unable to provide that information to the Parliament, and, therefore, we were unable to identify how the costs of the roaming charges associated with my iPad had been accrued.

At that time, I passed my iPad to the IT department to consider whether there was an issue with it and for it to look at the device. I also made a contribution of £3,000 to help meet the costs associated with the Parliament's IT department in meeting the overall costs. That was something that I volunteered to make to the Parliament directly.

The member referred to my statement last Friday, when I made no reference to the fact that that data usage had occurred through members of my family. As I set out in my statement, this has been a very challenging and emotional time for my family. I chose not to provide details of that in my statement on Friday, because it would implicate my children in this issue. I chose not to provide that information in order to try to protect them from the inevitable media scrutiny and political interest that that would generate. I did that as a father, to protect them.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank Michael Matheson for his personal statement. I think that anyone who has had teenage children will understand what has happened, but what people will not understand is the cover-up. That has only had the effect of heightening the media scrutiny, which understandably he did not want for his family.

I regret to say that the failure to replace the SIM card, despite reminders over several years, is wholly negligent; I regret that the failure to keep the iPad secure is equally negligent; and I regret that, on repeated occasions, the cabinet secretary gave assurances to this Parliament and made statements in the press that were wholly incorrect.

There is a serious question of judgment here, but while the cabinet secretary was focused on this mess of his own making, accident and emergency waiting times have gone up this year to the highest level, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde was named as a suspect in a corporate

homicide case and 820,000 patients are waiting too long on national health service waiting lists for treatment.

Does Michael Matheson not believe that, as a result of this serious question of judgment, people will understandably have lost confidence in his ability to do his job as the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care? I have to ask why he did not investigate the use of data when the issue was consistently raised with him by parliamentary authorities. Why is it only now that he asked his family what actually happened?

Michael Matheson: I wholly accept that the data usage and the cost associated with it are my responsibility. That is why, last Thursday, we as a family made the decision to reimburse the Parliament for the full costs associated with that.

My use of the iPad when I was on holiday was purely for constituency and parliamentary purposes. That was my understanding of all that had happened with the iPad when it travelled with us. However, it is clear that things have changed as a result of the information that I now have.

I will be very clear with Jackie Baillie. I asked for, and the IT department sought to get, further details from the network operator on exactly what the iPad had accrued the charges for, but the network operator was unable to provide that information. I also discussed the matter with my family, and I received assurances at that time. Had I known that my family made use of the data at that time, I would have met the costs associated with that. However, I did not know that. That is why, at that time, I could not understand how the costs had been accrued. When it became apparent that we had accrued the costs as a result of actions in my family, we took the immediate decision to reimburse the full amount to the Parliament. I hope that Jackie Baillie will take my reassurance that, as soon as that became apparent to us, we as a family decided to ensure that Parliament was reimbursed for the full costs associated with that.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement. Has he engaged with the Parliament on data capping on parliamentary devices in the future?

Michael Matheson: I am aware that the Parliament is undertaking a review of the existing arrangements that it has in place. With my own painful experience of the matter, I am more than happy to engage with it to offer it any assistance that I can from that experience in order to ensure that no other member experiences this type of difficulty at some point in the future.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): For a family member to access the cabinet

secretary's iPad, passwords would need to be shared. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether he has shared his device's passwords with anyone? Does he accept that that goes against general data protection regulation rules, given the sensitive information that is held on parliamentary devices? When did he first share with the First Minister that his family members used his iPad during his family holiday in Morocco?

Michael Matheson: I set out the information that I provided to the First Minister in my statement.

When I engaged with the Parliament's IT department on the difficulties that I had with my phone not operating, the advice that I was given was that I could use the iPad for hotspotting purposes. I had not used a hotspot before. My son helped to facilitate that provision. That is how there was the ability to access the data that was provided within the iPad during our holiday period.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement.

Yesterday, we spoke in the chamber about the Nolan principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. We have seen across the chamber and outside it the challenge that the statement has been. I respect that.

In MyExpenses, which we use in the Parliament to authorise payments out of the budget that is provided by the Parliament from the taxpayer, we certify that the expenditure arose and was appropriate. That was not correct in this case, was it?

Michael Matheson: The cost was accrued to the Parliament's IT provision, not through my office allowances, and it was funded centrally by the Scottish Parliament. Therefore, there was no claim for the £11,000 through my parliamentary office. I volunteered to make a contribution to the cost, given the costs that the Parliament faced as a result of the high roaming charges.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree with me that standards in public office are very important and that it is therefore right that he has referred himself to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body?

Michael Matheson: I have been in the Parliament for 24 years and have always sought to maintain the high standards of the Parliament in how I conduct myself—not just as a minister, but as an MSP—in how my constituency office operates in supporting constituents, and in how we utilise the public resources with which we are provided in order to undertake our job. They are standards that I have always sought to apply and that I will continue to seek to apply. I have

acknowledged the errors that have been made in this instance and have described the actions that I took, as soon as those errors became apparent to us, to address them by fully reimbursing the Parliament for the costs.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the personal statement.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We have had a short time to question the health secretary. I wonder what opportunities there will be for further questioning, particularly given the referral to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. On Monday, in his role as a Government minister, Michael Matheson responded to a journalist's question whether there had been "any personal use". He said:

"No. As I made very clear—"

et cetera, et cetera.

We have just heard from Michael Matheson that he knew on Thursday evening that there had been personal use. Will the investigation by the corporate body look into the conflicting statements that Michael Matheson has given to the Parliament today, what he said in his role as a Government minister on Monday and the apparent revelation from his family on Thursday evening?

Secondly, the First Minister refused to answer questions about the issue at First Minister's question time today—in particular, my question whether he still believed that the claim was legitimate. I can only assume now that he does not. When did he become aware of the matter, however? Michael Matheson said in his statement that he spoke—

Members: That is not a point of order.

Douglas Ross: Michael Matheson said in his statement that he spoke to the First Minister last night, advising—

Members: This is a question.

Douglas Ross: He advised that he would be making a personal statement. Between Thursday evening last week and yesterday, when did he inform the First Minister that he had found out that the device had been used for personal reasons?

Finally, Presiding Officer—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, questions to other members are not points of order. Points of order are intended to question whether proper procedures are being or have been followed. They relate to matters that are covered in the standing orders. I ask you to conclude very quickly.

Douglas Ross: I prefaced my remarks by asking how Parliament can get those answers, given that we have had a very tight timescale

today. I was also asking about the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body investigation.

The Presiding Officer: All members will be aware that, where there are matters to be pursued further, they should liaise with their business managers, who can pursue those matters with the Parliamentary Bureau at its meetings. The corporate body shall, of course, consider any referral.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My colleague Meghan Gallacher asked Michael Matheson a very important question to do with the security of parliamentary devices—

The Presiding Officer: I will stop you at that point, Mr Kerr.

As I have just said, if you want to avail yourself of the standing orders and look at them with regard to points of order, you will see that points of order are to cover whether or not proper procedures are being or have been followed in the chamber in the course of our parliamentary business. This is not, I suggest, the most appropriate venue for raising the question that you now wish to put.

We will move on to the next item of business, which is portfolio questions. I will allow a moment for those on the front benches to arrange themselves.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. While respecting what you have just said from the chair—that this is not the appropriate forum for asking about the security of parliamentary devices, which is an issue that will very much be of concern to the public—I ask your advice as to what the appropriate public forum is for that question to be properly addressed. What we have heard this afternoon is a clear transgression of the general data protection regulation. It is a very serious matter, indeed.

The Presiding Officer: Your comments are on the record, Mr Kerr. I will look at them, I will review them and I will be back in touch with you. I, or the most appropriate person with regard to the issues that Mr Kerr raises, will be in touch with him.

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

14:30

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time. On this occasion, the portfolio is education and skills. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Teacher Numbers

1. **Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what clarification on teacher number arrangements will be provided to local authorities this year. (S6O-02728)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Excellent teachers make all the difference in our classrooms. They are vital to ensuring that we make further progress on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, which is why we have invested to ensure that we have the lowest pupil to teacher ratio in the United Kingdom.

In this year's budget, we are providing £145.5 million to protect teacher and support staff numbers across local authorities, on condition that those numbers are maintained at 2022 census levels. That data will be available following publication of "Summary statistics for schools in Scotland" next month. We have been clear with councils that, if teacher numbers are not maintained nationally, we reserve the right to withhold or recoup funding that has been given for that purpose.

Sharon Dowe: In recent years, there has been growing concern about the number of temporary contracts for teachers, which has led to increased job insecurity in the education sector. What precisely has the Scottish Government done to end such job insecurity for our hard-working teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point about temporary contracts. It is worth saying that the number of permanent contracts has remained relatively static since 2007, at about 80 per cent, but I accept the member's challenge. It is also worth saying that the number of teachers in our schools has increased by 8 per cent since December 2014.

More broadly, there is more work that we can do to encourage people into the profession. In the programme for government, I have committed to working with our professional associations and

trade unions on a campaign to encourage people into teaching as a meaningful and worthwhile career.

On the member's point on job insecurity, I point out that employment responsibility sits with local authorities. However, this morning, I attended the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland's national conference, where the issue of recruitment came up. I have asked a number of experts to give me advice on our education workforce modelling analysis, which is an external piece of work that I have commissioned to inform our decisions on education workforce planning in future years. I hope that that will very much address the member's point, but it is worth saying that the picture has not changed markedly since 2007.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have received a number of requests for supplementary questions. I will try to get them all in, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Having the best pupil to teacher ratio in the UK is vital in providing an excellent education to our children and closing the attainment gap. What additional support does the Scottish Government provide to local authorities to close that gap and deliver the highest possible quality of education for our children?

Jenny Gilruth: We provide a number of forms of support directly to local authorities. As the member said, we have the lowest pupil to teacher ratio in the whole of the UK. In Scotland, we invest more per pupil in schools than is invested in other parts of the UK. Over this parliamentary session, we are investing £1 billion in the Scottish attainment challenge to help to close the poverty-related attainment gap. We are also providing free school meals to more than 280,000 pupils in primaries 1 to 5 and in special schools. We have provided funding for additional digital devices and internet connections in a number of parts of the school estate. We have also lifted the national minimum school clothing grant to £120 and £150 for primary and secondary school pupils respectively. All those measures help to support excellent education for all our young people.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): In some geographical and subject areas, including in science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—there are shortages of teachers. The teaching bursary scheme to attract career changers is key to addressing such shortages and spreading opportunity. However, the number of people in receipt of the bursary has decreased from 180 when it was introduced, in 2018, to only 84 in 2022. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether the number of applications for the bursary has decreased, or has the Government

chosen to cap the number of bursaries that are issued?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not have in front of me the specific answer to Pam Duncan-Glancy's question, but I am more than happy to write to her. She is absolutely right that we provide additional investment for the STEM bursary. This year, the bursary is for the first time supporting Gaelic-medium education, which is a focus for the Government.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This week, I was contacted by yet another teacher who gave up a career in industry to take up teaching. She was told just this week that no permanent contract is available for her, although she meets all the criteria. The cabinet secretary talked about the new modelling mechanism that she is looking at, but we have had mechanisms for years. I do not understand why supply and demand are so out of kilter. Will she explain that?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not aware of which local authority Willie Rennie alludes to, but one challenge is that we have 32 different approaches to teacher recruitment across the country and varying approaches to how probationers enter the system, as I know from experience. The local authority in the area that Willie Rennie and I represent has a generic approach to teaching interviews, which can sometimes be challenging for people who want to enter the profession in Fife in the middle of the academic year, which is where we are. I am more than happy to look at the specifics in the case that Willie Rennie raised.

Of course, local authorities employ our teachers directly, which is why we have ring fenced an additional £145 million to protect teacher numbers. That is hugely important and is a sign of investment from the Government. However, ultimately, our local authorities employ our teachers, so I will continue to work with them, through the workforce plan that I referred to, to help to improve the situation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Probationer Teachers (Preference Waiver Scheme)

3. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the number of probationer teachers choosing the preference waiver scheme. (S6O-02730)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The preference waiver payment is an important component of the teacher induction scheme that provides a financial incentive for probationer teachers to consider undertaking their probation year anywhere in

Scotland. Information that is provided to prospective probationer teachers clearly outlines all the options that are available to them, including the benefits of opting for the preference waiver programme. In addition, the strategic board for teacher education, which is made up of a range of key education stakeholders, is looking at the recruitment and retention of teachers, which includes considering issues that relate to the early phase of a teacher's career.

Jeremy Balfour: Figures that were released last month show that only 6.8 per cent of probationers opted to choose the preference waiver scheme. Furthermore, local authorities across Scotland received 657 fewer probationer teachers than they had requested, and rural areas were particularly affected.

It is clear that the situation is unsustainable. What action is the cabinet secretary taking to improve the preference waiver scheme and its uptake, so that more probationers opt to take up the offer next year?

Jenny Gilruth: I should probably declare an interest, as I benefited from the preference waiver payment back in 2009, when I went to Moray as a probationer teacher.

The waiver payment is set at £6,000 for primary and £8,000 for secondary. As I said in my initial response, it very much encourages teachers to consider going anywhere. We know that there are teacher recruitment challenges in parts of Scotland, and the preference waiver scheme helps to address those.

However, the member is right that there seems to have been a shift in the willingness of some of our student teachers to tick the box and go anywhere. That is problematic, because the scheme is not as popular as it once was. A few weeks ago, I held a round-table session on the issue with a number of probationers, and I heard from them a reticence to move around the country that perhaps did not exist before the pandemic.

Such challenges do not arise just in the education system—I know that they exist in the national health service and in justice, so the situation is not unique to education.

In response to another member, I set out some of the action that I am taking. The strategic board for teacher education will work with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, Education Scotland and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education to look at—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary—I have to move on to supplementary questions.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): How will the Scottish Government

continue to promote the teaching profession as a rewarding and valued career, particularly in rural communities such as mine—Perthshire South and Kinross-shire?

Jenny Gilruth: We value our teachers highly. Through the recent historic 14 per cent pay deal, teachers in our classrooms are the highest paid in the United Kingdom. We are also supporting councils with the additional £145 million that I mentioned in response to Mr Rennie.

As part of investing in our schools under the programme for government, we have a commitment to support our teaching profession by working with our partners on a joint campaign to promote teaching. As I said, the preference waiver payment, which Mr Balfour mentioned, is a really important part of that, as it gives probationer teachers financial incentives to consider undertaking their probation year in remote and rural areas, where the need is greatest.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Katy Clark has a brief supplementary question.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Probationary teachers often do not feel sufficiently incentivised to move to other parts of Scotland to teach, and they are also put off by precarious contracts. Does the Scottish Government intend to set out in guidance that local authorities should seek to eliminate the use of zero-hours and fixed-term contracts, given that we know that continuity of teaching is very much in pupils' interests, too?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please answer briefly, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: I go back to the point that about 80 per cent of our jobs in teaching are permanent posts. On the member's question about fixed-term contracts, some of those contracts arise when people go on maternity leave, so we should be mindful of that. Ultimately, local authorities are the employers, but I am committed, through the work with the strategic board for teacher education and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to seeing what more we might be able to do to improve the situation.

Schools (Abusive and Violent Behaviour)

4. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether schools should publish monthly reports on any reported incidents of abusive and violent behaviour. (S6O-02731)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Our national guidance makes clear that all schools and local authorities are expected to record all incidents of violent behaviour. Recording and monitoring play an essential role in helping schools to identify

recurring patterns of behaviour and ensure early intervention and appropriate support.

Members are aware that September's summit on relationships and behaviour in schools focused on recording and monitoring incidents. My aim from the summit process is to identify practical actions that we need to take in order to make progress, including creating a culture where staff are empowered to record incidents. Local data must then be used to ensure that schools have an oversight of issues and are responding effectively.

Alex Rowley: Hardly a week goes by without us seeing, through the media, another report of another school where behaviour has broken down. I appreciate that the cabinet secretary has held two summits and intends to hold another one, but when is she going to bring forward to the Parliament something that shows the outcome of those summits and the action that her Government intends to take? Will she put in the necessary resources to go with that action?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his question and I know that he takes a keen interest in the matter, as I have done, of course, since it was first raised in the chamber, not long after my appointment.

The point that the member makes about action will be addressed in a statement that I intend to bring to the Parliament in the next two weeks. That statement will talk to the accurate national picture. It is important for the chamber to remember that we have not carried out research on behaviour in Scottish schools since 2016, because the last round of data was in 2016. There should have been a round of data in 2020, but that was not possible due to the pandemic.

Publishing an accurate national picture is hugely important, and I intend to come to the chamber with an identified action plan for how we can help local authorities to improve the current situation.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As we mark anti-bullying week, what guidance does the Scottish Government provide to help schools to tackle bullying?

Jenny Gilruth: Our national anti-bullying guidance, "Respect for All", provides an overarching framework for all adults who work with children and young people, to address all types of bullying. We have also published guidance for schools and local authorities on recording and monitoring bullying incidents, and we are currently undertaking a review of "Respect for All", which is supported by a working group of key stakeholders. The planning is under way to engage with parents, carers, children and young people as part of that review, and the updated guidance is expected to be published next year.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Alex Rowley asked a spot-on question and got no answer. There is still no action plan to tackle incidents of abusive and violent behaviour, and there is no guidance for school staff. When will there be an action plan?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that Mr Kerr was paying attention to my response to Mr Rowley, because I was clear that I will bring a statement to the Parliament to identify action from the Government, while recognising, of course, that the statutory responsibility for responding to bullying incidents rests with our local authorities.

Skills and Training Planning

5. **Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to its planning for skills and training provision, what information it has on the skills needs of Scotland's economy in specific vocations over the next five years. (S6O-02732)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I apologise to the chamber that, with the Deputy Presiding Officer's agreement, I will have to leave after I have answered this question.

Through our purpose and principles for post-school education, research and skills, the Scottish Government has committed to take responsibility for skills planning and develop an approach at the national level that sees us work with partners to set clear priorities. If we are to deliver the change that is required, we need the clearest possible understanding of what Scotland's skills needs are and will be in the future, and how we will meet them.

Skills Development Scotland regularly publishes information on regional and sectoral skills demands, and that is available on its website. We will seek to build on the extensive work that it has done, through further detailed interaction with employers, colleges and universities.

Ivan McKee: I thank the minister for that welcome answer. As he knows, major employment sectors across the economy, including health, construction, engineering and many others, are reporting significant skills shortages. What process is the Government putting in place to quantitatively assess those needs and to align skills provision in the further and higher education systems to address them?

Graeme Dey: As I mentioned in my initial response, the Government is working with partners on developing an approach to take responsibility for skills planning and to improve the alignment and responsiveness of the provision. There is an on-going discussion within Government and across our agencies, but every

bit as important to the process will be my further engagement with employers in the coming weeks and, of course, input from colleges and universities.

In relation to the specific areas that the member has noted, work is currently going on involving the NHS Scotland youth academy, the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland manufacturing skills academy and the Construction Leadership Forum. To summarise, we are aiming to build on the foundations that are already in place by gathering the clearest possible skills-need data to best inform course offerings, qualifications, training and upskilling opportunities so that we can fully grasp the economic opportunities ahead.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Evidence given to the Economy and Fair Work Committee details a significant skills gap across all sectors to deliver a just transition, which is much highlighted by the Scottish Government. Did the Scottish Government do a skills-mapping exercise prior to setting our climate change targets, and what is it doing to deliver the green economy opportunities to our school pupils, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics for women?

Graeme Dey: That is quite a detailed question but, in a general sense, as I indicated earlier, we are currently engaged with ministerial colleagues across Government to map the skills shortages. I stress “skills shortages”—there is a difference between skills shortages and workforce availability, and that is what we are trying to differentiate. I will be happy to write to Brian Whittle in more detail in due course.

Fife Council (Meetings with Education Officials)

6. **Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when it last met with Fife Council education officials, and what was discussed. (S6O-02733)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Education Scotland officials regularly meet Fife Council—specifically, the senior regional adviser for the south-east region and Fife’s attainment adviser directly engage with the local authority. The focus is consistently on support for improved outcomes for Fife’s children and young people. The SRA met two of the heads of service on 27 October this year, and discussions included an update on progress with stretch aims, improving attendance and strategies to raise attainment. The attainment adviser met a number of education officials on 8 November, and discussions included use of both the strategic equity fund and the pupil equity fund to promote equity.

Annabelle Ewing: I welcome the regular dialogue that is evidently taking place. As a Fife MSP, the cabinet secretary will be aware of the recent tragedies involving young people in my Cowdenbeath constituency. Although investigations are still on-going, drugs are suspected. Will the cabinet secretary therefore confirm that updated guidance will be issued to schools in Fife and across Scotland to help young people to stand up to the drug pushers who so blight our communities with the scourge of drugs and who destroy young lives?

Jenny Gilruth: I am aware of the case that the member alludes to. Although it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specifics of that case, I offer my condolences to the families involved.

Learning around substance abuse from secondary 1 upwards supports our young people to develop a range of skills that can help to support decision making about substance use. That includes strategies for making informed choices to maintain and improve young people’s health and wellbeing, and the ability to apply those in situations that might be stressful or challenging or involve peer pressure.

It is for education authorities and schools to consider the resources and approaches that they use in supporting our children and young people in their learning with curriculum for excellence. I know that information has already been provided to parents in local schools following some of the tragic incidents that the member has alluded to, and that work is on-going to consider what further steps can be taken to support children and young people’s learning around substance abuse, such as through personal and social education.

Culture and Arts Careers

7. **Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to help schools to support children who wish to pursue a career in the culture and arts sector. (S6O-02734)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Expressive arts education in schools plays an important role in supporting young people to enter Scotland’s creative industries and it positively impacts on our young people’s wellbeing. We remain committed to helping schools to support young people into careers in the culture and arts sectors. For example, the national career information and advice website, My World of Work, has a range of resources and tools to support the exploration of occupations in different sectors, including the culture and arts sector. Furthermore, Developing the Young Workforce, which is employer led, also promotes a range of culture-based education and

career pathways through its network of dedicated school co-ordinators and by hosting careers events with employers and the creative industries.

Foysoil Choudhury: Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture announced funding of £6.8 million for the cultural sector in 2023-24. I welcome that news. However, long-term and sustained funding for courses and qualifications must go hand in hand with that to ensure that the culture sector has the skills and talent that it needs. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with ministerial colleagues in the culture sector to ensure that culture is encouraged and kept alive in our educational system?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises a really important point. He will recall that I formerly served in the Parliament as the culture minister, and I very much recognise the importance of culture in terms of educational opportunities and our school curriculum. In fact, I am going to Lasswade high school later this evening for its expressive arts show. We are currently reviewing our expressive arts curriculum and, to the member's point, there are opportunities through that review. More broadly, there have not been ministerial discussions directly on that point, but I am more than happy to undertake those with Mr Robertson.

It is worth saying that the Government has a long-standing investment in culture through the youth music initiative, including £9.5 million in this financial year. That is helping our young people across Scotland to access music-making opportunities and to develop their wider skills and learning. It is hugely important that we understand the wellbeing impacts that culture can have in relation to our education system and I am more than happy to discuss that in further detail with my respective ministerial colleagues.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What initiatives exist in schools and colleges to support young people to pursue careers specifically in the sphere of Gaelic culture and arts?

Jenny Gilruth: There are many good examples of young people who have benefited from a local authority Gaelic-medium education and have been encouraged to pursue careers in the sphere of Gaelic culture and the arts as a result. Support for culture and the arts features very prominently in Gaelic-medium classes, and additional support is provided for schools by bodies such as MG Alba.

School Pupils (Provision of Electronic Devices)

8. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the provision of electronic

devices to all school pupils to support their studies. (S6O-02735)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Data provided by local authorities in 2022 indicated that around 280,000 devices were in circulation. We are aware that local councils continue to make progress in providing electronic devices to our pupils in line with their own digital strategies. We continue to consider future options around enhancing digital access, including a range of delivery models to ensure maximum value for investment. Given the extremely challenging financial climate, it is important that that is fully considered to ensure best value.

As set out in the programme for government, we will also publish a digital strategy to support the broader aims of the education system. Further details on that strategy will be provided in due course.

Jackie Dunbar: I am sure that the update on the roll-out will be of interest to my Aberdeen Donside constituents who contacted me regarding it. With more young folk regularly using electronic devices to access the internet as part of their learning, what steps can the Scottish Government take to ensure that our children and young folk are able to stay safe online?

Jenny Gilruth: Protecting our children from online harm is a key priority for the Scottish Government, so we are taking a range of different actions, including funding third sector organisations, delivering campaigns and working with partners including Police Scotland, to keep children and young people safe online. We are committed to ensuring that child internet safety is properly recognised in Scottish education policies through the technologies part of the curriculum. That includes learning about internet safety and cyber-resilience, for example.

Within our national learning platform, Glow Connect, safety and safeguarding are key considerations, alongside the protections that are already in place, such as account management and dual-layer filtering, to reduce the likelihood of inappropriate content. We have recently joined the Internet Watch Foundation. Membership of the IWF provides us with a range of additional tools and resources to further enhance safety measures within Glow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementaries. They will need to be brief.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): A freedom of information response earlier this year stated that digital inclusion funding has not been made available since 2020-21. What funding has

been made available for digital devices since the digital inclusion fund was closed?

Jenny Gilruth: During the pandemic, as the member alluded to, we provided £25 million to local authorities, which supported the purchase of 72,000 devices and 14,000 internet connections for schoolchildren across Scotland.

Since that time, many local authorities have invested in devices from their own budgets. Information from them in 2022, for example, shows that up to 280,000 devices have already been distributed to learners across Scotland. It is worth while saying that many authorities, including Falkirk, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Glasgow and the Borders, have already made significant investments to improve the digital access of their learners.

More broadly, as we move forward, as was announced in the programme for government, we are developing a new digital learning approach and strategy that aims to develop a shared narrative on the role of digital in education and the opportunities that it can enable in the system.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the digital strategy deal with the disparity between the provision of modern devices for pupils with additional support needs and the restrictions that are being imposed by Scottish Qualifications Authority regulators that hinder the use of “familiar technology” during critical exam periods?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sighted on the specifics of the second part of Martin Whitfield’s question in relation to the SQA, but I would be more than happy to discuss that with him in a bit more detail, to clarify the challenge in that respect, particularly in relation to young people with an additional support need.

Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Fiona Hyslop on the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract. The minister will take questions at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:56

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement on the delivery of the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract, which is one of the biggest contracts that the Government oversees. I am acutely aware of the importance of these lifeline services for our island communities, and I am committed to delivering an appropriate replacement for the contract, which is due to expire at the end of September 2024.

I recognise that the resilience and reliability of the services has been subject to a great deal of scrutiny, both in this building and, crucially, by the communities that they serve. The next CHFS contract is vital to our efforts to drive improvements across the network; therefore, we must carefully consider the optimum model, hence the time that has been taken to arrive at this decision.

I was struck by a comment from the chair of the ferries community board who, in evidence during the Parliament’s Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee’s inquiry, the report of which we debated last week, said:

“One thing that we have to break from is having an operator being told just to do a timetable. That results in no recognition of need or of what the service should be. It stops flexibility”.—[*Official Report, Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee*, 31 January 2023; c 48.]

The concept of flexibility must be key to any future process, ensuring that we can tailor service levels to effectively respond to community needs.

As I highlighted in the debate last week, the Government has no plans to unbundle or split up the network. We have considered two options for contractual arrangements to ensure the continued operation of the services: either a direct award to the current operator, in what is known as a Teckal arrangement, in accordance with the Public Contracts (Scotland) Regulations 2015, or a competitive tender on the open market. Having considered the benefits and risks of each, I want to update the Parliament on Scottish Government ministers’ preferred way forward, which is to explore a direct award.

I want to be clear that, before any final decision is taken, a due diligence process will establish the feasibility of the approach from a financial,

operational and legal perspective. In terms of value and importance to our island communities, this is one of the most significant contracts that the Government will enter into, and it is vital that we get it right.

As I have said, there are a number of complex issues to be resolved before committing to a final decision, including subsidy control, individual entity status and associated accounting requirements. However, I assure members that those will be examined via a thorough due diligence exercise that is supported by specialist advisers. I expect the exercise to be completed to allow a final decision to be made by next summer.

Central to the process, ministers will seek assurance that a direct award would offer a value-for-money solution. Subject to a satisfactory outcome, we would then commence the necessary steps to facilitate a direct award. Should the process result in a decision not to proceed with a direct award, we would revert to a competitive tendering process on the open market.

In the meantime, I assure our island communities that I will continue listening to those who have rightly asked for improved resilience, greater transparency, better communications, responsiveness and sensible flexibility in the service and for more certainty for communities, service users and staff. We will continue engaging with all our communities and stakeholders to inform the development of the new contract and to ensure that, regardless of the ultimate procurement route, we capture the improvements that we all want to see.

I understand community expectations for the service and make this absolutely clear: if we decide ultimately to make a direct award, that would not, under any circumstances, simply mean business as usual. Going down the direct award route would help to change the ethos of the service by shifting the focus, from a commercial arrangement to a model that is more focused on the delivery of a public service, which would help to create a more agile approach to drive the service improvements that we all want to see. Not least, we are determined to improve communication with communities and will look to introduce meaningful performance indicators that better reflect their experience of using the service. We will aim to have the new arrangement in place by 1 October next year, meaning that we can start to see benefits for our communities as early as possible.

In addition to better operational communication, a direct award would provide us with the opportunity to consider adding CalMac Ferries as a relevant authority under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, strengthening the ability of communities

to feed into impact statements and assessments to inform proposed future changes.

I recognise that we cannot rely solely on the contract procurement route as the mechanism for driving improvement. That is why it is only one among a number of measures that this Government is taking to improve Clyde and Hebrides ferry services for islanders and visitors alike. The contract award preferred route sits alongside the island connectivity plan, the fair fares review and the future of governance. We are working to introduce a range of policy measures, alongside significant investment in new vessels and infrastructure.

We will continue progressing the islands connectivity plan, with two key documents due for public consultation later this year: a draft strategic paper on wider connectivity issues and a draft long-term plan for vessels and ports, which updates the paper that was published last year. Our fair fares review will also report soon. Following the success of the road equivalent tariff, we want to consider a fares policy that is affordable and sustainable for both ferry users and Government.

On the issue of governance, and following the project Neptune report on options for change, we have spoken extensively to island communities and stakeholders and it is clear that they want a structure that is more transparent, accountable and customer-focused. A direct award would be supported by governance that best supports our goals for the service and must reflect the culture and ethos required for running a public service.

There have been calls for mergers and I am conscious that reform can be unsettling for staff. Change must and will happen to improve accountability and transparency, but form must follow function. I can confirm today that I am not taking any immediate decisions on governance or the merger of bodies, because I want organisations to focus on delivery of the new contract, on the operation to bring the various large vessels into service from next year and on the small vessel replacement work.

Should the final decision of the due diligence exercise be for a direct award, that may also have an impact on decisions on governance structures. I give an assurance that we will work with the relevant organisations, trade unions and other stakeholders to identify the optimum final governance arrangements.

As minister, I have had a unique opportunity to engage with a wide range of stakeholders and to listen to their experiences of the ferry service. Although one of the key recommendations made by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee was for a direct award, I recognise that others may

prefer a competitive tender. I know that a direct award might not be welcomed by every community and that we will be judged on the improvement that is delivered. I again reiterate that keeping the status quo of current service levels is not an option. I expect a direct award to be a catalyst for change, leading to a more efficient and flexible model for the delivery of this public service.

Alongside the construction of new vessels and infrastructure, I also wish to see—this is crucial—a new management culture emerging: one that is more supportive of the communities, customers and passengers who are served by the network; that provides greater transparency in communications; and that strives for continual improvement through an innovative and responsive approach.

I turn to the next steps. Regardless of the procurement route that is ultimately chosen, the next CHFS contract will not be developed in isolation. I will continue to speak to communities and stakeholders to ensure that we have a service that delivers for them. Later this month, my Transport Scotland officials will hold a series of engagement events on Arran, Mull, Islay, Skye and Lewis. Those events will be followed by a public consultation that will commence in December. Further engagement is also planned over the coming months, and I encourage everyone with an interest to help us to shape the future of these vital services.

In addition, consultation will be undertaken on the islands connectivity plan, which will provide the opportunity for communities and stakeholders to comment on the proposals.

In relation to the wider network, I am aware that the northern isles ferry services contract is due to expire in 2028. Those services are different in nature from the Clyde and Hebrides services. That being the case, I can confirm that our current intention is for the next generation of that contract to be procured via the open market.

Finally, I would like to conclude by thanking those—especially the communities—who continue to inform our plans for the future of the Clyde and Hebrides services. I hope that the Parliament can agree that, taken alongside the other initiatives that I have outlined this afternoon, Government ministers' preferred approach of a direct award would provide us with greater flexibility to drive improvement for the benefit of our island communities.

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

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

Islanders who were hoping for some clarity on how ferries will be run, by whom and for how long, will be bewildered by what has just been said. Scotland's ferry system is not working, our ageing ferries are unreliable, and the procurement and confused governance system is not fit for purpose.

The minister said that the status quo is not an option. I agree, but it is difficult to see how anything that has been announced today is anything but the status quo. Perhaps the minister can explain how it is. Far from announcing a new model that would give hope to islanders, the minister has kicked the can down the road. She said that she wants to explore a direct award to CalMac. With the current contract fast running out, maybe she feels that that is the only route left. How long does she want the next contract to run for? She did not say. If a direct award is not allowed, how quickly can a new tender process be completed?

The minister has previously said that she believes that the tripartite structure should change, so why has she not made a decision on a new arrangement? Does she not recognise that any such change should go hand in hand with a new contract award?

Fiona Hyslop: It is clear that resilience and reliability are key to improving services. The six new vessels that we will have by 2026 will help to provide that resilience.

The new contract would be implemented from October next year. A tender arrangement would take much longer. Could a tender arrangement be achieved? Yes, it could, but only by extending the existing contract, which would mean that the existing contract would last longer. It is the existing contract that we want to change in order to drive the improvements that we seek.

On the governance arrangements, Graham Simpson is correct that I want change. I said that to him in the chamber only last week. However, there is an order in which decisions and assessments need to take place to ensure that the financial, legal and other requirements that will have to be met are dealt with in a logical way, and to ensure that the final decision is a sensible one that will meet the needs of the contract that we are awarding. There is an order to what we are doing, and the work that we are doing is comprehensive.

I assure Graham Simpson that I want change and that I do not want to kick the can down the road, which is exactly why I will change the contract as of October next year, should due diligence allow us to do so before we make the final decision next summer.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Minister for Transport. We believe that a direct award of the contract is the correct way to move forward.

I note that the minister said that, moving forward, it will “not” be “business as usual.” Again, I welcome that statement. We know that islanders feel very badly let down, and there have been many calls from islanders for them to have a greater role in the management and running of their lifeline services. Labour agrees with those calls.

What action will the Scottish Government take not just to consult islanders and staff, but to ensure that they are much more involved and have a greater say in how the services are run and managed? Will there be places on the board of CalMac for islanders and trade unions? Finally, is the minister looking at a 10-year contract?

Fiona Hyslop: I welcome the Labour Party’s support for a direct award. The greater role of communities in shaping the content of the new contract starts immediately. That work starts now, and the new contract will emerge, regardless of whether it is a direct award or a tender.

On the question of islanders being on boards, that has already started to happen, but I think that there can be more movement. I am also sympathetic to the point about trade union representation. Again, part of what I will need to do is work with the organisations concerned in terms of delivery and the change. There will need to be a number of changes in relation to the operation of CalMac for it to be kept Teckal compliant; a number of changes would need to be made at the same time. However, change starts now. I do not want to wait change to happen years down the line. I want to see it happening, and it can happen from next year if we follow this route.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What will the Government do through any directly awarded new contract to hold CalMac senior management’s feet to the fire, given the widely expressed concern that, under the existing contract, the leadership of the company has at times felt remote from the communities that it serves?

Fiona Hyslop: Alasdair Allan makes a very important point. He has been assiduous in pursuing the issue on behalf of his constituents. A direct award would allow service delivery to be more flexible. On the changes that are required, there needs to be a change in the management culture and ethos, and relationships with key communities and customers are critical to that. They are not just running a timetable; they must run a public service.

I reiterate that part of that direct award, should it be delivered, will need to be a Teckal compliant approach by the board and management, which will also directly involve Government. That would also support the approach by providing a more direct role and the influence to do exactly what Alasdair Allan has asked for.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The minister said that a direct award might not be welcomed by every community. There is good reason for that suspicion and nervousness. Among the benefits of the competitive tender process the last time CalMac won the award was that it had to make 350 commitments to improvement, as part of the contract.

First, have all those 350 commitments been delivered over the past five years? Secondly, which is more important, will the new contract have specific key performance indicators for service delivery that come with penalties, as is the case with ScotRail, for example?

Fiona Hyslop: Jamie Greene has made an important point. I will need to revert to him on the detail of the 350 commitments, but his point about driving change is really important. There will be KPIs, and the change will be about customer delivery and, importantly, customer experiences.

He is quite right to draw attention to the situation of ScotRail, which has greater focus on customer service in what it delivers. That is the kind of approach that I want to see. The development of the contract, with KPIs, will start later this month, with my officials speaking to the communities that I mentioned earlier.

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

I welcome the statement, which I am sure will also be welcomed by CalMac staff. However, what assurances can the minister provide that CalMac’s headquarters in Gourrock is secure? Does the statement have any implications for staffing at the headquarters?

Fiona Hyslop: If the contract is directly awarded to CalMac, that would offer all CalMac staff the certainty and stability that I know the trade unions have been requesting. I make it clear to members that the location of the headquarters is a matter for CalMac management. However, I know, because I have heard it directly in the chamber, that Stuart McMillan will continue to make the case for his constituency and constituents on that matter.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, would welcome a direct award. However, to run lifeline services—which always should be run as public services—we need ferries that are fit for

purpose. Can the cabinet secretary tell us when the Scottish Government will publish a ferry replacement programme in order to provide the lifeline services that our islands require?

Fiona Hyslop: I repeat that the ferries that we are expecting are the Glen Sannox in spring next year, with a view to its commencing service in the summer, and the Glen Rosa in May the following year. For the Islay vessels, we are looking at October 2024 and February 2025, and for the Little Minch vessels, we are looking at June 2025 and October 2025.

Rhoda Grant might be referring to the small vessel replacement programme. As I said in my statement, as part of the islands connectivity plan, we will publish the long-term vessels and ports infrastructure plan. That might be what the member is talking about. That will be an update on what was produced in December last year. It should give the member some indication not just of the vessel replacement programme, but of what will happen in relation to ports and harbours, because it is clear that the infrastructure is just as important in relation to our ensuring that we continue with on-going investment to support the ferry service.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The minister spoke about changing the management culture, which is certainly long overdue. Can the minister advise what steps will be taken, if there is a direct award to CalMac, to ensure that it includes a duty to engage and communicate effectively with community representatives; a duty to deliver greater customer focus and ethos; and a restructuring of CalMac's management to ensure that it clearly puts the travelling public first?

Fiona Hyslop: I know that Kenneth Gibson—who also has been diligent in representing his constituents on the issue—will be reassured by what I expect of the contract. I do not wish to prejudge what the communities want in the contract, but I would be surprised if the elements that he has just described were not in the contract. Let us see the work that emerges.

With regard to a new management culture emerging, it has to be supportive of customers and passengers, and there must be greater transparency in communication and relationships. In delivering that, the community voice must be central to the future of the service.

It is also worth stressing that CalMac is not currently a relevant authority under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, so we would seek to change that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister knows that no new contract will overcome years of underinvestment in the ferries. However,

will the new contract, or any new contract, include better compensation arrangements for businesses, in particular those on the islands, so that they are never again left high and dry, with months—in fact, years—of interrupted services?

Fiona Hyslop: We continually hear about the pressures on businesses, which Kenneth Gibson also raised at First Minister's questions, because of the issues with regard to unreliability and resilience.

Resilience is part of providing continuity of service, and it will be much easier with six new vessels by 2026. The implications of that should mean that there is a greater opportunity for resilience, in particular in the winter months, when the overhaul, servicing and dry docking of a number of vessels is required to take place from a safety point of view. That will provide more stability for the service, so we would not expect questions and issues of compensation to arise in the future.

Nevertheless, I am acutely aware, not least as the former Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, that any interruption of business has a severe impact on businesses. That is why I have been talking to the current Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade about what support can be given in particular to help to generate more support for businesses and greater promotion of tourism, once we know that the reliability and resilience of the ferry service can be resumed.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): My understanding is that the last time that the contract was put out to tender, Transport Scotland received only one compliant bid for the Clyde and Hebrides ferry contract. What determines whether a bid is compliant, and what due diligence does the Scottish Government undertake to arrive at its determination?

Fiona Hyslop: Our decision is not to go out to tender. The issue with the last tender was that the market was in a different market. However, even at that stage, there were issues around the minimum technical, financial and legal requirements for participants. If the contract goes to tender, those requirements will be clearly specified in the pre-qualification phase. Where any aspect of a bid is found not to meet the specified criteria and requirements that are set out in the tender documentation, that bid may be deemed as non-compliant. Before rejecting any bid as non-compliant, the specific circumstances would be carefully considered, but that is not the route that we are taking at this stage.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Under the existing contract, it is island communities that continue to suffer from problems in our ferry service. The minister may be aware

that there will be no Monday sailings from Colonsay to the mainland for the duration of the winter timetable. In effect, there will be a 25 per cent reduction in services over 21 weeks. What action will the minister take to ensure that Colonsay residents have access to a full service during that period?

Fiona Hyslop: That is not a direct question on the statement that I have made today, but I am happy to try and address it. Like Donald Cameron, I was concerned to hear the news about that disruption. Again, that is an issue related to resilience and the required servicing of vessels during the winter dry docking and servicing period.

I may be wrong and the quote may be incorrect, but I was somewhat amused to see quoted that decisions have been made on behalf of Transport Scotland and by proxy of Government as to whether, for example, some kind of passenger plane or charter could help to provide resilience. I have asked my officials to look further into that.

The islands connectivity plan will look at wider connectivity issues. For example, in Orkney, we have been asked by the council whether it could use some of its funding for ferries—which are obviously council-run, but for which we provide revenue support—for replacement flights in some circumstances. Obviously, as we move to more sustainable flights, that may increasingly become an option in some areas.

I appreciate the question. I cannot give a direct answer, but I am aware of the issue.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I thank the minister for her statement and commend her on the intention to make a direct award. If she manages to achieve that, she will be the first transport minister to do so, as no previous Government has been able to do that—I speak as the person who let the last contract.

The contract is a very important step in the future of ferry provision on the west coast. While the details and the process are being decided on, there are, of course, still ferry services that island communities rely on. I am encouraged by the minister saying that she intends that those improvements should start now. Can she say anything further than what she has already said on the steps that the Government will take to ensure improvements in service and the resilience of the fleet in advance of the contract being let?

Fiona Hyslop: I believe in continuous improvement. On the latter point, it was the direct intervention of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition that led to the consulted-upon change to the winter programme to ensure resilience, so that no one community would be left without a service for any

extended period of time, which had been experienced previously. The attempt at continuous improvement has had a direct impact already.

Keith Brown made the point that other ministers may have sought to make a direct award. I do not know whether he said that I was brave, but we are not through this yet. This is the first part of a two-part process. In relation to my determination for change, the due diligence exercise—which will be conducted by experts—to advise us on the final position is really important. Until we get that due diligence, I cannot give members a final decision, but it will be a final decision that will lead to improvement sooner rather than later.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the minister for her considerable work on making improvements in our ferry services.

Earlier this week, CalMac published its annual vessel overhaul plans and announced a three-week increase in the number of overhaul days for its ageing fleet. What assurances can the minister give to rural and island communities that progress on maintenance will be closely monitored, and how will a direct contract award in the future ensure that the voice of the rural and island communities that depend on those services is heard and responded to?

Fiona Hyslop: Winter resilience and maintenance are critical to the service. Again, that is an issue that may or may not be addressed under the terms of contract. CalMac recognises that this winter's overhaul is particularly pressured. It represents a challenge to communities, and it is a challenge to staff to manage the various periods when vessels are out of service because they are getting their annual overhaul. However, the position will improve with the delivery of the new tonnage: there are the six new vessels that are coming through, and the MV Alfred has been chartered for a further six months to help to provide additional support to services for the remainder of the overhaul period.

As I mentioned in my answer to Mr Gibson, I want the community voice to be central in the future of the service. That is an important role for the ferries community board.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am going to try to get in the two remaining members who want to speak. I would just advise the chamber that the clock is not correct—we should be finishing at 18:40. I will allow the questions, but they need to be brief, as do the responses.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the statement and refer to my entry in the register of members' interests relating to attendance at trade union events.

Could the minister confirm the role of the specialist advisers in on-going work to explore direct award? Ernst & Young failed to involve trade unions in its work for project Neptune. What is the role of those private consultants? Given the importance of unions, islanders and others, will they be consulted over a legally compliant direct award?

Fiona Hyslop: I hope that we are not running to 18:40, Presiding Officer.

Katy Clark makes an important point, because the issue of due diligence is related to legal and accounting aspects and, in particular, to constitutional arrangements that may or may not be required. I reassure the member that, depending on when decision time ends, I am due to meet the trade unions this evening to discuss my announcement today.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): We have heard that the northern isles contract runs to 2028 and will go to open market, but the CalMac contract is direct award. Why the difference?

Fiona Hyslop: The contracts, and the services provided, are quite different. The northern isles ferry services are much longer and there are fewer of them. I think that the NIFS contract should be available for tender in the future. That is the current decision but, as we approach 2028, we will be making a final decision about that. In terms of the original tender, it is a different service. I think that the CHFS will benefit from a Teckal-compliant direct award. That is why we are pursuing the due diligence, and the steps that are needed to develop that new contract and deliver the changes that we all want to see.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes that item of business. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business, to allow a changeover of front-bench teams.

Culture in Communities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11153, in the name of Clare Adamson, on behalf of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, on its report “Culture in Communities: The challenges and opportunities in delivering a place-based approach”.

15:29

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am delighted to open this debate as convener of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. I would like to put on record my thanks to our clerks for their work in organising our inquiry. I also want to thank everyone who took part in our lunchtime event to highlight the report.

We are joined in the gallery by representatives who took part in our inquiry, some of whom attended our evidence sessions. That includes people from the WHALE arts centre, the Museums Association, Museums Galleries Scotland, Creative Lives and Art27. We had performances from those who are delivering some of the projects, including Recovery Scotland, the North Lanarkshire Recovery Community band, Reeltime Music, Culture Collective representative John Martin Fulton, Storytelling Centre representative—also a representative of the Culture Collective—Jane Mather and Spotlight Shotts. I welcome those who are with us today.

As I said, I am delighted to open the debate. Our inquiry considered the important matter of access to culture in communities. As we heard, for many people, participation in culture in their community is

“what their cultural life looks like”.—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 4 May 2023; c 35.]

It is about being part of a local choir, a book club or a drama group, going along to a makeshift cinema in a town hall or library, setting up an open-mic night or joining in on gala day.

Scotland is a culturally rich nation, so it is important to ensure not only that communities across Scotland have the opportunity to participate in and enjoy cultural activities—and not only participate but be empowered to shape the cultural life of their place and their community—but that organisations that deliver cultural interventions in communities truly understand and respond to the unique needs of those communities. Indeed, the Scottish Government’s culture strategy is clear in that regard. It says:

“Giving people a greater say in shaping the cultural life of their communities ... can help protect Scotland’s ... cultural heritage”.

That gets to the nub of the place-based approach to culture, which is a key focus for the culture strategy, and it builds on long-standing ambitions to adopt community-led approaches to service delivery.

Our report considered the challenges and opportunities in delivering that place-based approach to culture. I thank again all the organisations that submitted evidence to the inquiry or took part in our visits, and those who took part in our round-table discussions during the inquiry. I also thank those who participated in our engagement visits to the communities in Wester Hailes, Craigmillar, Dumfries and Orkney. That rich evidence helped to inform our inquiry and the findings of our report. We heard countless positive examples of that place-based cultural work being delivered in communities. We saw at first hand the transformative impact that local cultural projects are having, including on regeneration, on creative placemaking and, particularly, on the support of wellbeing.

However, our report also identified several challenges facing national and local government in delivering that approach. Those challenges must be addressed to realise the ambition of the cultural strategy.

The deputy convener will expand on some of those challenges in his closing remarks, but I will begin with the importance of supporting the vital role of voluntary arts. We heard that the “vast majority” of cultural activities in communities are

“dependent on the efforts of volunteers.”

We saw that in action on our visit to Orkney, where we met the volunteer-run cultural groups that are the backbone of Orkney’s cultural life. We heard not only of the immense commitment from the community to make cultural activity happen but of the challenge of volunteer fatigue and burn-out.

We know that not all communities have the time and resources to volunteer. Given the vital role of volunteers in sustaining local culture, we are concerned about the impacts of those inequalities on opportunities for cultural participation.

We also heard calls for there to be greater support for the voluntary arts, with capacity building and regular microgrant funding for voluntary groups. We have asked the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to explore whether further support can be provided, particularly to the communities with fewer resources.

I now turn to the wider challenge of funding. That was central to the evidence that we received.

The long-standing financial challenges that the culture sector faces, which have intensified in recent years, have been well documented. Indeed, the committee’s pre-budget report, which was published last week, says that the “perfect storm” facing the sector

“has not abated over the last 12 months”.

We heard that the wider budgetary pressures were constraining funding for cultural organisations to deliver place-based projects and activities, local government cultural services and publicly owned community spaces in which cultural activity takes place. Those funding constraints pose a significant challenge to the successful delivery of the culture policy. Community-based cultural projects need to be embedded over the longer term to be successful. However, that work often relies on short-term and volatile project funding. Indeed, we heard the phrase “donut funding” mentioned. Quite often, projects would be funded, but the infrastructure and organisational aspects that are needed to support those individual projects would not be.

We heard that the Culture Collective programme had been a powerful example of a national place-based initiative that had supported cultural organisations and artists to work in partnership with communities to develop local projects, and that that had benefited from being “funded at scale” over a two-year period. The Stellar Quines representative said that the programme had enabled it to show

“how it could be and what might be possible”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 4 May 2023; c 20.]

if the necessary funding was available to deliver that work on an on-going basis. With funding for the programme concluding, the Scottish Government should now set out how its legacy will be built upon through future place-based initiatives and the new cultural strategy.

On our visit to WHALE arts centre in Wester Hailes, we heard about donut funding, which supports delivery but not the overheads from having a building or the infrastructure that is needed to support an organisation to do administrative and planning work.

A significant challenge for organisations was trying to deliver long-term transformative work. Who in the funding landscape should cover those overheads? We think that that question needs further consideration. We believe that there needs to be clearer understanding of the roles of national and local government funding for community-based culture in supporting the activity itself and the infrastructure that underpins it.

The emphasis on the role of communities and place in the culture strategy is very welcome.

However, in practice, there still needs to be a much greater prioritisation of the role of community culture at the heart of the culture sector as a whole in recognition of the fact that, for many people, their cultural participation in their communities is perhaps the only cultural activity that they will take part in.

We have invited the Scottish Government to consider whether community-based culture should be funded separately from professional arts and whether they should not be seen as having parity. I note the Scottish Government's response that that model will be taken into consideration.

Local government also has an essential role to play, but the on-going funding challenges that it faces are leading to real-terms reductions in spend on local cultural activities, which are often seen as low-hanging fruit. We are concerned about the impact that that could have on the delivery of services in communities. The Glasgow Life culture trust said:

"the health of local government finances has a direct impact on the funding available for the services that Glasgow Life provides."

Community Leisure UK said that any reductions in spend on culture

"will now result in reductions in provision",

as all the saving mechanisms had already been considered and implemented. The Museums Association said that that could lead to

"local authorities limiting cultural provision or removing free access to culture".

National and local government need to work in partnership to assess the on-going impact of the fiscal environment—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry to interrupt, Ms Adamson, but I think that your allocated time is nine minutes.

Clare Adamson: I beg your pardon, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We do not have any time in hand.

Clare Adamson: On that note, I will conclude.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee's 4th Report, 2023 (Session 6), Culture in Communities: The challenges and opportunities in delivering a place-based approach (SP Paper 431).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Ms Adamson. I call the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson. You have up to eight minutes, please, cabinet secretary.

15:39

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I am pleased to be here today to hear from colleagues across the chamber about how we harness the opportunities and rise to the challenges of place-based cultural provision. I pay tribute to all members of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee for their report. One of our ambitions in the Scottish Government is to meet communities' economic, physical and social needs, ensuring sustainability and supporting wellbeing. Culture and creativity are a vital part of that, and our ambition for everyone to experience the transformative potential of culture is one of the key pillars of our culture strategy.

We are very much alive to the fact that this is an incredibly challenging time for the sector. The enduring shocks of Brexit fallout, the pandemic, the energy crisis and the mismanagement of the economy by the United Kingdom Government have sent prices spiralling, and we have had to make incredibly difficult decisions in the light of those financial challenges.

However, we have prioritised support for culture, and I was delighted to report yesterday that the Scottish Government has released £6.68 million of funding to the culture sector for the rest of this financial year. That funding comprises £1.5 million to the Culture Collective programme, about which we have heard so much already, £2 million to Screen Scotland, £250,000 to the platforms for creative excellence—PLACE—programme, £130,000 to the national performing companies touring fund and £2.8 million to fund public sector pay policy uplifts.

That funding will support individuals and communities across Scotland via our funding to the Culture Collective programme, and it is a demonstration of our continued investment in screen and in festivals. In addition, we have now released £2.6 million to Sistema Scotland, delivering on our commitment to ensure that the organisation has the funding that it needs this year to continue to deliver its big noise programmes in communities across the country.

Separately, and in light of the challenging context that we are in, we have been reviewing the actions that support the culture strategy. Although we recognise that the aims and ambitions of the strategy are still very relevant, we will publish a refreshed action plan later this year, setting out what we will do to respond to the challenges. That will include actions on how we will support culture and creativity in our communities. I have already mentioned that one of the ways that we do that is through our support for programmes such as the Cultural Collective and Sistema Scotland. We also

do that through the youth music initiative, support to independent museums, and the funding of our national bodies, performing companies and Edinburgh international festival.

We are proud that, in spite of on-going challenges, our funding for culture reaches grass-roots, local, regional, national and international communities. We cannot understate the value that we place on our cultural and creative organisations and the contribution that they make to the wellbeing of individuals and communities across Scotland.

Last month, the First Minister announced that the Scottish Government will increase our investment in Scotland's art and culture by £100 million over the next five years. That is a huge vote of confidence in our culture sector, and it will help to protect the sector and the impact that it makes on people's lives.

As was set out in our 2023-24 budget, around £90 million was allocated to budget lines for Creative Scotland and other arts, for national performing companies, for royal and ceremonial events, and for culture and major events staffing. That amount seeks to more than double the funding for those areas by 2029.

Ministers will take decisions about where the funding is allocated in 2024-25 and future years, subject to the outcome of the Scottish budget process and associated approval by the Scottish Parliament. I have encouraged colleagues and parties across the chamber to let their views be known, please, in advance of that. The Scottish Government intends to present the draft budget for 2024-25 to Parliament on Tuesday 19 December.

I reiterate the words of the First Minister that we are making a choice

"to ensure that Scotland's arts and culture are supported to grow at home, and be seen across the world."

Working in collaboration with the culture sector around that will be vital. I have already begun meeting MSP colleagues and members of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee to discuss the culture funding model. I welcome ideas from all members and I encourage my colleagues to get in touch to share their thoughts on the culture funding model. I think that we are in agreement across the chamber that collaboration in that respect is key.

In October, I was lucky to attend a showcase for the Culture Collective programme and to see some of the inspiring work that is taking place across that network of 26 participatory arts projects, hearing from participants and practitioners about the impact that our investment has had on their lives through grass-roots, community-developed cultural provision.

For example, Street Level Photoworks offers a wide range of artistic residencies in the new Gorbals and Govanhill areas of Glasgow, connecting to communities via local community connector posts and housing associations. The artists were open to adapting their practice to meet the needs of the communities on which they are based. In the Gorbals alone, residency locations range from the local primary school, youth centre and local community arts clubs to a hair salon, a barber shop and even the local chippy.

An Lanntair took a completely different approach, developing an intergenerational project with a local museum and a youth club. It was a multi-art form and heritage project in which participants explored local stories, geography, history and culture, resulting in the creation of new artwork based on that heritage material. That led to the development of a collective intergenerational picture of the community, detailing what is special to the community about its own area and highlighting the similarities and differences in the community over time and over the generations.

I am proud that we have protected our investment in the programme. Communities have the opportunity to contribute to what they would like to see in their local area in regard to culture. That brings to life our culture strategy ambition, which is that everyone should be able to experience and take part in culture.

I look forward to hearing the views of members from across the chamber. I will end where I started, by extending my appreciation to the convener and other members of the committee for their hard work in drawing up the report, and to fellow members of the chamber who have a close interest in cultural affairs.

15:46

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con)): The debate provides a welcome opportunity for the Parliament to set out its vision for embedding culture in our communities. An effective place-based approach should empower communities to create cultural projects that meet their own needs. In a culturally diverse place such as Scotland, that raises the question of how we can best meet such needs.

On that question, there was broad consensus on what good practice should look like. Dumfries and Galloway Council perhaps put it best when it highlighted that effective cultural participation means allowing cultural projects to develop from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. In essence, it should be for communities to decide which cultural initiatives they would like to see, instead of governing bodies deciding that for them.

Community-based cultural organisations are a key part of achieving that objective. Throughout its inquiry, our committee heard evidence that organisations that are embedded in communities in the long term are far more effective at engaging. Ultimately, cultural engagement is a long-term project, and the way in which we engage with communities should reflect that.

We know that funding for such organisations is crucial. The culture collective programme has provided important funding for numerous arts projects across Scotland, which is to be welcomed. As of last month, that funding has ended, so a key recommendation of our committee's report is that the Scottish Government should set out whether any further funding will be provided. I note the cabinet secretary's comments, made over the past few days, on how such funding will be approached, and I have no doubt that the sector will embrace that. However, we must consider what we will do for the future. Following the Scottish Government's recent U-turns on cultural funding, now is not the time for even more financial uncertainty for the sector.

Our committee also called for a more innovative approach to the funding of the culture sector in general. Although the evidence on whether community-led culture projects should be funded separately from professional arts organisations was inconclusive, it was clear that more flexibility in the funding system is needed. On that issue, the Stove Network highlighted that the current system forces community-based culture projects to compete for funding against differently structured projects, which sometimes causes conflict. Creative Lives described how cultural funding streams are most effective when there is scope for flexibility between different projects. Several stakeholders were clear that multiyear funding settlements could play an important part in any potential funding reforms.

The Scottish Government should listen to what the sector is telling it on the issue, because it understands how things should be managed. It wants the Government to take its concerns on board. It is time for the Government to come good on its talk about potential reforms. The sector has reformed itself, and continues to do so, but it wants the Scottish Government to be supportive of the reforms that it has suggested and which could be worked on collectively. I look forward to seeing whether that will happen.

Another key theme of the committee's work was on community assets. Potential cultural venues include many spaces such as village halls, libraries and churches in our communities. Throughout the inquiry, the committee heard about various potential threats to many of those cultural assets.

Sometimes, communities feel under pressure to rescue venues that are at risk, and many have taken on such venues. It is a large responsibility for community groups to acquire venues, but it is only right that they should be empowered to do so with an understanding of the circumstances.

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill was passed back in 2015, and organisations have been working to ensure that it is applied. The power in relation to community asset transfers has been in effect since 2017, but there is still much to do to ensure that communities benefit from the potential of such transfers. Community groups are often fully aware of their legal right to acquire assets but, in practice, many groups are still finding it a little bureaucratic to take assets on board.

Some public bodies are still focused entirely on the monetary value of assets, and cultural shifts are still required to take full advantage of such assets. It is important for the Scottish Government to work together with councils to ensure that the process runs as smoothly as possible.

Since the 2015 act came into force, there have been 225 successful asset transfers. There is great cultural potential, but we must look at how to maximise that in our communities.

It is clear that the Scottish cultural landscape faces many challenges. It is also clear that that landscape is of great importance to many individuals and communities the length and breadth of Scotland. The landscape has many potential benefits for communities to harness, and they want to be empowered to do what they can. It is important for the Scottish Government to understand the logistics of that and work closely with partners, organisations and councils in a collective way to embrace the community culture that is vital for many individuals and organisations.

I hope that the Government will approach in good faith the recommendations in our committee's report and will commit to playing its part in protecting this vital sector and the vital assets that communities have, because our society depends on that. Scottish culture is recognised the world over. Communities have a part to play in that, but so does the Government.

15:52

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): As a committee member and on behalf of Scottish Labour, I am pleased to welcome the report, which highlights the benefits of a place-based approach to culture and the many challenges that its implementation faces.

The report is thorough and carefully considered, and I extend my sincere thanks to all who

contributed to it, including the stakeholders who answered the call for views and provided evidence and the committee clerks, who did an excellent job of organising evidence sessions in Edinburgh, Orkney and Dumfries and of writing the report. I commend our convener, Clare Adamson, and fellow committee members for their constructive and collegiate approach. I also thank Sarah Boyack, who sat on the committee for Scottish Labour in the early phases.

Wellbeing, quality of life, physical health and mental health are all influenced by the quality of the places that we live in. I heard that yet again this lunch time in moving testimony from the recovery group from North Lanarkshire about using the power of music to tackle drug and alcohol addiction.

A place-based and community-led approach to service delivery, including cultural provision, has for some time been recognised as a useful framework that recognises that communities ought to be central to the delivery of creative activity in their areas, to ensure that that activity responds to distinct opportunities and challenges in different localities.

In that spirit, I pay tribute to organisations such as the Beacon arts centre in Greenock, which does tremendous work with young people in Inverclyde. I also pay tribute to the Bungalow bar in Paisley, which is an outstanding local venue that was recently named the best music-led venue in Scotland at the *Scottish Licensed Trade News* awards.

Our report notes that, despite many positive examples, the proper entrenchment of a place-based approach to culture is inadequate at present, and a huge amount of progress is required to make it a reality.

The report identifies a number of challenges

“for national public bodies and local government in delivering a place-based approach to culture where communities are central to shaping the cultural life of their place”.

The challenges are listed in the report as

“Supporting community-based cultural activity ... Funding culture in communities ... Providing and supporting local cultural services”

and

“Providing and protecting physical spaces in communities for cultural activity to take place in.”

The report rightly highlights, as has been mentioned, the “vital role of volunteers” in supporting community-led cultural activity. It is right, however, to acknowledge that such volunteering is “time and resource intensive”. As the convener said, the committee was concerned by the evidence that there might be

“disparities between communities who have greater time and resources to volunteer and those who do not”.

The committee’s view is that

“it is crucial for all communities across Scotland”

to be able

“to shape the cultural life of their places, and ... sustain the cultural activity which meets their needs.”

Ensuring that that happens is likely to involve the Scottish Government providing funding and support. The report rightly invites

“the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to explore whether further support can be provided to protect and encourage the vital contribution of volunteers to culture”

in their communities, including the communities with the fewest resources.

The report highlights the culture collective programme as an excellent example of place-based cultural initiatives. The committee calls on the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to set out how the programme’s legacy will be built on.

When it comes to protecting the future of local physical spaces for cultural activity, the committee rightly recognises that it is critically important that,

“For culture to thrive within communities, there must be spaces in which cultural activities can take place.”

The committee is, therefore, concerned that evidence has been received that

“some cultural and community assets are becoming less available, less affordable, and at risk of closure”,

including many churches, which, as Alexander Stewart said, provide a venue not just for worship but for culture.

I, too, urge the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to take all the action that they can to protect local cultural spaces. I also commend the committee’s suggestion of considering a role for Creative Scotland in delivering a capital programme to support the refurbishment and upkeep of such spaces.

In relation to the provision and support of local cultural assets, the committee is right to note

“the essential role of local government in the delivery of a place-based approach to culture”.

Therefore, the report is right to note with concern what it politely terms as

“the funding challenges facing local government”.

It notes the enforced reduction of cultural spend by local authorities in the face of persistent cuts to council budgets over many years. I hope that the Scottish Government will reflect on that, as well as its spending commitments in the cultural sector.

The report highlights the importance of

“a ... joined-up approach between local government and national agencies”

and that

“further progress is required to improve collaboration.”

I echo the report’s call for a further update before the end of the year on what progress has been made on the commitment from the Scottish Government

“to work with Creative Scotland to map local authority support for culture and explore future models of collaboration between national and local bodies.”

The challenge of funding is an overarching concern that touches almost all areas of the report. Cultural activity and cultural life—place based and otherwise—rely on Scottish Government funding and support. Years of standstill funding and increased costs have created a situation of chronic underfunding and a sector at breaking point. There is an urgent need for investment, support and a new long-term culture strategy. Finally, as many stakeholders highlighted, there is also a need for funding to be placed on a sustainable footing.

I commend the report to the Parliament, and I hope that we can all work together to ensure that we support culture in our communities—now and into the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, with speeches of up to six minutes.

15:59

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I am a member of the committee but, unlike the previous speakers, I was not there during consideration of the report that we are discussing today, so I cannot speak with the same authority as them. However, I am absolutely on board with the place-based approach. In a culture debate a few weeks ago, I gave a number of examples of organisations in my constituency that take that approach, as well as stating the obvious, which is that we all want to see culture in Scotland thriving, and not just for economic reasons, which are very important, but because of the difference that it can make to people’s lives.

However, we need to be clear that, as was mentioned in the previous speech, the biggest obstacle in the way of the implementation of many of the recommendations in the report is the extremely limiting financial situation that we are in as a country, which the report rightly mentions. In my view, the current financial restraints that Scotland faces are perhaps the starkest that we have seen since this Parliament was established. We need to be really explicit with the people of Scotland. Bodies can all shout about sustainable multiyear funding, but if that is not what the

Parliament is getting, how will we provide it? We must be serious about the challenges that we face.

The devolution settlements created a situation in which the UK Government still has control over the vast majority of Scotland’s finances. If the UK Government chooses to implement real-terms cuts, as it very often does, the Scottish Government must make difficult decisions to implement those cuts, either by cutting somewhere in the Scottish Government’s budget or by raising one of the few taxes for which the Scottish Government is responsible. Both those options are virtually always met with universal criticism from Opposition members.

On the point about local government, it is obviously constrained, but much less so in Scotland than it is in England or Wales. In England, there have been 40 per cent cuts to council budgets, and a number of councils have gone to the wall financially. We have not seen that in Scotland, although there is a difficult situation. We should acknowledge that and the impact that it has on a place-based approach to culture.

However, the Scottish Government has done, and it continues to do, what it can within the devolution settlement to support a place-based approach to culture in communities. I am also sure that the commitment to double funding for culture and the arts by £100 million over the next five years will play a part in furthering that approach.

The theme of the debate is challenges and opportunities. Although I have highlighted the challenges, I would also like to highlight the opportunities. Oddly, one of the side effects of austerity over the past 14 years has been the increase in community ownership of cultural assets, which we have seen across Scotland and which the report rightly highlights. During the summer, I visited Wimpy Park community garden in Alloa, which was recently taken over by Wimpy Park community group—a group of residents who had a vision and worked immensely hard to bring the garden to life. For members of the committee or anyone else who wants to visit it, I say that it is a real example of cultural empowerment in our communities—indeed, in one of our most deprived communities. That is absolutely to be commended.

The community garden is just one of a few examples in my Clackmannanshire and Dunblane constituency. Thanks, usually, to the work of immensely dedicated volunteers and community ownership, many formerly publicly owned spaces have taken on new roles in the community. Among many other such examples in my constituency, Tullibody Community Development Trust operates the civic centre in the town, the Dollar Community Development Trust operates the Hive in Dollar, the

Dunblane Development Trust manages the Braeport Centre and—perhaps best of all—the Sauchie community group operates the Sauchie resource centre. All those facilities are used by their communities as spaces for culture, which is another important aspect of a place-based approach to culture, as is highlighted in the report.

I welcome the report. I will add that one of the most crucial aspects in delivering a place-based approach to culture in our communities is that we give the people in those places a significant role in developing and delivering services. However, as a Parliament, we need to be aware of the root causes of the significant financial challenges that face implementation of the recommendations in the report. We do not serve the people if we try to ignore the source of those financial constraints.

Austerity has been one of the biggest problems, but I will mention another that was brought home to me today during the committee session with touring musicians. It is in a different category, but it involves a very similar challenge. Brexit, largely, has caused a huge meltdown in their sector—we all heard the evidence. I asked the witnesses about the two scenarios that we were given about Brexit—one involved sunny uplands full of opportunity and no regulation; the other involved enormous economic and cultural self-harm. I can tell members that the latter characterises the experience of those touring musicians since Brexit. They also said that most of the factors that were causing them to suffer were predicted at the time of Brexit. We heard about the decimation of the Scottish culture sector in their area, and we heard about some Scottish artists having continued, but only if they could get an Irish passport. Those people are appearing at Irish events in Germany and elsewhere—not as Scottish artists but as Irish artists. That is the only way that they can continue.

It is as if a theatre curtain has come down on a vital part of our cultural heritage. Some people have lost their jobs and others have walked away from the sector, which is a loss to Scotland. An absolute crime is going on. The musicians laid the blame fairly and squarely at the door of Brexit, although, as we would expect them to do, they made requests of the Scottish Government about the support that it can provide. That is the reality of what our cultural sector is going through.

The news of the additional £100 million from the Government is very welcome, and I would endorse the request by some of the people whom we heard from today that some of that money finds its way to touring musicians, because that is so important for the international reputation of Scotland. It is how the rest of the world views us.

They also made the point, very fairly, that, grim as the situation is, Scotland is overendowed with

talent and with artists who can enhance Scotland's reputation. Therefore, my main appeal is that supporting that talent through the place-based approach that we are talking about today is done at the same time as we support culture and try to reverse the damage of Brexit, which has decimated our cultural sector.

16:05

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome this debate on the conclusions and recommendations in the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee's report, "Culture in Communities: The challenges and opportunities in delivering a place-based approach". I commend the members of the committee and the clerks for their work, and all those who contributed.

I will highlight two areas in particular that the committee's report examined, which I believe need greater focus from the Government. My speech will discuss funding challenges for the cultural sector, and then I will move on to the need for the Government and its agencies to listen to local communities and empower them.

First, the committee looked in detail at funding issues in the culture sector. It heard from a National Museums Scotland spokesperson that

"The current financial climate is one of the toughest that the heritage and culture sector has ever faced."

The Federation of Scottish Theatre said that organisations that deliver cultural work in communities

"are in an extremely precarious financial position."

The committee's report cited a Scottish Parliament information centre assessment, which found that the total grant funding for Creative Scotland in 2021-22 was about 10 per cent lower in real terms than it had been in 2014-15. The lack of funding from the SNP Government has been a real thorn in the side of the culture sector.

The problem is not only the lack of funding, but the inconsistency of its delivery. Even when it is announcing more funding for culture, the SNP has often managed to make a confusing mess of it. Last year, the SNP cut the budget for Creative Scotland by several million pounds. It then made a big announcement that it was restoring the funding. After patting itself on the back, the SNP then announced that it had changed its mind and that it was going to go ahead with cutting that funding. That flip-flopping does not help the culture sector to plan. How are organisations supposed to plan when the SNP U-turns on a U-turn on a U-turn?

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

Sharon Dowey: No—time is short today.

The lack of certainty and stability makes those organisations' lives very difficult. That is just one example, but the committee's report looked at many other funding issues. In particular, the extremely short-term approach of culture policy came in for substantial criticism. Professor David Stevenson, who is the dean of the school of arts, social sciences and management at Queen Margaret University, said that the "biggest challenge" that the culture sector faces is

"a persistent and pernicious obsession with short-term project funding."—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 27 April 2023; c 19.*]

Scottish Ballet said that that approach created "a stop-start mechanism" and the Federation of Scottish Theatre also highlighted issues with the "inconsistency of funding". Professor Stevenson said that, in other countries, there is

"much clearer understanding of how different elements of the funding landscape support different things."—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 27 April 2023; c 19.*]

I hope that the Government reflects on that and learns from the best examples of how other countries operate. I note that, earlier this year, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Angus Robertson, said that he was keen to work on a multiyear funding approach, and I hope that that work will conclude imminently. A clearer funding system would be very beneficial to the culture sector.

However, funding is not the only issue that needs to be addressed to promote culture more effectively in Scotland. The Government must also listen more closely to communities. As a point of principle, my party believes that local people are best placed to decide what is best for their community. We firmly support communities having more power to shape the cultural life in their own area. The best preservers and promoters of local heritage and cultural sites are the people in those areas. They must be empowered to take the lead themselves, free from the constraints of too much bureaucracy or too much imposition and top-down control from the Government. The role of the Government and councils must be to deliver the platform and environment that allow local communities to feel able to make a difference themselves. As things stand, the Government is not meeting its end of the bargain.

I return to Professor Stevenson's evidence to the committee, in which he noted:

"we fall into thinking that there is a one-size-fits-all model".

The report also notes his comments around the "danger" of helping individuals to overcome

barriers to cultural participation only where they are

"barriers to the type of culture that we feel is valuable for them to take part in."—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 27 April 2023; c2, 4.*]

It was welcome in Creative Scotland's evidence to the committee that it acknowledged that

"There are cases of what might be felt as, 'We are doing good to communities—we are offering you something, so come and see it,' without understanding what it can mean to the people and what the unmet need is in that community."—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 8 June 2023; c 5.*]

All the evidence seems to indicate that there is too much of a top-down approach to culture in Scotland at the moment. Local communities are often boxed into what cultural projects they get, which is not how things should be.

I hope that the Government will focus on improving how it co-operates and works with local communities, and I hope that it will address the inconsistency of funding, so that the culture sector can more effectively plan for the future.

16:10

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I praise the work of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. A lot of work goes into taking evidence and producing committee reports. The result, in the case of the one that we are debating today, is a report that is informative and that, I hope, can guide the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government's commitment to a place-based approach in our cultural strategy stands as a testament to the belief in empowering communities, fostering their engagement and weaving their stories into the very fabric of our national identity.

As a representative in the Scottish Parliament of the many communities of Glasgow Kelvin, it is clear to me that the affiliation that people have with the place to which they belong is important. It is about identity and belonging. It is about the overall welfare of communities and the people who live in them.

The strategy not only recognises the intrinsic value of cultural diversity but seeks to empower diverse local voices in weaving the cultural tartan of our nation. However, in navigating that, there are a great many challenges that we must be cognisant of and work together to resolve.

The economic landscape in which we live is littered with financial constraints, as my colleague Keith Brown has said. Those present formidable barriers to financing community-based cultural

initiatives, nurturing local government cultural services and providing the essential spaces where cultural expression can flourish. Those challenges, although significant, present opportunities for strategic intervention and innovative solutions, aligning our endeavours with our collective aspirations.

From my perspective, as the member for Glasgow Kelvin, the culture strategy's emphasis on community and place is pivotal. Many members will already be aware of the community victory over the Children's Wood, which is in my constituency. The Children's Wood is a fantastic outdoor community space; it is where I held my first surgery after being elected. Over a relentless 25-year campaign, teachers, climate advocates, local residents and even celebrities—one of whom was our late Queen—rallied to protect the Children's Wood and North Kelvin Meadow. The grant of a community asset transfer by Glasgow City Council in 2020 signifies more than just land preservation; it symbolises the triumph of collective will and the validation of a community vision.

The success is not solely about land; it is about nurturing a communal heartbeat. The former chair of the Children's Wood, Professor Niamh Stack, rightfully called it a "community anchor", emphasising its pivotal role in current times. I frequently visit and join in with the wide variety of activities that take place there. I watch children and families running around and laughing, I hear the buzz of the bees from the hives that are kept there and I see the opportunities for toddlers and mums to get together to not only weave stories in the local environment but develop Scottish storytelling, among other things.

The agreement demonstrates a shared commitment to empowering communities and is a model for fostering the sustainable, playful and resilient communities that are especially vital after the challenges that we have faced. However, there remains an inherent need to more deeply integrate community culture in what we do. The Scottish Government's commitment to empowerment mechanisms, such as the place principle, calls for a robust amplification of cultural voices at grass-roots level.

The committee's inquiry into the matter unveils the positive strides that have been made in place-based cultural initiatives across communities. There is resounding recognition, from a diverse array of stakeholders, regarding the importance of that approach. That recognition is deeply rooted in the Scottish Government's cultural strategy, which builds on long-standing ambitions and seeks to adopt place-based and community-led approaches to service delivery.

However, the inquiry's findings also highlight the substantial hurdles that must be addressed in order to realise the aspirations that are set out in the strategy. Those challenges, which span both national and local spheres, require a whole-system approach and cohesive collaboration across the different layers of government, transcending partisan interests in order to overcome those hurdles for the collective betterment of our cultural landscape.

To be frank, more than a decade of austerity, polished off by economic turmoil at the hands of the Tory UK Government, has presented severe challenges to the implementation of place-based cultural policy. Those constraints affect the funding of community-based cultural organisations, the support for local government cultural services and the provision of the publicly owned community spaces that are vital for cultural activity. Despite the commendable emphasis on the role of communities and place within the culture strategy, there remains a pressing need for a more robust prioritisation of community culture to put that at the core of the sector.

The report is a call for the Scottish Government to act to address those challenges and to heed the committee's findings and recommendations. The imminent finalisation of the refreshed culture strategy action plan later this year presents a critical opportunity to tackle the facets that will be essential to shaping Scotland's cultural trajectory. I commend the report.

16:17

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the committee members who carried out the inquiry, those who gave evidence and the clerks and researchers for their work in distilling that evidence into the committee's excellent report, which makes a timely and important contribution to the debate on the crucial role of the culture sector in our local communities.

I was particularly pleased that the committee took time to visit my home town of Dumfries, where members experienced an outstanding example of the place-based approach, taken by the Stove Network and genuinely shaped by the community.

I have had the privilege of working with the Stove Network since its inception more a decade ago, including in my role as local councillor when the council transferred the High Street base to the Stove in a community asset transfer. I have seen at first hand how that property has been developed into a cafe, a meeting place and an outstanding events venue, but it is what the people inside do that excites me. Those at the Stove have used arts and cultural activities to bring together

diverse communities to drive positive, place-based solutions to challenges that people care about, such as the future of their town centre, using arts and culture not as an end in itself but as a means to deliver a wellbeing economy.

The Stove's engagement with often underrepresented groups in some of most vulnerable communities on issues that are relevant to their lives ensures that those solutions are genuinely bottom up, not top down, which is an important principle that was stressed by Dumfries and Galloway Council in its submission to the committee.

It was that work by the Stove that led to the creation of the Midsteeple Quarter in Dumfries. A community benefit company took on the problem of absent landlords in the town centre, becoming the landlord itself, taking back our high street shop by shop, investing in neglected properties and using them for the benefit of the community.

The work of the Stove goes beyond Dumfries town centre. I know that the committee also visited Lochside—a community I am proud to say that I was brought up in—where members witnessed the Lift D&G project, which is also supporting and transforming the community. That project is community driven, using culture and the arts to build community confidence to take on and dispel the outdated and negative perception of the area and, in doing so, to change the perception that “culture's not for me”.

The committee heard that one of the biggest barriers that the Stove and others faced with those projects was the outdated approach that is taken to how we fund culture and the arts. That approach is about performance, which is often professional, rather than participation; it is certainly not about community participation. That means that, when the Stove seeks support for its important cultural contribution to building the wellbeing economy, it often finds itself competing with wellbeing projects, such as food banks, for non-culture-based sources of funding, because the current silo model of Creative Scotland funding does not properly recognise cultural and community participation.

On the committee's visit to Dumfries, members heard about the different approach that is taken in Ireland, where there are separate bodies and separate funding streams for participation and community-based practice. However, we do not have to look beyond Scotland to see that: sportscotland recognises the role that sport plays in our wellbeing, especially our health, and it provides separate funding streams for elite sport and for participation in sport. As the Stove said in its submission to the committee,

“In culture we do not have the ‘Participation’ strand, but only the ‘Elite’ one.”

The Government has said that it now intends to double culture spending, which I welcome, but I hope that, as it grows that budget, it will not be—it must not be—simply a case of more of the same. We need to better recognise the wider role of culture in delivering the wellbeing economy, and its preventative social impact on social isolation and mental health, by better ring fencing funding streams for community participation.

I also hope that the Government will look again at the geographical spread of funding. The focus on professional performance often means that a disproportionate amount goes towards big events in our cities. That often leaves events in peripheral communities, where margins are tighter, in a precarious position. Festivals and events are hugely important to my home region of Dumfries and Galloway, but in recent years we have lost major festivals. The Wickerman festival, the Electric Fields festival and the Big Burns Supper festival have been cancelled for this year, and the Eden festival has been scaled back, given the challenges of higher policing costs since the establishment of Police Scotland.

However, when new, developing events such as Music at the Multiverse have emerged in a bid to replace those that we have lost, they have not received the support that they needed from EventScotland and other national agencies in order to develop. In the three years since Music at the Multiverse began, studies have shown the important economic benefit that it brings to Upper Nithsdale, which is one of the most deprived parts of Scotland. It is clear that the potential exists to grow that contribution to make the visitor attraction of the Crawick Multiverse viable for the future, but that has not been recognised when it comes to support.

Likewise, as a result of the Scottish Government's decision to remove winter festival funding in 2022 and the rejection—again—by EventScotland of an application from Dumfries and Galloway, sadly, the plug has been pulled and the curtain has fallen on the Big Burns Supper this year. That is a genuine grass-roots event that has transformed the lives of hundreds of young people who trained as the producers of the future. Ministers used to queue up to cut the ribbon at the opening of the Big Burns Supper. Now, sadly, the only cut that is being made by the Government is in the funding for the main event to celebrate the birthday of Scotland's greatest cultural icon—all for the sake of £25,000.

That is a huge blow to the south of Scotland, and it shows that we still have a long way to go to properly recognise the value of grass-roots community participation events and to ensure that

every part of Scotland is fairly supported in delivering them. That is why I very much welcome and thank the committee for its important contribution to the debate on tackling the issue.

16:23

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I, too, put on record my thanks to the members and clerks of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee for producing its comprehensive report on culture and communities.

Places and people underpin culture and communities across Scotland and generate a distinct sense of place, identity and confidence. Keith Brown was absolutely right to mention that supporting culture is not just about economics; people obtain so much value from cultural experiences. Evidence from the report consistently points to the need for integrated and co-ordinated action to deliver improvements for communities, rather than a focus that isolates social, economic or physical aspects.

The Scottish Government's culture strategy action plan refresh will support the recovery and renewal of the culture sector through its focus on empowering individuals and communities to further develop their own cultural activity. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has given that commitment, following the committee's report.

Scotland is a place where culture is valued, protected and nurtured. Culture is woven through everyday life; it shapes and is shaped by society; and its transformative potential is experienced by everyone. Scotland's rich cultural heritage and creativity of today is inspired by people and place. It enlivens every community and is celebrated around the world.

However, as the committee's report acknowledges, we have challenges in the culture sector. I am all too aware of those from my constituency casework in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. It is important to acknowledge that the Scottish Government is operating in an extremely challenging fiscal context. A combination of the impacts of Brexit, the aftermath of the pandemic and the energy crisis, which was fuelled by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, has sent prices spiralling upwards. In the light of that challenging context, the Scottish Government has been reviewing the actions that support its culture strategy. Although the aims and ambitions of the strategy are still relevant, the Scottish Government will publish a refreshed action plan later this year, setting out what it will do to respond to those challenges. That

plan will include actions on how the Scottish Government will support culture and creativity in our communities and it will support them by identifying and removing barriers to access and by championing the economic impact of culture.

Although that is welcome, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the removal of much of the winter festivals funding, which has impacted the grass-roots-created Big Burns Supper. Colin Smyth has just outlined the challenges there. The 2024 festival has had to be cancelled. However, I have been working closely with the team at the Big Burns Supper, which is now in its 13th year, to support it, and I thank the minister for her engagement and advice to me so far. I am planning to convene a round-table discussion with the Big Burns Supper, EventScotland, Creative Scotland and additional key players to discuss how the Big Burns Supper and similar organisations could be better supported in future. That will include how organisations such as EventScotland could improve their communication should funding and other issues arise. I ask the minister whether she agrees that it is important for key people from those bodies to engage in such round-table discussions to support our creative and events sectors and to look to improve the support that is offered to them.

I want to highlight some of the key points from the committee evidence session that took place in Dumfries. I was pleased to be able to join committee members that day—Neil Bibby, Donald Cameron and Ben Macpherson, who was a member of the committee at the time—at three site meetings. We met representatives from the Stove Network, A' the Airts in Sanquhar and representatives from Dumfries and Galloway Council and Lift D&G. Colin Smyth described well what the Stove Network and Lift do in our communities. I enjoy engaging with them, working with them and supporting them.

The committee heard that good place-based cultural policy involves empowering the local community to create a cultural offering that caters to its specific needs. Dumfries and Galloway Council provided evidence that, in order to overcome barriers to cultural participation, it is important to support communities to grow the cultural activities that they want, rather than taking a top-down approach.

Rural transport was flagged by all as a huge issue for people in the area, and a barrier to cultural participation. Since the pandemic, there has been more awareness of the need for a hybrid approach, recognising the need for direct human connection, but also keeping engaged those people who might not be able to travel to events in person. When the Big Burns Supper broadcast online during lockdown, it reached 300,000 people

globally. It was excellent that it took to the online platform during the pandemic. We can learn from what we had to do while we were required to stay at home.

The work and support of South of Scotland Enterprise was discussed in positive terms. The agency has adopted a strategic overview and encouraged what was seen as a shift in the approach to community engagement and support for individual projects.

Stranraer oyster festival was cited as an example of where that engagement has worked really well. It is a grass-roots-organised festival that is held over two and a half days, and it has contributed £2.3 million to the local economy in this year alone. That is a complete local culture success; I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands will attest to that.

Finally, there are important recommendations—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Harper, we have no time in hand. Could you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Emma Harper: Okay—yes. I am in my final sentence. I welcome the committee's report and the debate today.

16:30

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It has been an absolute privilege to sit on the committee during this inquiry. We had a unique opportunity to hear from an incredible array of cultural organisations and artists from across Scotland, ranging from grass-roots community arts groups to more established national charities and projects. However, it has, at times, been a pretty humbling experience. While we have spoken quite often about there being a perfect storm facing our cultural sector, it is quite another thing to actually hear at first hand the exact scale of the challenge that many of those organisations are facing. I therefore take the opportunity to thank all those who gave evidence to the inquiry.

Of course, culture does not happen exclusively in the programmes of national performing companies or in gallery spaces, hugely important though they are. Culture is also in the very fabric of our communities and civic spaces; in every community-led arts group up and down the country; and in hubs, such as Creative Stirling and the Whale Arts Agency, that bring creative projects together.

The work of those organisations is vital to our national cultural ecology, and they are everywhere we look. Those cultural spaces are where communities can come together to educate and organise. During the depths of the Covid crisis, it

was often those organisations that helped to look after each other.

The evidence from Edinburgh's cultural hubs in the inquiry was important. It underlined the fact that, even in a city where we have a big and profitable culture sector, communities can easily be left behind unless there is a commitment to partnership and to co-production. The community hubs want to be empowered to do amazing things, rather than just getting free tickets to fringe shows. It is often the makers, artists and other creatives who provide the spark for transformation and change, while providing support for the most vulnerable.

Radical Weavers in Stirling, for example, is helping survivors of trauma, including ex-servicemen, through weaving. It has also run a project to help trans and non-binary folk to alter clothing, building personal confidence and connection to a wider community. This lunchtime, we heard from other wonderful community organisations that are working on the rehabilitation and empowerment of vulnerable people.

The inquiry took the time to explore culture in communities in all its forms and in all its spaces. The consensus was clear: that the vision for place-based culture is clear, but it is a fragile ecology that needs to be protected and nurtured if it is to thrive.

The funding settlement that is given to the Scottish Government from Westminster does not keep pace with inflation and is forcing difficult choices to be made. When projects and organisations are already running on shoestring budgets, changes to funding can have a disproportionate impact on delivery. Standstill funding across the sector has ensured that many groups are trying to do more with less, and running costs for organisations are skyrocketing, while the need for affordable cultural activities continues to grow. Project-based funding has hollowed out community organisations' finances, with many struggling to cover core costs and keep buildings running. Local authority arts and cultural services have been cut to the bone.

The committee's report is clear: we must find a way forward that provides the financial security and certainty that our cultural sector needs, and we must do so with some urgency. I am pleased, therefore, that the First Minister has made the commitment to double cultural funding over the next five years, with increases starting from next year's budget. Beyond bigger budget lines, however, we need to rethink the way in which the sector is funded in order to secure a sustainable future.

There are innovative financial levers that we can use, and some of them are already under

development. We need a long-term strategy for culture that pivots away from stop-start funding towards multiyear budgets. The new Creative Scotland funding model will go some way towards that, allowing cultural organisations to do long-term community development work: to thrive, not just survive.

We also agreed that community-based organisations support the fulfilment of many of our key national outcomes across Government, and that our funding model should also reflect that. It is about understanding the wider benefits that culture brings, including through leveraging spending across Government portfolios for culture.

We know that the Scottish Government is still in the early days of considering cross-departmental budgeting for culture and preventative spend. We cannot sustain our cultural ecology from a single budget line and that work has to be accelerated. There are important lessons from Wales, where the Future Generations Commissioner has embedded that longer-term thinking about culture, place and the role of preventative spend in the public sector.

The report calls for innovation in cultural funding, such as a percentage for the arts scheme. We also looked at the potential use of the transient visitor levy and the importance of having a cultural voice at the table when councils are looking at how that is spent. We can see how percentage for the arts schemes have worked across the world, with the Netherlands, Ireland and the States redirecting funds for major developments into the arts. It is time that we developed more tools like that in Scotland under devolved powers—although I agree with Keith Brown that Ireland has turned into a cultural powerhouse because it is an independent country. It has the powers of a small independent nation and it has not severed its ties with the EU. It is integrated into the EU, which has driven its incredible work on culture.

The cultural strategy action plan later this year will be an important opportunity for the Scottish Government to set out a plan that delivers radical change for our community cultural sector. I hope to see the committee's recommendations reflected in the action plan. I am excited to see what the new investment in the sector can deliver over the next five years.

16:36

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As a substitute member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, I am pleased to speak in this debate, which has offered us the opportunity to celebrate an amazing wealth of culture in our communities

while thinking about how we respond to the many challenges culture faces that have already been outlined. It is about building on the opportunities that already exist and enabling local communities to shape what that looks like and make it sustainable in the longer term.

The fiscal landscape is very challenging, however. In that regard, I am pleased that the Scottish Government is refreshing the national culture strategy action plan, taking account of the way in which external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, rising energy prices and Brexit have impacted on our culture sector. I recall only too well meeting local creators in my constituency last year and hearing their deep concerns about whether they would be able to keep their studios open due to the sharp rise in energy prices and rental costs. Those challenges are very real and there is work for us to do.

The report produced by the committee is extremely comprehensive. It recognises that a place-based approach to culture is not new and considers a number of challenges in delivering local culture, including supporting cultural activity through, for example, volunteering, cultural provision and protecting spaces for culture. Personally, I found it an immensely helpful report in providing a reference point for what I and others should be thinking about in relation to how we support culture in our communities and regions.

The report reflects the importance of local networks to cultural ecology, and Deemouth Artist Studios, in my constituency, is a perfect example of that. It is home to artists, designers and makers with a strong relationship with Gray's School of Art and community and cultural organisations. However, there is absolutely no doubt that the success of the studios has been a slow burn. It has been hard earned and the studios have faced many challenges, not the least of which is funding, as is highlighted in the report.

I welcome the Scottish Government's recent announcement of almost £7 million to support the culture sector and, of course, the £100 million committed by the Scottish Government to the sector over the next five years, reflecting the real value that we place on culture in our communities at a time when the fiscal landscape has never been so challenging. I seek an assurance that the culture funding through, for example, the culture collective programme will continue to support grass-roots projects so that place-based culture such as the Torry Development Trust, the Doric festival and the North East Open Studios, in my constituency, can be sustained in the longer term.

Community assets are another issue that has been highlighted in the report. I note the on-going effort made in my constituency to secure the community asset transfer of a former police station

that has recently closed so that it can become a community hub that will support culture. I recognise that a community asset transfer process is already available for that purpose, but I am concerned—and I think that I reflect the concerns of those who are involved in this particular transfer opportunity—that the process is less than user friendly for groups that are perhaps unfamiliar with what is required. Alexander Stewart raised that point. I hope that the Scottish Government responds to the committee's recommendation that it engage with organisations in order to better understand what support can be provided around community ownership of assets, enabling them to realise their cultural potential in a truly place-based way.

I pay tribute to the volunteers and others who support culture in the justice space. In the Scottish Parliament, I recently hosted Aid & Abet, which is an organisation that supports the recovery of people who are leaving prison, and we celebrated the recent launch of "The Good Prison Officer", which is a collection of reflections written by ex-prisoners about their experiences of prison. It is a fantastic example of how imprisonment has inadvertently led to a creative endeavour by bringing a group of people together to write about their life-changing relationships with prison officers. I also pay tribute to Scottish Prison Art and Creative Enterprise—SPACE—Art Scotland, Koestler Arts and the many projects and organisations that promote access to the creative arts for those who are subject to, and in, the justice system. Through exhibitions and creative interventions, those organisations harness the arts to support rehabilitation and recovery from alcohol and drug harm.

Some people may feel that culture in justice is a bit of a stretch in the context of place-based culture, but I disagree. Members only had to pop along to the culture in communities event in the Parliament this afternoon to hear the fantastic North Lanarkshire Recovery Community band, supported by Reeltime Music, to appreciate the utter value of that important work.

I thank the committee for securing the debate and allowing us to reflect on the content of an important report. I look forward to remaining involved and working for my constituents in this wonderful creative space.

16:42

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Place-based approaches to culture are vital. They enable communities to make decisions about culture that best suit the needs and wants of the local population and allow much-needed local engagement in Scotland's culture. I welcome the announcement of an extra £100 million for the arts

and culture budget and await further details of that. However, the report and the committee's pre-budget scrutiny highlight that questions still need to be answered, given the dire situation that our culture sector faces.

As Karen Adam and Keith Brown rightly pointed out, we are in a difficult financial situation and the culture sector is feeling the brunt of it. I have been contacted by a number of organisations and event organisers whose future remains uncertain due to continued funding cuts in the arts. As a result, Scotland's culture sector hangs in the balance. A straightforward and coherent approach to protecting Scotland's unique culture and heritage is crucial. Cuts and short-term, project-based funding schemes jeopardise the ability of cultural programmes to reflect the communities that they serve. Our culture sector needs long-term, sustained funding. Community organisations cannot continue to operate while wondering when the next funding cuts will be, so long-term and continued funding is the only way that a place-based approach to culture in communities can work. Without it, community organisations cannot plan ahead, commit to cultural events or ensure the progress of culture in their own communities.

A successful place-based approach to culture must also address the individual needs of people in each community. The report rightly recognises the important role that volunteers play in supporting community-led cultural activities. However, Neil Bibby rightly pointed out the need to address the disparity when communities do not have the capacity or resources to sustain long-term volunteering.

In addition, the cultural needs of one community might not be the same as those of another. Scotland is a diverse place, so there must be a targeted approach to ensure that each community's unique needs are being met. A place-based approach must also acknowledge the unique cultural heritage and history of individual communities. It must recognise the multicultural heritage and make-up of communities across Scotland and work towards meeting the needs of the many, not the few.

A place-based approach to culture is what best serves our communities, but that cannot be fully implemented without decision making being handed back to the local communities. Decentralisation will bring decision making closer to home and put it back into the hands of those who are directly impacted. Local communities know their own cultural needs best. By giving communities a choice and a say in shaping the cultural life of their communities, we will help to strengthen and improve multiculturalism and Scotland's rich cultural heritage.

Finally, despite the Scottish Government's commitments to culture, access to cultural spaces in communities is on the decline. Giving power to the communities to implement their own cultural activities will go nowhere if local spaces are not made available to bring them to life.

Alexander Stewart rightly pointed out that there is immense pressure on many community arts groups to rescue spaces that are used for community cultural activities. There are some success stories in that regard, such as North Edinburgh Arts, in my region, but the current crisis that the sector faces means that many community organisations' spaces are still at threat of closure. That is particularly the case in deprived urban areas, where individuals may feel further removed from engaging in culture. We must ensure that spaces are open and maintained in order to allow communities to meet the cultural needs of individuals and to encourage everyone to engage in local cultural and arts settings.

16:48

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to today's debate on how we can empower our communities to deliver a place-based approach. It is great to hear from around the chamber today that, if there is one thing that we all agree on, it is how important and valuable our cultural sector is.

Scotland is a country that is rich in cultural heritage. It is, therefore, not surprising that, in every corner of the country, we see communities approaching cultural projects in their own unique way. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the amazing work that is done by the great organisations and volunteers in my region, including the Milngavie Town Centre BID, which does great work in bringing the local community together with events such as Milngavie street party, merry Milngavie and many others.

I welcome the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee's report, which sets out a way forward for a place-based approach to culture. I would also like to thank everybody who came along to provide evidence to the committee.

I hope that the Scottish Government will pay close attention to the report's recommendations. The report speaks about the key role that local support networks play in our communities. It is important that we recognise the importance of the cultural ecosystem in communities. Local networks of community-based organisations are vital to the ecosystem, and we should not forget that those networks are often made up almost entirely of volunteers whose time and efforts are essential to the delivery of cultural projects.

Volunteer Scotland has highlighted that much of the work that volunteers do is unseen. That work is essential to community projects, but we need to recognise that not all communities have equal access to those local networks of support. The committee's work revealed that communities in more deprived areas simply have less time to volunteer. In 2021, the Scottish household survey revealed that just 21 per cent of people in the most deprived areas were involved in volunteering in the previous 12 months, compared with 33 per cent in the least deprived areas. However, a community with fewer potential volunteers does not mean a community with fewer cultural needs. Cultural events can provide an important boost to people's mental health and allow people to escape their everyday lives. That is just as true in one area as it is in the next.

We also know that many volunteer-led groups face significant financial challenges. Many of those groups are almost entirely self-funded, and more and more of them have to charge for their services. At the very least, that makes cultural activities even less accessible to communities with more deprivation; at worst, it makes many cultural projects unsustainable. The committee is therefore right to urge the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to explore further avenues of support to protect and enhance those fantastic volunteer-led projects in our communities.

On that note, it is, of course, difficult to talk about support for cultural activities without discussing funding. As has been mentioned, today is not the time to rerun debates on local authority funding trends. However, it is a fact that local government funding has fallen in real terms over the past decade. It is therefore unsurprising that analysis by Audit Scotland shows that local government spending on cultural and leisure services has fallen by nearly 20 per cent since 2013.

Keith Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Pam Gosal: I do not think that I have enough time.

The committee was therefore right to recommend that the Government work with Creative Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual councils to assess the impact of the current physical environment on local cultural projects. I hope that the minister, in closing, will be able to comment further on that recommendation and on how the Government plans to address that decline.

Another barrier that prevents community groups from engaging in cultural projects is the red tape that they face. That is another issue that the committee was right to highlight. I hope that the

Government can engage with Planning Aid Scotland to ensure that unnecessary bureaucracy does not prevent communities from pursuing cultural projects.

In conclusion, Scotland's cultural landscape faces numerous challenges. Various public bodies have a role to play in tackling those issues, but the Scottish Government must play its part. I hope that it listens to what the cultural sector and the committee's report tell it. We need clear assurances that the current decline in cultural spend will be reversed and a clear strategy for how our communities will be empowered to take forward the cultural projects that they choose. I hope that, with those steps, Scotland's vibrant cultural landscape will be able to truly live up to its full potential.

16:54

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): I thank my colleagues for their contributions and the committee, which is diligently chaired by Clare Adamson, for its detailed report.

I am very pleased that we have had the opportunity to discuss the importance of culture in our communities. Today, Clare Adamson hosted groups that have given evidence in our Parliament—the North Lanarkshire recovery group and Reeltime Music, which created a band that sang its own songs and gave us all a poignant rendition of “Stand by Me”. That is a nice note to take away from today.

I have listened with interest to all the contributions from across the chamber about the challenges and opportunities in delivering a place-based approach. As Creative Scotland has said, a good place-based cultural policy recognises the individual needs of people, communities and places, recognises the unique culture and heritage of individuals and communities, and responds to the ambition, need and challenges of each place.

We are a nation of storytellers. At the event that Clare Adamson chaired today, I loved hearing a spellbinding tale from Jane Mather, from her very own Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh—a salient tale about heeding the advice from yer mammy and yer granny. That aligns well with our ambitions for the culture strategy, and we remain fully committed to delivering at that standard for everyone in Scotland.

I will pick up on some points that Emma Harper and Colin Smyth raised about the Big Burns Supper. I have been in communication with the organisers of the Big Burns Supper, and Creative Scotland continues to have a relationship with Electric Theatre Workshop, which manages it. Creative Scotland is engaging with it to advise on

any suitable funding routes. I thank Emma Harper: I am grateful for the work that she is doing to support the Big Burns Supper. I agree on the importance of the round table and the event, and I look forward to the response.

We have embodied such commitments through our support for programmes such as the Culture Collective, which we have heard a lot about today. For example, the Ayr Gaiety Culture Collective worked with partners including the violence reduction unit, Newton primary school and South Ayrshire Council to gather ideas about what the community needed and wanted. That came across very clearly today from the people from the recovery network and the band at Clare Adamson's event—it was really important to them. One member told me about the importance of the music and said that it was life-saving. We should not underplay how powerful that is.

The work that we have done so far, and the work of the Culture Collective and others, has led to the development of community gardens, women's groups and a range of summer activities for young people. That is one of the many opportunities that the programme created, and it demonstrates where Scottish Government support is fostering grass-roots community-developed initiatives. However, our support for culture and communities reaches far beyond our funded programmes. I am sure that everyone in the chamber would welcome the extra £100 million that was announced by our First Minister.

Along with the COSLA spokesperson for community wellbeing, Councillor Maureen Chalmers, I co-chair the culture conveners group. That group of elected officials shares the Scottish Government's view that culture is of great importance to our communities across the country, and we are working with them to develop ways for local and national organisations to work together to further our shared priorities. We have heard many examples today of those contributions, and I hope that colleagues welcome that national and local government collaboration. We are exploring and discussing the provision of cultural services and the impacts of the cost crisis and of Brexit, as well as an accessible recovery.

I raised all those issues with Sir John Whittingdale a few weeks ago. Tories in this place cannot just blame the Scottish Government when most of the challenges that organisations such as those that I have mentioned face, and the responses to them, lie with the UK Government. We cannot get away from that fact. It has been clear that, to fully harness all the potential, we need to collaborate strategically across central and local government, using all the lessons, creativity, levers and comparative advantage that we can bring to the table.

Mark Ruskell and Colin Smyth described how Ireland funds its cultural organisation. That shows the power of a small independent nation with a budget surplus. Our cultural strategy sets our ambition that everyone should be able to experience the empowering potential of culture, wherever they live in Scotland. Mark Ruskell reminded us that cultural groups brought us all light in the dark days of Covid.

Alexander Stewart, Neil Bibby, Keith Brown, Colin Smyth and Audrey Nicoll all spoke about community ownership. We know that ownership and control of land and buildings is a powerful tool for communities to drive change and achieve their goals. It can help to develop the local economy, provide activities and services and boost community identity. Audrey Nicoll mentioned the challenges with the process. I hope that she will be interested to know that the Scottish Government launched a review of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 on 21 July 2022. Work to review the 2015 act is due to conclude in early 2024, with a report being made available. I hope that members take an active interest in that.

Place-based and community-based collaborations can be the very heartbeat of our local community, as we heard today. We also heard about cultural assets and the cultural programme, so let us look at those. Keith Brown and others spoke about funding constraints. The outlook for our capital budget is very challenging, with high inflation and a projected 6.7 per cent real-terms reduction in our capital funding over the medium term. To meet all the pressures and spending commitments in the investment pipeline, an additional £1.9 billion for 2024-25, £2.5 billion for 2025-26 and £2.8 billion for 2026-27 will be required, against a funding envelope of £5.9 billion. Those numbers speak for themselves.

I always enjoy listening to Foyso Choudhury. He brought up how diverse and multicultural our nation is, and the importance of including those aspects. Pam Gosal, too, raised those points in her contribution.

As the cabinet secretary mentioned, our refreshed cultural strategy action plan, which was developed through close engagement with the sector, will set out the actions that we will take to respond to challenges that we have heard about in the debate, including a place-based approach to culture. I will ensure that Foyso Choudhury's request is considered in that regard.

The cabinet secretary also spoke about the new funding of £6.68 million that we announced this week, which was welcomed by many members, including Audrey Nicoll, in their contributions. I know that Keith Brown will be interested to hear that the impact of Brexit has been taken into

account, because we have now committed that additional funding to our national performance companies touring fund.

There is agreement across the chamber on the importance of culture in our communities, and a recognition that we must collaborate to realise the full potential of place-based culture. Alexander Stewart asked the Scottish Government to approach the report's recommendations in good faith. I certainly agree to do exactly that. We can all acknowledge culture's unique power to inspire, enrich and transform lives not only for individuals but for the collective wellbeing of our communities.

Kaukab Stewart said that we are a richer nation for our weaving of our cultural tartan. I could not agree more. The debate has demonstrated that.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Donald Cameron to wind up the debate on behalf of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

17:02

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The debate has been wide ranging and helpful. I add my thanks to the committee's clerks for all their work on its inquiry into culture in the communities and to all those who gave evidence. I thank, too, all the organisations that hosted visits from the committee, including the excellent ones that some members took part in to the Stove Network and Lift D&G in Dumfries, to the various venues here in Edinburgh and to Orkney.

Before I respond to members' contributions I will expand on some other important aspects of our report, further to those raised by the committee's convener in her opening speech.

Throughout our inquiry we sought to better understand the factors that either support or impede the development and growth of cultural activity in communities in Scotland. One view that we heard consistently was that there must be physical spaces in which cultural activities can take place. Those can include traditional venues such as theatres and cinemas, but also community assets such as village halls, community centres, schools, libraries and church buildings, which are equally important to our cultural ecology.

On our visit to Dumfries, we saw the vital role of the Stove Network building, which provides a cultural venue and meeting place on the high street and is somewhere to bring the community together to participate in culture. In Lochside, we visited the Lift D&G project space, which now operates as a community hub, having successfully moved into community ownership.

However, we have also been concerned to hear of a growing trend of cultural and community

assets becoming less available, less affordable and at greater risk of closure. That will no doubt negatively impact on access to culture for the affected communities. Volunteer Scotland lamented the lack of affordable and accessible community venues. Fèisean nan Gàidheal said that unaffordable rental levels for community spaces such as school buildings present a very real threat to community cultural activities. Making Music said that the rationalisation of the church estate was proving a significant challenge for its members. Creative Lives expressed concerns about the longer-term viability of venues run by local councils or arm's-length cultural trusts, which might be subject to closure as they face financial pressure.

Professor David Stevenson said that anguish was expressed over the closure of the Filmhouse but that the closure of community halls, which are the cornerstone of community culture, was being ignored. He told us that the impact of community spaces closing was even

“more significant in rural areas and smaller places, in terms of the effect of one space—one community hall—that had supported a multitude of cultural activities closing down.”—*[Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 27 April 2023; c 13.]*

We heard that there was a need to improve the mapping of assets at a local level to support better use of those assets, to improve understanding of the impact that individual site closures could have in the wider local context and to inform planning decisions. We heard that the Scottish Government should understand better which communities across Scotland have limited access to spaces for culture.

We considered community ownership as one possible route to keeping spaces open for use by the community. In her opening speech, the convener touched on the vital role of volunteers in sustaining community culture and the burden that that can place on individuals. We heard about similar challenges in relation to the community ownership of assets. That requires expertise, as well as volunteers' time and resources, and high costs are often associated with managing and maintaining such spaces.

It was clear to us that community ownership cannot always be the answer to protecting cultural assets that are subject to closure. However, when it is a viable option, communities need to be provided with on-going support and advice.

Neil Bibby: We heard evidence about the importance of transport links and of having affordable and reliable public transport to get people to spaces where they can access cultural opportunities. Does Donald Cameron agree that we need to consider that in relation to access to cultural opportunities?

Donald Cameron: I absolutely agree. When Mr Bibby and I visited Dumfries with others, it was clear that rural transport was an issue and a barrier.

We considered the planning system's role in protecting cultural and community assets, with the welcome inclusion of a new culture and creativity policy in national planning framework 4. Local place plans have an important role in enabling communities to make their views heard on cultural spaces and assets, but the committee thinks that further capacity building is needed to support communities to engage in the planning process and embed culture in their LPPs.

The importance of funding for culture in communities is a theme that permeates the committee's report. As the convener said, the funding constraints in the current fiscal environment pose a significant challenge to the successful delivery of place-based cultural policy. Several organisations told the committee that their funding had been at a standstill for several years. That was underlined by Creative Scotland, which had previously told the committee that many organisations that it funds on a regular, multiyear basis have received unchanged funding levels for a number of years and that that is increasingly unviable, as it represents an increasing year-on-year cut for organisations.

Analysis by SPICe for the committee revealed that total grant funding for Creative Scotland in 2021-22 was approximately 10 per cent lower in real terms than in 2014-15. The committee heard about the impact of that on the sector's ability to deliver cultural projects in communities. Caitlin Skinner, who is the chief executive of Stellar Quines, warned that

“the arts have been chronically underfunded and on standstill for so long”

that it

“creates a limit on what is possible.”—*[Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 4 May 2023; c 17.]*

The Federation of Scottish Theatre warned that organisations that are needed to deliver cultural work in communities

“are in an extremely precarious financial position.”

In our pre-budget report, which was published last week, the committee acknowledged that the First Minister has committed to increasing the Scottish Government's investment in arts and culture by £100 million over the next five years. However, we await the detail of how that funding will be rolled out in each of the next five years and how it will be allocated in the culture budget. I acknowledge the comments that the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and

Culture made in the chamber yesterday and the further information that he imparted about the breakdown of the £6.68 million of Scottish Government funding.

In the brief minute that is left for my speech, I will mention a few of today's contributions from across the chamber. One consistent theme was the importance of grass-roots development of culture and the importance of local people's role in developing cultural services. That was mentioned by many members, including Neil Bibby, Keith Brown and Sharon Dowey.

Kaukab Stewart spoke about empowering communities and the identity of belonging. Many people spoke about their local experience, including Colin Smyth, who spoke about his experience of the Stove Network in Dumfries.

Mark Ruskell rightly spoke about how important it is—and how lucky we were—to meet such a wide array of people and hear about the scale of the challenge that they described. He spoke of the opportunity in the Scottish Government's action plan later this year and the hope that that plan takes account of the committee's recommendations.

Audrey Nicoll made an important point about community assets and spoke about a former police station in her constituency and about culture in the justice space.

Foyso Choudhury spoke about cultural needs differing in Scotland and said that, because Scotland is a diverse place, cultural needs differ from one community to another.

I wish that I could mention more contributions, but I simply do not have the time.

In conclusion, the committee report clearly sets out the number of distinct and unique challenges that currently face culture in communities in Scotland: the squeeze on funding; the pressure on volunteering; the affordability and availability of spaces for culture; and a lack of rural transport, which can all act as a barrier to cultural participation.

The committee hopes that the Scottish Government will now respond positively to those challenges to safeguard the future of culture in all our communities across Scotland.

I support the motion in the convener's name.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:11

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-11305, on committee membership. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Colin Smyth be appointed to replace Mercedes Villalba as a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:11

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S6M-11153, in the name of Clare Adamson, on behalf of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, on "Culture in Communities: The challenges and opportunities in delivering a place-based approach", be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee's 4th Report, 2023 (Session 6), Culture in Communities: The challenges and opportunities in delivering a place-based approach (SP Paper 431).

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S6M-11305, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Colin Smyth be appointed to replace Mercedes Villalba as a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:12.

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

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