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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 18 January 2024

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Safeguarding Training (Non-clinical NHS Staff)

2. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what safeguarding training NHS boards are required to provide to non-clinical staff who are handling interactions with members of the public. (S6O-02983)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): The staff governance standard, which is applicable to all staff employed by NHS Scotland, requires health boards to appropriately train and develop staff and provide a safe working environment. The national policies on personal development and managing health at work support boards, as employers of national health service staff, to identify and provide necessary training for staff according to statutory requirements, the job role and individual training needs.

Foyso Choudhury: People who require to use NHS services will go through a process of dealing with non-clinical staff before seeing a medical professional. Many of those patients may be neurodivergent or require tailored communication. It is important that staff can identify needs and transmit medical information in a way that is effective and appropriate for neurodivergent patients. How often does the Scottish Government monitor and review the type of safeguarding training that is required for non-clinical staff with regard to such specific needs?

Michael Matheson: The national policy is to ensure that NHS staff, in whichever role they work, are provided with the appropriate training to undertake that role. It is the responsibility of their employer—the NHS board—to ensure that they receive the necessary training. Therefore, those non-clinical staff who work with individuals who have neurodivergent conditions should be appropriately trained in order to do so.

However, if the member has specific examples of instances in which he feels that that has not been the case, he should write to me with the details, and I will be more than happy to look into

the matter for him and to ensure that the issue is appropriately addressed.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn and question 4 has not been lodged.

Lifelong Learning

5. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve lifelong learning in Scotland. (S6O-02986)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Our lifelong learning offer already caters for a range of learner needs. However, last month, I set out to Parliament the steps that I will be taking to further improve lifelong learning in Scotland. As part of our reform programme, the Scottish Government will take the lead on skills planning, simplify funding and take a central role in the development of apprenticeships. I have also commissioned a short independent review of community learning, to be led by Kate Still, which is to make recommendations by summer 2024.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that response, and I hope that members across the chamber can agree on the importance of lifelong learning.

According to last year's Scottish Government report, "Adult lifetime skills: a literature review",

"Literature on the weaknesses of the current adult skills system in Scotland is also relatively sparse".

Can the minister tell us why, after 25 years of being a devolved nation, for 17 years of which a Scottish National Party Government has been in charge, there are still significant gaps in lifetime skills data and when the Government will rectify that? When will those gaps be identified and, more important, when will the need be met?

Graeme Dey: I will begin on a note of consensus: I completely concur with Martin Whitfield on the importance of the issue that he raises. I also recognise that he has a genuine interest in the topic.

I will offer just three specifics on what we are planning to do, because I think that it is more important to talk about what we intend to do and what we will do, rather than what has happened previously. I hope that my answer provides him with some reassurance on the seriousness of my intent in this area.

The national careers service that we intend to offer will be an all-ages service; it will not be aimed primarily at young people, important though it is that we get that aspect right. We are also working with employers and colleges in particular to shape an agile and responsive short qualifications

offering that meets the needs of businesses and employees who are looking to upskill to meet changing needs.

There is also a review of community learning and development provision to identify where in the country we might have to improve that offer in order to provide people of all ages with the chance to improve the quality of their day-to-day lives and, where applicable, access to education, training and employment.

I agree that there is a need for data to underpin that. In part, the review is intended to give us a clear picture of what is happening, but we know but that there are issues, because they have been identified by the Withers review and others. I am inclined simply to get on with fixing some of those issues.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I very much welcome the minister's evident commitment to improving lifelong learning in Scotland. It is commendable that that is the Scottish Government's position. Can the minister indicate what assessment has been made of how to promote that objective in my Cowdenbeath constituency and across the kingdom of Fife?

Graeme Dey: Annabelle Ewing makes a very good point, which is at the heart of why I have commissioned the review. If we are to address the point that has been made by her and others, we must understand what is and what is not working well and where there are pockets of good practice that we can try to roll out.

It is important to raise awareness of access to community learning and development, but I want to understand better the position across the country, so that we can take steps that are informed by robust information.

Colleges (Staff Attraction and Retention)

6. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to attract and retain staff in colleges. (S6O-02987)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Operational decisions, including those about attracting and retaining staff, are matters for individual colleges. The Scottish Government expects colleges' staffing complements to be in line with the needs of their learners and of their local and regional economies.

The Scottish Government, through its fair work agenda and through its work to support the adoption of the teacher qualification in further education, continues to support the college sector in attracting and retaining support and lecturing staff.

Colin Smyth: It is rare for a week to pass without a minister saying in the chamber that we do not have industrial action in the national health service in Scotland at the moment because of the action and intervention of ministers. What does it say about the failure of the Government to intervene in our colleges when we note that this week, college staff in the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers Association have once again voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action? What will the minister do in the coming days to avert that action and to ensure that our college staff get a fair pay deal, given that Audit Scotland recently warned that we face a recruitment and retention crisis in our colleges and that more cuts and a lack of fair pay will simply make that worse?

Graeme Dey: I am literally just off a call with the Unite union on that very subject. I have engaged with all the trade unions and the employers.

Colin Smyth knows that ministers cannot enforce a pay settlement in the sector. He also knows that industrial relations in the sector have been toxic, to say the least, for eight of the past nine years. I am actively encouraging all sides to try to find a solution, which is the role for ministers in all that.

There is a long-term issue with industrial relations in the college sector. I am intrigued by the fact that, although all sides recognise that, we have not yet been able to find a solution. We need to find a solution to the current pay dispute, but we also need to find a solution to the longer-term systemic problem in the sector. I think that if all the actors are as genuine as they tell me they are, we can resolve both issues.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Something that will not attract and retain staff is a proposed cut of 8 per cent—which is £58.7 million—to the net college resource budget. Recruitment of staff and students for next year has to happen right now, so when, precisely, will colleges know exactly what their budgets for next year will be, and just how brutal will those cuts be?

Graeme Dey: Mr Kerr is knowledgeable about those things and knows that there is a process, following publication of the draft budget, in which the Scottish Funding Council works directly with colleges and universities to determine the specifics of their budgets. That process is under way. I am not currently sighted on the exact details, although I will be in due course. I anticipate that more precise detail will emerge in the next few weeks.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The minister knows that redundancies have been proposed at the Shetland campus of the University of the Highlands and Islands. What confidence

can be given to the community that, in the future, we will have a Shetland college that meets the needs of local learners and of local businesses that require different sets of skills?

Graeme Dey: I am grateful for the question. Beatrice Wishart and I have engaged directly on the matter quite recently. She is right—there is legitimate concern about the situation at UHI Shetland. I can assure her that both UHI as an entity and the Scottish Funding Council are engaged directly with the college in Shetland to try to ensure its future along the lines that she indicated, but it has to get itself into a sustainable position. There are currently some challenges there, but I think that everyone is participating positively in trying to find the right solution for the college and for Shetland.

City of Edinburgh Council (Housing Emergency Declaration)

7. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the City of Edinburgh Council to discuss its housing emergency declaration. (S6O-02988)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Scottish Government regularly engages with the City of Edinburgh Council concerning our shared efforts to end homelessness and reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation. On 7 December, I met the convener of the housing, homelessness and fair work committee, Councillor Meagher, to consider housing supply matters. On 21 December, I discussed budgetary matters, including housing, with the leader of the City of Edinburgh Council, Cammy Day. Just yesterday, I met the Scottish Cities Alliance to discuss housing, and that meeting included officers and council leader Cammy Day.

Continuous dialogue between officials is facilitated through forums such as the City of Edinburgh Council's homelessness task force, which last met on 13 December. Scottish Government officials and their City of Edinburgh Council counterparts will next meet on 23 January.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome the minister's engagement, which is much appreciated, but it is not just the City of Edinburgh Council that has declared a housing emergency—other councils are doing it now. Last week, 781 people applied for a single council house in Dreghorn. The housing emergency is a "now" issue. What action will the Scottish Government take imminently to tackle our housing emergency, whether by bringing empty homes back into use or by getting

moving on building both housing to meet general needs and social rented accommodation?

Paul McLennan: On the specific issues, Sarah Boyack will be aware of the announcement of £60 million of acquisition funding. We are discussing various sites with the City of Edinburgh Council and we are talking about allocation policies. Sarah Boyack will be aware that we have also attended a number of round-table events in Edinburgh at which the particular issue of empty homes has been raised. We are working with the council with regard to empty homes and a few other things. There are a few strategic sites, such as at Granton in the west of Edinburgh, that we are working with the council to develop as quickly as possible.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I, too, thank the minister for his committed engagement on the housing emergency in Edinburgh and for his appreciation of the financial constraints, which are real. The situation in Edinburgh is becoming more and more serious, and it is more acute than the situations elsewhere in the country. In this new year of 2024, as well as the official engagement, can we expect action from the Scottish Government and the City of Edinburgh Council, working together, to tackle the emergency?

Paul McLennan: I thank the member for his question. As I said, we are engaging with the City of Edinburgh Council on a regular basis on the issues that I mentioned, such as strategic sites that are coming forward and the acquisition policies. When I met the Scottish Cities Alliance yesterday, we looked at innovative methods of financing that the City of Edinburgh Council has used before, such as the growth accelerator model and tax increment financing. We are engaging with the council on the issue, and we will continue to engage with it on bringing housing forward as soon as we possibly can.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): We need to find solutions, and part of that is about looking at our land supply issues in the capital. Will the Scottish Government agree to audit all public land—not just council land and Scottish Government agency land, but national health service land as well—to see what development sites might be available to help to significantly reduce the cost of affordable housing development? We know that many sites across the Edinburgh area will not necessarily be developed as part of the local plan. I hope that the opportunity to undertake a proper audit will be taken up and that that is a positive suggestion.

Paul McLennan: I thank the member for his question. We are touching on planning issues, but, with regard to the availability of land such as NHS land, I have already engaged with Paul Lawrence and Cammy Day, from the the the City of Edinburgh Council, to discuss that. I am awaiting

some evidence from them about land that is available and how we can work to bring it forward, which may include land that is not in the local development process. We are engaging with the council on that issue.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): In November last year, the city of Glasgow, too, declared a housing emergency. I understand from my colleagues at Glasgow City Council that our city has about 1,500 fewer homes than it needs in order to meet demand. I know that the housing minister meets council representatives regularly, but what work is going on to address Glasgow's specific needs, including the challenges that have been set by the Home Office's fast-tracking of asylum claims?

Paul McLennan: I met Glasgow City Council to consider the city's housing supply challenges on 12 December, and I will meet it again on 23 January.

In October, the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees wrote to the United Kingdom Government to request funding to support local authorities to manage asylum pressure. However, no additional support was forthcoming. That is deeply disappointing, and ministers continue, alongside our Welsh Government colleagues, to press the matter. Clearly, the Home Office's approach is pushing people into destitution, and the impact of that on Glasgow—Scotland's largest dispersal area—is particularly acute. We will again call on the UK Government to recognise the devastating impact of its approach on local authorities, communities and asylum seekers.

Out-of-hours General Practice Services (Inverclyde)

8. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to discuss out-of-hours GP services in Inverclyde. (S6O-02989)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government engages regularly with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, as it does with other health boards, on a variety of issues, including the provision of out-of-hours services. Healthcare Improvement Scotland is supporting the health board directly in relation to the service provision in Inverclyde, to ensure quality engagement on any permanent change to that service. The Scottish Government has been sighted on that process.

Paul O'Kane: Communities across Inverclyde, in my region, are deeply concerned about the possibility of a permanent reduction in availability of their out-of-hours services and what that will mean for local communities. I pay tribute to local

campaigners, including local councillors—in particular, Martin McCluskey—for all their work in pushing forward the case for the value of those services. That marks quite a contrast to the member for Greenock and Inverclyde, who, according to reports in the *Greenock Telegraph*, has already given up the fight and accepted that his constituents and mine will have to put up with reduced services.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise the value and importance of a full out-of-hours service in Inverclyde? Will he listen to local people's views and deliver more than just a weekend-only out-of-hours service, as local people deserve?

Michael Matheson: As Paul O'Kane will be aware, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has undertaken a full consultation exercise that closed last month and is presently being analysed by the board. Healthcare Improvement Scotland has a clear process for looking at any review of what may be classed as a major service.

It is important to recognise that the reintroduction of the part-time service on Saturdays complements the existing home visiting service, which remains operational throughout evenings and weekends and overnight. However, it is important that any decision that is arrived at takes into account the concerns and issues that have been raised by the local community during the consultation process.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): It is frustrating that the general practitioner out-of-hours service in Inverclyde is to be limited to Saturdays and public holidays. However, having attended one of the health board's public consultations on the service changes, I am aware that just over a third of people from Inverclyde who need to see a GP out of hours are given a face-to-face appointment, with the remainder being given video, telephone or home appointments. I want a full service to be reinstated to Inverclyde, but not to the extent of losing the accident and emergency provision, concern over which was very much highlighted at the consultation that I attended. If Paul O'Kane had been there, he would have heard that.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is important that we consider the full context in which those decisions have been taken and, ultimately, do not mislead the public, as some have done in the press, by suggesting that Inverclyde does not have an out-of-hours GP service?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the concerns and issues that Stuart McMillan has raised, and I have made the point about the services that are available, including the home visiting service, which remains operational throughout evenings and weekends and overnight. It is important that

people are not left with the impression that no services are available in the Inverclyde area. I agree with Stuart McMillan that we would like there to be greater out-of-hours service coverage across NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, including in Inverclyde.

I want to make sure that the process that has been followed by the board in holding the consultation exercise is in line with the Healthcare Improvement Scotland guidance on such matters and that, at the conclusion of that exercise, we have a clearer understanding of the most appropriate path for dealing with out-of-hours services in the Inverclyde area.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): One of the problems with not having out-of-hours GP services is that people will simply present at A and E, adding more pressure to already overstretched departments, particularly at Inverclyde Royal hospital but right across Scotland. Will the cabinet secretary explain what additional resource support he can offer to A and E departments to deal with that influx of patients when no other services are available?

Michael Matheson: We have to wait for the outcome of the consultation exercise in Inverclyde. However, I do not disagree with the point that Jamie Greene has made about the potential impact on A and E departments if there is no access to out-of-hours services.

This winter, specific work has been undertaken to make sure that there is greater resilience in our out-of-hours services across the country, which has been effective over the past month or two because of the actions that we have taken. Notwithstanding that, I recognise Jamie Greene's concerns, which is why we will look very closely at the outcomes of the consultation and the impact that they could have on wider services.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Post Office (Horizon Prosecutions)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I begin by putting on record the best wishes of, I am sure, the whole chamber and people across Scotland to His Majesty the King and to the Duchess of Rothesay. We wish them both a speedy recovery to good health. *[Applause.]*

Last week, in response to the Horizon scandal, the First Minister said:

"I think that the idea of almost a mass exoneration is one that is very worthy of consideration."

In a letter to the Prime Minister just eight days ago, he said:

"it is right that normal processes for appeals are set aside".

However, in a statement this week, the Lord Advocate, his Government's top legal adviser, said:

"in Scotland, there is an established route of appeal in circumstances such as this."—*[Official Report, 16 January 2024; c 14.]*

Humza Yousaf has said that there should be a blanket exoneration, but the Lord Advocate believes that the current process for appeals should not change, with each case being considered individually. Will the First Minister tell not just the Parliament but, crucially, all the victims of the scandal what the position of his Government is?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I associate myself with Douglas Ross's remarks and wish both King Charles and the Duchess of Rothesay a speedy recovery.

On the Post Office issue, I begin by paying tribute once again not only to Alan Bates but to all the hundreds of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses right across the United Kingdom who should not have had to wait for an ITV drama in order to get justice and compensation. However, it is important that the United Kingdom Government has acted.

Douglas Ross is right—I wrote to the Prime Minister. I should say that I have received his response, which is a positive one, to the effect that he is willing to work on a UK-wide basis. I will be happy to release that response, but I think that we are waiting for number 10 to confirm that it is happy for us to do so. The detail says that the UK Government is willing to work with the Scottish Government to consider a UK-wide approach to

mass exoneration for people who have been wrongfully convicted.

I listened carefully to what the Lord Advocate had to say, both in her statement and in response to questions. She made the point that there is currently an appeals process through the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission to investigate miscarriages of justice. Let me be clear, though, so that Douglas Ross has no misunderstanding. We support the UK Government's considering legislation for mass exoneration for people who have been wrongfully convicted. We have written to the UK Government and have had a positive response back. We hope that the legislation can apply across the UK.

Douglas Ross: That does not clear up the case in Scotland.

The First Minister: It does.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister says that it does, but the UK legislation will apply in England and Wales, whereas the issue is devolved in Scotland. We have his top legal officer, who sits in the Scottish Government's Cabinet, saying something quite different from what the First Minister is saying. Let me quote again from the Lord Advocate's statement on Tuesday:

"That is an important process, because not every case involving Horizon evidence will be a miscarriage of justice, and each case must be considered carefully".—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2024; c 14.]

That is the Lord Advocate's current position: a refusal to change the process and accelerate the system because there might be some guilty people. Surely it is better to accept the tiny possibility that a guilty person will have their conviction overturned than to allow dozens of innocent postmasters to live with the stain of guilt for a minute longer.

What discussions has the First Minister had with the Lord Advocate since her statement on Tuesday? Does he agree that the convictions must be quashed as quickly as possible?

The First Minister: The Lord Advocate and I are due to speak again tomorrow, I believe. When the Lord Advocate spoke in the chamber, she was speaking as the independent head of the prosecution service. That important part of her function is distinct from her position when she provides legal advice as a member of this Government.

It is still my preference that UK legislation be applied UK-wide through a legislative consent motion. That would be the preferable route, although there are complexities to work through in that.

Douglas Ross is presenting this as a binary choice, which is not correct. The best position for

all of us is to see, urgently, the mass exoneration of those who were wrongfully convicted. However, when it comes to those whose conviction was and is sound, nobody necessarily wants those convictions to be overturned and those people to be able to apply for compensation. If we can get to the position of having the best of both worlds, that would be the best position to get to. That is why we are willing to work with the UK Government, which presumably also does not want sound convictions to be overturned if that can be avoided. We will work with the UK Government in that respect.

However, let us not forget what we are dealing with. I am afraid that this is a scandal that was born in Westminster. The Post Office is wholly reserved, and UK Government ministers are wholly responsible for it. I accept that it lied to UK Government ministers—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: —but they clearly did not interrogate the Post Office strongly enough. Therefore, the public inquiry is important, and I urge the UK Government to fully co-operate with it.

Douglas Ross: The Crown Office is wholly devolved in Scotland, which is why the situation here is very different. The Post Office could not prosecute those individuals here—it was the Crown Office that did so.

One of those who was prosecuted was Judith Smith. She pled guilty in 2009 at Selkirk sheriff court to a charge of fraud, after thousands of pounds disappeared. Judith's lawyer told us that the Crown Office displayed a worrying lack of scepticism about the Post Office's case, particularly as there was no trace of the money anywhere. Judith was even asked whether she had blown it all on a lavish holiday or whether she had a gambling problem. Her conviction was finally quashed just last week. However, Judith's lawyer said that the Crown Office should have launched a review of all past Post Office prosecutions the minute that it became aware of the Horizon problem in 2013. It did not, and it took a further two years for prosecutors to dismiss on-going cases that relied on Horizon evidence.

Will the First Minister explain why prosecutions in Scotland continued for two years after the Crown Office became aware of concerns with Horizon? Does the First Minister agree with the Scottish Conservatives' call for the Lord Advocate at the time, Frank Mulholland, to come to the Parliament to answer questions on the scandal?

The First Minister: Let us be clear that it took an ITV drama to get the UK Government to take action, even though we have been told by hundreds of sub-postmasters and sub-

postmistresses up and down the country that they were lied to. Let us not forget that that is what spurred the UK Government into action, not the desperate pleas of sub-postmasters up and down the country.

Let us go back to the point that the Lord Advocate made very clearly in the chamber, which was that the Crown Office was, in her words, “misled” and given false reassurances by the UK Post Office time and again.

There are many institutions that, given the harrowing testimonies, including the one that Douglas Ross just articulated, will be answerable for what they did and the action that they took. I fully expect—I am certain that it will be the case—that the Crown Office will fully co-operate with the public inquiry that is under way.

On why the Crown Office chose to prosecute cases after 2013, the Lord Advocate laid out the fact that there was guidance to prosecutors in 2013 in relation to Horizon cases, and, in 2015, the Crown Office stopped prosecuting cases that were sufficiently dependent on Horizon data.

The current Lord Advocate is responsible and answerable for the Crown. She has already answered questions about what took place in 2013, and she has said that, if MSPs want a further opportunity to question her, she will make herself available.

Douglas Ross: My question was about one of her predecessors. I think that it is crucial that the Parliament hear from Frank Mulholland. It would be interesting to know whether the First Minister supports that call from the Scottish Conservatives.

All of this matters here in Holyrood, because the Crown Office is a devolved institution. The procedure by which these convictions can be quashed will be set by this Government and this Parliament. However, the process that the Lord Advocate set out could mean that that takes far longer in Scotland than it should.

Myra Philp worked with her mum, Mary, at the post office in Auchtermuchty in 2001. At 7 o'clock one morning, Post Office auditors burst through the door and demanded the keys to the shop. Mary, a former policewoman, was suspended, but she immediately suspected that Horizon was to blame.

The Post Office, on the other hand, blamed Mary's teenage grandchildren. Auditors accused them of breaking in during the night, overriding the time lock and taking the money. Mary was not prosecuted, but she lost her business. She died in 2018, the year before Alan Bates forced the Post Office to admit that Horizon was desperately flawed. Myra told us:

“My mum died not knowing she was right.”

The Lord Advocate is head of the independent judiciary in Scotland, but she is also the chief legal adviser to the Scottish Government and the Cabinet. Does the First Minister accept that, if we follow the position that the Lord Advocate laid out to the Scottish Parliament on her preferred process, the process will take far too long for the postmasters who have been wrongly convicted and that some could die before their names are cleared?

The First Minister: I will give clarity once again, not just to Douglas Ross but to Mary's family and to all the other sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses across Scotland. Last week, the UK Government announced that it was looking to introduce legislation in the UK Parliament in order for there to be mass exonerations for wrongful convictions.

I have written to the Prime Minister to say that we would welcome that process. Not only that, but I said, as the First Minister, that we would be willing to work with the UK Government so that the legislation has a UK-wide effect. That could be done through an LCM. I say to Douglas Ross that, if it is not possible, for whatever reason, for the UK Government to bring forward an LCM, we are already working on contingencies around separate Scottish legislation if that is required. I hope that it is not—if an LCM is a possibility, that would be the easiest and quickest route.

As the First Minister of Scotland, I will decide what legislative route is used in this Parliament to exonerate those who were wrongfully convicted. I say once again, regarding the harrowing testimony that Douglas Ross gave in relation to what Mary had to suffer—I have no doubt that her family still feel the consequences—that that happened on the UK Government's watch, because of a Post Office that is wholly reserved to the UK Government.

Time after time after time, UK Government ministers from UK-based parties did not believe sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, such as Mary and others, who were being harassed by the Post Office. They have waited far too long for justice, so I give them absolute confirmation and assurance that we will work with the UK Government, and whomever else we need to work with, to ensure that they do not have to wait a single day longer—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: —not just for justice but for access to compensation.

Dangerous Dogs

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I echo the best wishes to King Charles and to the Duchess of Rothesay, and I wish them both a speedy recovery.

Confusion about a ban on XL bully dogs in Scotland has brought dangerous dogs back into the headlines. Today, the Scottish National Party Government will finally make a statement, and I hope that it takes action. As with so many issues, however, it is only when media pressure builds that SNP ministers respond. Too often, they act on headlines rather than on the evidence.

In the previous session of Parliament, I sat on the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee when it produced its “Post-legislative Scrutiny: Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010” report. The cross-party committee called for a review of the law and for a focus on irresponsible owners and breeders. The Government accepted the committee’s findings, and committed in 2019 to a review. Nearly five years on, therefore, why are we still waiting?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There was, of course, something that happened between 2020 and the current time: a global pandemic, which undoubtedly resulted in the fact that other work had to be delayed. I think that most individuals would accept that.

On the XL bully dog safeguards that the United Kingdom Government has brought in, the UK Government made the announcement without a single word of consultation with the Scottish Government. I suspect that, if I had said to Anas Sarwar at that point that we would take immediate action, he would have demanded to know what consultation we had had. It was right that Siobhian Brown took time to consult with animal welfare stakeholders and those involved in animal rehoming centres.

The Scottish Government still absolutely believes that the correct approach is not to breed XL bully dogs, but we have to be able to respond to the fact that we have seen media reports of a number of people who have brought their XL bully dogs over the border to Scotland.

We have consulted, we have taken time to engage and we will bring forward safeguards. It should be said that that is not a ban. People will still, of course, be able to have their XL bully dogs if they meet the criteria of the regulations that are brought forward.

On the stricter regime that we have in Scotland with the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 and the various notices, I am pleased that we have a strict regime, which is not available elsewhere in the UK.

Anas Sarwar: I know that the First Minister is not good on the detail, but a review of the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 was in the programme for government in 2021, during Covid. Therefore, I am not sure that that excuse holds any water.

In 2022 alone, victims were treated in Scotland’s hospitals a reported 7,600 times for injuries that were inflicted by dogs. Those dogs were out of control and often mistreated, or poorly trained by their owners. Many of the injuries that people sustained disfigured them for life.

Kirsteen Hobson is a postwoman in Oban. In December, she was brutally attacked by a German shepherd dog, and she sustained serious injuries to her face, leg and arm. She needed specialist plastic surgery. She will be scarred for life emotionally and physically. Nothing that the Government is announcing today would have helped her.

Five years ago, the Government promised to take action against irresponsible owners and breeders, not just an individual breed. If the Government can act on XL bully dogs, what will it take for it to protect people such as Kirsteen and many others whom it has repeatedly promised to protect?

The First Minister: My sympathy goes to Kirsteen for the injuries that she has suffered.

We did, of course, take action on the back of the work that was done in 2019. That is why we have a really important regime of dog control notices. That is the regime that I am talking about, and it does not exist in England and Wales. If Anas Sarwar had the detail in front of him, he would know that.

Anas Sarwar would also then know that more than 1,200 active dog control notices are currently in place in Scotland. We know that XL bully dog DCNs represent 2 per cent of the DCNs that are in force.

One dog attack is, of course, one too many. We have taken a whole range of actions to protect communities as well as we possibly can. Our dog control notice regime will undoubtedly help in that regard.

We will continue to work with Police Scotland, local authorities, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and those with other relevant interests to keep communities safe from the very small minority—we should be clear that it is a very small minority—of irresponsible dog owners who have dangerous dogs.

Anas Sarwar: Some 7,600 treatments in hospitals related to dog attacks in one single year. I do not think that the First Minister should play that down, because that will be of extreme concern to families throughout the country.

Humza Yousaf was, of course, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice when the Government promised to review the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. Still nothing has happened. People such as Kirsteen Hobson should not have to be fearful

when they go to work, and parents should not have to fear for their kids when they take them to the park. The Government has a responsibility to protect people, not just to respond to bad headlines. However, too often, sadly, that is what it does. We saw that with the infection scandal at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, we saw it last week and we see it again today with the Post Office scandal, and now we see it with XL bully dogs.

The Government must commit to stronger powers for councils and the police, and it must make it clear that the responsibility for dogs lies with owners and breeders. Does the First Minister accept that we cannot wait until another 7,000 people are harmed before the Government fixes the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010?

The First Minister: Anas Sarwar's third question took no account at all of the response that I gave to his previous question. That is the problem. He says that we failed to act. If he had stopped reading his pre-prepared script, he would have heard me say that we brought in a dog control notice regime. That does not exist in England and Wales. The fact that we have that in place has meant that we have more than 1,200 active dog control notices in place as we speak.

We will continue to work with Police Scotland, local authorities, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and other relevant stakeholders to keep our communities safe. On top of that, we have established an operational working group involving local authorities, Police Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and key stakeholders to progress the work. We have also commissioned a national dog control notice database to help enforcement agencies better monitor the control of dogs.

When it comes to having to respond to the actions of the UK Government, which is what we are having to do in this case, would it not be far better if we did not always have to respond to what the UK Government does, and instead had the full powers here in Scotland?

Cancer Survival Rates

3. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that Scotland has among the worst survival rates for some of the most serious cancers. (S6F-02717)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Cancer remains a national priority for the national health service and the Scottish Government, which is why we published a 10-year strategy in June 2023, focusing on improving cancer survival and providing equitable access to treatment. The

strategy includes a focus on the less survivable cancers and improving their outcomes. The strategy and the plan take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways in cancer, from prevention and diagnosis through to treatment and post-treatment care.

I am heartened by the fact that, overall, cancer mortality in Scotland has decreased by 11 per cent over the past 10 years, but we of course recognise that we have much more to do, particularly when it comes to less survivable cancers. I know that Alexander Stewart has raised these issues on a number of occasions, and the importance that he attaches to this subject is shared by the Government.

Alexander Stewart: The Scottish National Party Government has been responsible for running health for nearly 17 years. Data shows that, out of 33 countries of comparable wealth and income levels, Scotland ranks as low as 32nd for five-year survival from pancreatic cancer, 31st for stomach cancer and 29th for lung cancer. First Minister, you should be ashamed that your Government has allowed the five-year survival rates for those cancers to deteriorate to some of the lowest levels in the developed world. What action will you take to resolve that?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

The First Minister: With those survival rates, there is work for the Scottish Government to do—there is no getting away from that. I have often spoken about my personal experience in relation to pancreatic cancer: I lost a dear uncle to pancreatic cancer, so the issue is very personal to me.

There are areas where we compare very favourably among those 33 countries—in liver cancer, for example, where Scotland's survival rate is 12th, whereas that of the United Kingdom overall is 21st, and England is in 25th place. Although there are some cancer types where we are seeing progress, there is clearly still much more for us to do in other areas such as pancreatic cancer, stomach cancer, brain cancer and lung cancer.

In relation to what we are doing, I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care writes in detail to Alexander Stewart. We are trying to speed up diagnosis where we can, and that is why we are investing in our detect cancer early programme. We are also investing in rapid cancer diagnostic services, which are currently operational in five national health service boards across Scotland. The early evaluation from those rapid cancer diagnostic services shows that hepato-pancreato-biliary or HPB cancers—liver and pancreatic

cancers—are among the most common cancers that are being diagnosed through that pathway.

I will return to and end on this point. Overall, cancer mortality in Scotland has decreased by 11 per cent over the past 10 years, but there is clearly still work to do on less survivable cancers, as Alexander Stewart says.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Labour MSPs shamefully failed to support minimum unit pricing, a policy that has been proved to save lives and reduce hospital admissions since its inception. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact of policies such as minimum unit pricing on liver cancer rates in Scotland?

The First Minister: Public Health Scotland's evaluation of minimum unit pricing shows that it has had a very positive impact on health outcomes during the study period. It is estimated to have cut alcohol consumption and alcohol-attributable deaths, and it is likely to have reduced hospital admissions. Public Health Scotland estimates that about half of liver cancers in the UK are preventable, and that is why we continue to take action on the most prevalent factors, particularly alcohol consumption. Prevention of cancers takes longer to realise, but we hope that MUP impacts will be seen in the future for liver cancers. Our cancer strategy places a focus on less survivable cancers, including liver cancer.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Recently, I met a courageous group of women from the west of Scotland who shared their experiences of being diagnosed with ovarian cancer and being forced to use their families' life savings to fund private treatment in England. According to Target Ovarian Cancer, people in the west of Scotland cannot access the life-saving surgery that women in NHS Lothian can access. Consequently, they face poorer outcomes with survival rates for the disease. It is nothing short of a national scandal that women with ovarian cancer are having to pay for the surgery that they need and deserve because of where they live. Can the First Minister tell us why women in the west of Scotland cannot get surgery? What urgent action is being taken to end that life-threatening postcode lottery?

The First Minister: I am happy to ensure that the cabinet secretary for health writes in detail to Jackie Baillie about the actions that are being taken. I do not want anyone in the country, regardless of their condition, but particularly when it is cancer, to have to wait a day longer than they have to in order to get treatment. We know that the earlier that cancer is diagnosed and the earlier treatment begins, the better the chances of survival, which is why we have taken action. For example, there has been an almost 100 per cent increase in the number of consultant oncologists since the SNP has been in position. We have also

increased the number of consultant radiologists by more than 66 per cent.

To address the point about private healthcare, when comparing Scotland to the rest of the UK, fewer people are having to self-fund for private in-patient day-case care. Notwithstanding that, I want to see the work that we are doing, particularly on ovarian cancer, being extended across Scotland so that there is no postcode lottery for care. I will ensure that the health secretary writes to Ms Baillie in detail.

Food Labelling

4. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of reported concerns regarding food labelling being a devolved matter, what the Scottish Government's position is on what impact the United Kingdom Government's reported plans to roll out "not for EU" labelling on food and drink products across the whole of the UK could have on Scotland's food and drink industry. (S6F-02729)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Government shares the well-documented concerns about those labelling plans that have been highlighted by the Food and Drink Federation Scotland and many food and drink businesses. Mairi Gougeon, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, wrote to her UK Government counterpart before Christmas for much-needed clarification on its plans. However, my understanding is that she has not had the courtesy of a response as yet. We will continue to press the UK Government for answers, not least on the question of why it is insisting on pursuing a policy that would arbitrarily add costs to all agri-food businesses, not just those that trade specifically with Northern Ireland. The move is disproportionate and wholly inappropriate, particularly when consumers are already bearing the burden of added food costs. Frankly, it is just another example of Conservative chaos harming our economy.

Emma Harper: I agree with the First Minister about the impact and the harm that the plans will cause many Scottish food and drink businesses. Does the First Minister also agree that, although the labelling may be needed for goods that are being traded with Northern Ireland, there is no rationale for it in relation to trade with other countries? Has the Westminster Government shared why it intends to impose the regime?

The First Minister: No, it has not. We have written to the UK Government, but we have had not had the courtesy of a response. There is no real evidence or convincing argument as to why the labelling requirement is necessary.

Food and drink stakeholders in Scotland, who have added so much to our economy, are absolutely scathing about the UK Government's plans. The Food and Drink Federation's director for growth, Balwinder Dhoot, said:

"Our members are really clear that the Government's plan to extend 'not for EU' product labelling on a UK-wide basis will hamper growth, hitting investment, exports and jobs while increasing consumer prices and restricting the choice of products".

The evidence is clear, as is the independent analysis. Brexit is damaging our economy, which is why it is utterly unforgivable that no UK-based party is standing up against Brexit, or even proposing that we rejoin the single market, which is seven times the size of the UK. The people of Scotland should be given a choice—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: —as to whether they want to stay in broken Brexit Britain, or whether we want to make decisions for ourselves as an independent nation that is in the European Union.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The UK Government is going to launch a consultation on a new food labelling scheme that will ensure that consumers know what they are buying: high quality British produce, rather than imported goods that do not meet UK welfare standards. Does the First Minister support that move? Can he explain how he expects Scottish farmers and fishermen to continue to provide high welfare food that meets environmental standards when his Scottish National Party budget is cutting £46 million from the rural affairs portfolio?

The First Minister: This is another Brexit burden for businesses in Scotland to bear, even though we did not vote for Brexit—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The damage and burdens of Brexit are being imposed on our businesses up and down Scotland.

Businesses are not lining up to thank Rachael Hamilton's Conservatives for the imposition of Brexit—quite the opposite. Even the British Retail Consortium has said:

"Given labelling is intended to prevent goods from GB entering the EU through Northern Ireland, it is unclear why such labelling is necessary for all goods sold in Great Britain. This will only add unnecessary costs at a time when the cost of living is already high."

The SNP is the only party that is standing up against Brexit and the only party that says that we should rejoin the European Union—that single market that is seven times the size of the UK market. When the choice is so clear, it is no

wonder that the Conservatives fear the Scottish people's verdict.

Superfast Broadband (Reaching 100 Per Cent Programme)

5. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what percentage of the premises contracted for delivery of superfast broadband under the R100 scheme have still to be connected. (S6F-02720)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): All homes and businesses across Scotland can currently access a superfast broadband service. The R100 contracts go beyond that by extending access to gigabit-capable broadband, which is more than 30 times faster than what we originally committed to.

Our programme remains on track to complete build and ensure that all contracted premises are connected by 2028. So far, more than 36,100 premises have been connected, and the remainder will be phased between now and 2028.

Despite swingeing cuts from the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government has prioritised investment in digital connectivity in the 2024-25 budget, in recognition of the fact that digital connectivity is a key building block for a green and growing economy.

Douglas Lumsden: The R100 scheme was meant to connect more than 114,000 premises—mainly in our rural areas—by 2021. We know from the response to a freedom of information request that only 29 per cent of those premises have been connected, and the figures in the north are even worse—only 15 per cent has been delivered. The date for the north Scotland scheme has slipped to 2028, which is seven years late. Does the First Minister accept that that abject failure by his Government is leaving our rural communities behind? Will the R100 scheme be delayed any further?

The First Minister: We have a strong track record of delivering successful digital infrastructure—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: Our broadband initiatives have delivered almost 1 million connections to date. Douglas Lumsden asks about telecoms, which matter is wholly reserved to the UK Government—well, you could not mark his neck with a blowtorch. We have a strong track record. For rural Scotland, we have invested three times more in the R100 north contract than we have in the central or south contract. Any suggestion that the north of Scotland has been neglected is simply untrue.

Although telecoms legislation is wholly reserved to Westminster, the UK Government has invested

just £49.4 million in the R100 programme. That stands in stark contrast to the £592 million that the Scottish Government has invested. If we left it to the UK Government, we would all be using dial-up modems. Thank God, and thank goodness, for the Scottish National Party stepping in.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: Through our efforts, we have delivered more than 1 million broadband connections to Scotland to date.

The Presiding Officer: We must move on.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The First Minister may recall media coverage of the eye-watering £725,000 quote that Shetland residents were given for getting connected to superfast broadband. Even if vouchers from the broadband voucher scheme were pooled with neighbours, that would not cover the cost. One of my constituents, who is investigating the possibility of a community scheme, has found that inflation has impacted the scheme's real-terms value. Is it time for a rethink of the voucher scheme offer?

The First Minister: I am happy to look at the important issue that Beatrice Wishart raises. We have had some success under our R100 programme on a number of our islands, including our most remote islands. Beatrice Wishart asked about Shetland in particular, but our contract build on Fair Isle was delivered almost two years ahead of schedule in one of the country's most challenging rural locations.

The issues that Beatrice Wishart raises are important. If there are tweaks that we can make, particularly to understand the complexities in our island communities, we are always happy to consider them.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (Accessible Information)

6. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that information on sexually transmitted infections is accessible, in light of STIQ day and the reported rising number of cases of sexually transmitted infections in Scotland. (S6F-02719)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Ensuring that people have access to the information and services that they need to make informed choices and to take care of their sexual health is vital, which is why there are outcomes in our "Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Action Plan 2023-2026". The plan, which was published in November last year, sets out the priority areas for action over the next three years and is backed by £1.7 million of Government funding. The Scottish Government is funding a number of projects to

support those priorities, including the development of a new sexual health website, which is hosted by NHS Inform, and the production of accessible animated information resources on key sexual health topics, including testing for sexually transmitted infections, in a range of community languages. Vaccinations against STIs also continue to be important in protection and the treatment of disease.

Evelyn Tweed: Research published last year by the *BMJ* found that young people in rural and island communities face practical and social barriers to support for sexual wellbeing. Will the First Minister outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to ensure access to timely STI testing in those areas?

The First Minister: Evelyn Tweed rightly raises an important point about the particular complexities and nuances that rural communities face in relation to sexual health care. Rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to accessing healthcare, and it is no different for sexual health care. That is why we do not believe that one size fits all, particularly when it comes to delivering healthcare. National health service boards are the experts on their communities, which is why we work with them to ensure that they take appropriate approaches that are tailored to local needs.

We have invested in a number of projects through our sexual health and BBV action plan, with a significant focus on rural communities. Those projects include providing outreach services in Ayrshire and Arran and exploring the delivery of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis in primary care in Grampian.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Given the importance that the First Minister places on the issue, I ask him to acknowledge that access to in-person sexual health services is often limited, particularly, as was mentioned, in rural areas. Even in more urban areas, clinic times can be limited to one session per week, and NHS Inform indicates that workforce pressures are causing operational hours to be changeable. Given all of that, what additional investment has been made in sexual health services to ensure that face-to-face appointments can be provided appropriately when requested?

The First Minister: The member makes a very important point. A number of people will want that face-to-face service and a number of people will not. We should all say collectively that there is no stigma around sexual health. People should be able to access the care that they want when they want it and however they want it, be it face to face or otherwise.

On the funding that we are providing, I have mentioned the action plan, which is backed by £1.7 million of funding to improve sexual health and blood-borne virus outcomes. Grants totalling £800,000 have been distributed between a wide range of projects, including high-quality innovative projects with health boards, third sector organisations and academia. Many of them provide the face-to-face service that Carol Mochan rightly mentioned.

On wider funding for the health service, I am pleased that, notwithstanding the fact that our budget has been subject to swingeing cuts from the UK Government, we have increased our investment in the NHS to a record £19.5 billion.

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

W W & J McClure Limited

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the collapse of W W & J McClure Limited, which happened in 2021 and has affected an estimated 100,000 people across the United Kingdom.

The firm was based in Greenock and it had many local clients. The Trusts and Succession (Scotland) Bill, which was passed in December, and the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill will, I hope, make similar situations more manageable in the future. Will the First Minister provide an assurance that the Scottish Legal Complaints Commission will be supported, if it requires to be, to deal with the expected increase in complaints relating to McClure's as former clients become aware of the collapse and as public information events take place similar to the one with the SLCC that was hosted in Greenock earlier this week, which was attended by 150 people?

The First Minister: I am hopeful that the SLCC will be appropriately funded, and I will come to that point shortly.

I am aware of the matter and I appreciate, as Stuart McMillan rightly noted, the distress that it continues to cause. I cannot comment on individual cases, but the Scottish Government has taken proactive steps to militate against such a situation happening in the future. Stuart McMillan is right to mention the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill, which introduces authorisation of legal businesses, bringing benefits such as greater consistency in regulating legal firms and enabling the regulator to identify and address deficiencies early doors.

I understand the concerns that Stuart McMillan raises. The SLCC is funded through a levy paid by legal professionals in Scotland. The SLCC is required to forecast trends in complaints when

considering its budget in order to set the levy, so any proposed levy takes into account the consideration of potential increases in complaints, such as complaints relating to the matter that has been raised.

Milan Centre (Closure)

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Earlier this week, I attended a protest against East Dunbartonshire Council's plans to close the Milan day care centre. Milan provides a fantastic tailored service to elderly and vulnerable ethnic minority clients. Its service users all say that Milan should be a model for the rest of Scotland to follow, rather than something to be closed down. Does the First Minister agree that local services should cater to all communities, including the needs of ethnic minorities? What can the Scottish Government do to save Milan and other centres like it?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Pam Gosal for raising the issue of the Milan centre. Yesterday, I met the Scottish Hindu Foundation, which is a recently established organisation speaking on behalf of the Hindu community. The foundation raised the issue of the Milan centre with me, and I said that we would engage with the local authority—in this case, East Dunbartonshire Council—to see what more we could do to assist.

However, these are decisions that are being made by local authorities. That is why, when the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance announced our budget, she announced an uplift for local government. I agree that community services are incredibly important and should cater to the needs of all our diverse communities. What does not help is that we continue to receive a £500 million cut in our block grant since 2022-23. Despite such swingeing cuts, we have decided to prioritise local government by giving it an uplift in 2024-25.

Turning Point Scotland (Closure of 218 Service)

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Turning Point Scotland's 218 service in Glasgow will close in February. Glasgow City Council presented the service with an unworkable budget of £650,000, down from £1.5 million. The funding was previously ring fenced by the Scottish Government, which signed off a reduction in that funding in a letter on 31 May last year. That decision has, in effect, resulted in the closure of the service.

Is the First Minister content that there is now no bed facility for women offenders with drug use as their main problem—a facility that has kept hundreds of women out of jail? The Liliac centre in Maryhill, which is brilliant, was cited by the cabinet

secretary in her response to the news, but it is not an alternative to custody disposal. Ministers surely cannot wash their hands of this tragic outcome.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I know the 218 project well. I visited it when I was on the Justice Committee, many years ago now. It is a project that I know is doing some excellent work. This is a decision made by Glasgow City Council in relation to the services that it is able to fund. I am more than happy to ask the justice secretary to engage with Glasgow City Council on that issue. I know the excellent work that Turning Point's 218 service has done over the years. By giving that intensive support to female offenders, we can stop the cycle of reoffending, and I value the project very highly.

Of course, we have maintained our budget in relation to the national mission dealing with drugs deaths in particular, but nobody should be in any doubt that this Government believes in community justice disposals. That is why I will ask the appropriate cabinet secretary to pick up the issue with Glasgow City Council.

Union Street, Aberdeen (Regeneration)

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): This morning, it was sad to hear that Marks and Spencer has decided to close its Aberdeen St Nicholas Street store—a blow that has been lessened by the fact that it intends to invest in and expand at Union Square in Aberdeen. However, the St Nicholas Street site, off Union Street, is a very important one. I have asked the local authority and other stakeholders to come together to form a task force to ensure that we have a bright future for that site and for Union Street as a whole. The First Minister has previously ensured investment in the Our Union Street project to help with the regeneration of Aberdeen city centre. Will the Government serve on such a task force if it comes to fruition? I hope that the First Minister will agree to do so.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We will certainly be happy to give that consideration. As the member has rightly said, we value our city centres and town centres, and we are working hard to ensure that they are as vibrant as possible. A flourishing and vibrant city centre is essential for the social and economic wellbeing of our cities, including Aberdeen. That is why we provided £400,000 to the community-led Aberdeen Our Union Street initiative, which aims to revitalise the town centre, building on the city centre's regeneration plans. If Kevin Stewart can furnish me with the details of the task force that he is proposing, we will give that due consideration.

Professor Sam Eljamel (Public Inquiry)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Four months have passed since the Scottish Government announced a full public inquiry into Professor Eljamel, but we still have no confirmation of the appointed chair, no confirmation of the start date of the one-to-one clinical reviews and, as was revealed by The Courier, no confirmation from the First Minister that the public inquiry will start in 2024. Will the First Minister confirm all those points?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): It is fully my expectation that the public inquiry will start in 2024. Therefore, we should have an inquiry chair appointed very shortly, I hope, because the Lord President has, rightly, been involved in the process of appointing an inquiry chair, and discussions are at a very advanced stage.

Planning for the independent clinical review is also well under way, and further discussions are continuing early next week. We will say more as soon as we can. As with the announcement of the inquiry, we will ensure that former patients are informed directly wherever possible.

I say to those who have suffered greatly at the hands of Professor Eljamel that we do not want them waiting a moment longer for the public inquiry to begin. I can give them absolute confidence that a lot of work is happening, somewhat behind the scenes at the moment, with the appropriate authorities, including the Lord President, to ensure that an appropriate inquiry chair is appointed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and public gallery to do so.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Prostitution Law Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask members of the public who are still leaving the gallery to please do so quickly and quietly. Thank you for your co-operation.

Our next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11509, in the name of Ruth Maguire, on "International Insights" by A Model for Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the report, *International Insights*, by A Model For Scotland, which is a campaign group for progressive prostitution law reform; considers that the report highlights important findings related to what Scotland can learn from international efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation; further considers that, whilst the Scottish Government recognises prostitution as a form of violence against women, and has committed to develop a model for Scotland to challenge men's demand for prostitution, it is currently legal in Scotland to perpetrate and profit from prostitution, and that victims receive sanctions rather than support, including in the Cunninghame South constituency; believes that Scotland's approach to tackling sex trafficking and sexual exploitation can build on the experiences and learning of other countries, and notes the view that Scotland must join the growing number of countries taking action to combat commercial sexual exploitation by ensuring that the new model for Scotland criminalises paying for sex, decriminalises and provides support to women involved in the sex trade and holds pimping websites accountable.

12:49

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): If we are to truly realise our shared ambition of eradicating male violence against women and girls, Scotland needs to have a progressive legal model to tackle prostitution—a model that shifts the burden of criminality off victims of sexual exploitation and on to the people who perpetrate and profit from such abuse.

To prevent sexual exploitation and deliver justice to victims, the Scottish Government must decriminalise victims of sexual exploitation by repealing section 46 of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982; wipe previous convictions; outlaw online pimping; criminalise paying for sex; and provide comprehensive, resourced support and exiting services for victims of sexual exploitation.

In order to do that effectively, it will be important to learn from international examples. I thank members from across the chamber for signing my motion and helping me to secure the debate. I am particularly grateful to the members who will

participate in the debate, including the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, who I know to be fully and passionately committed to women's equality and ensuring that Scotland is safer for all.

I echo the thoughts of Diane Martin CBE, the chair of A Model for Scotland, who said that she hopes that the organisation's "International Insights" report

"gives confidence to Scottish law makers that the international evidence base is there, and the time for change in Scotland is now."

A Model for Scotland is an alliance of survivors, organisations and front-line services that is calling for the progressive model that I outlined. I should declare an interest as a member of the steering group of that organisation.

The prostitution trade is transnational, and different countries face common challenges in tackling commercial sexual exploitation. A Model for Scotland's "International Insights" report provides helpful international evidence and offers key learning from Sweden, Ireland, France, Iceland and the United States.

In 1999, Sweden became the first country to combat demand for prostitution by criminalising paying for sex while decriminalising victims of sexual exploitation. Evidence shows that the proportion of men paying for sex has dropped, that public attitudes have changed and that the law acts as a deterrent to sex trafficking.

Key learning from Sweden includes how essential it is that training be provided for law enforcement agencies to ensure effective enforcement, and that the development of a nationwide network of support and exiting services is crucial.

In 2017, Ireland criminalised paying for sex and decriminalised selling sex. Early observations reveal a shift in the burden of criminality from the victims to the exploiters. Women involved in prostitution report feeling more able to disclose violence against them to the police, and there is a high level of public understanding that prostitution is a form of sexual exploitation.

In Ireland, partnership working was crucial to the adoption and implementation of the relevant laws, and the provision of support and exiting services for victims has been a vital component of the law reform process.

In 2016, France decriminalised soliciting for prostitution, criminalised paying for sex and established comprehensive support provisions for victims of sexual exploitation. The same legislation established a national policy on prevention, education and training to prevent sexual exploitation. The law resulted in an immediate change in law enforcement activity, with a shift

from a focus on penalising victims of sexual exploitation to holding sex buyers to account. Exiting prostitution programmes have proved successful, and there is a high level of public support for France's new abolitionist laws to combat prostitution. In France, strong political leadership was pivotal to securing legal reform.

Iceland criminalised paying for sex in 2009; selling sex had been decriminalised in 2007. In response to that legislation, the focus of policing shifted towards targeting and holding accountable those who create demand for prostitution. There is strong support among the general public for Iceland's prostitution laws. A key learning point from Iceland was that the prostitution trade should be tackled as part of broader efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation in its entirety.

In 2017, the United States made it a criminal offence for pimping websites that advertise individuals for prostitution to operate. That new legislation established criminal and civil liability for websites that promote and facilitate prostitution, and it led to a significant shrinkage of the sexual exploitation marketplace. Within 48 hours of the law being passed, major websites stopped hosting prostitution adverts. A year after the legislation was passed, the sexual exploitation advertising market remained significantly disrupted, with a reduction in demand and the failure of any pimping websites to recapture the market dominance of the biggest pimping websites that had previously operated. The key learning from the US is that actions against such websites are crucial in reducing demand and deterring sex trafficking.

I know how proud my Government is of taking a human rights-based approach to policy making and legislation, and I welcome the fact that a Scottish human rights bill is coming soon. Scotland has multiple international obligations to discourage demand for sexual exploitation, including under the Palermo protocol, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings.

When I spoke about France, I talked about the political leadership that was required to make the changes. I will give the last words to France's former minister for women's rights, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, who said:

"It is not only a question of fighting against violence, the specific oppression represented by prostitution, but it's also about teaching the principle that a woman's body is not for sale, that it is not an object, that a woman is not a commodity."

12:56

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank Ruth

Maguire for bringing it to the chamber, although the last time I spoke in a members' business debate on this subject was in December 2017, and I am not sure how much progress has been made in the intervening six years. During her summing-up speech, the minister might want to address the question of whether it is still the Government's position that prostitution is a form of violence against women and, if so, set out what plans the Government has to do something about it.

The motion addresses a report that makes international comparisons and looks at the importance of learning from the experiences of other countries about what works and what best practice looks like. I will draw on some examples of that work.

In Ireland, it was noted that, when previous convictions for prostitution were expunged and paying for sex was criminalised, it was more likely that women would then report any violence that had been committed against them.

In France, measures were put in place to provide support, including financial and accommodation support, for women who were exiting prostitution, and 90 per cent of women who exited prostitution found stable jobs at the end of that programme.

Sweden stressed the importance of training law enforcement officers in order to ensure the effective roll-out and implementation of legislation, as well as the importance of tackling trafficking alongside prostitution. One person said that doing those things together made Sweden a very unattractive location for traffickers, as their market dried up.

It is also hugely important to identify and recognise the importance of culture change and of shifting the boundaries of what is recognised as being acceptable behaviour within society, rather than normalising exploitative behaviour. Once again, there are examples from Sweden. In 1996, before the implementation of the legislation, 33 per cent of the population were in favour of criminalising payment for sex; by 2015, that figure had risen to 72 per cent, and only 0.8 per cent of men reported paying for sex in the previous 12 months, which was the lowest figure in all of Europe. After the implementation of legal reforms in Iceland, it was noted that those had created a space in which people saw prostitution as something that threatened the dignity and health of the seller.

The report is also clear that strong political leadership is an absolute prerequisite to addressing the challenge and that the role of Government is to end violence against women, not to mitigate or legitimise it.

Finally, I want to reflect on the points that I made in December 2017 that were addressed to those who seek in some way to justify paying for sex or are opposed to its criminalisation. I find it very peculiar and illuminating that they take the word of supply-side pimps, industry bodies and powerful economic lobbies in this sector when they would never take the word of the equivalent people in any other sector. They are right to call out, as we all do, exploitative sexual behaviour in the workplace or anywhere else that relies on significant imbalances of power, but they do not recognise the significant imbalance of economic power that is core to paying for sex. They would find abhorrent and would oppose, for example, men asking for sex as part of a rental contract, yet when the mechanism of exchange is not rent but cash, they find that acceptable. Those points deserve to be made again.

I thank Ruth Maguire again for bringing this debate to the chamber, and I thank those who worked on the report for the very helpful guidelines that it promotes for taking this work forward in Scotland.

13:01

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank Ruth Maguire for securing the time for this debate on such an important issue. Her work and Rhoda Grant's work on the topic long pre-date my time in the Scottish Parliament.

I understand that how Scotland addresses prostitution and protects vulnerable women has been discussed and debated in this chamber many times but, as Ivan McKee pointed out, there has, sadly, still been no real resolution. The Scottish Government's 2021 programme for government committed

"to develop a model for Scotland which effectively tackles and challenges men's demand for prostitution."

Work is on-going, but the commercial sexual exploitation of women continues every day, often with harrowing consequences.

There are questions over the policy approach to a model for Scotland. Do we tackle prostitution in law or through other mechanisms? How do we change behaviour and reduce demand? How do we mitigate the unintended consequences of criminalising the purchase of sex? There are ideological questions, too. If two consenting adults agree to the purchasing of sex, should that be acceptable in the eyes of the law? Can there ever be an equal distribution of power in a situation where sex with women is a commodity bought by men?

Ruth Maguire's motion focuses on international insights and learning, but I note that the Netherlands is not mentioned. Some time ago, I

lived and worked in the Netherlands, where prostitution is legal as long as it involves sex between consenting adults. The Netherlands has a liberal approach in which prostitution is normalised, and I have reflected on that for many years. Since I was elected, however, I have opened conversations with sexual violence support services and advocacy groups such as Beira's Place and the Women's Support Project, and they have had a massive impact on me.

Prostitution is not about pleasure or gratification; it is about exploitation and violence. I am still developing my position on how we address such a complex issue, but the immovable starting point for me is how we best protect vulnerable women from coercion, violence and abuse. In the Netherlands, the fact that prostitution is legal does not make it safe. Forced prostitution, underage prostitution and unsafe working conditions still happen, but underreporting to police about what happens in the room is common practice because of prejudice. I note with interest that the Dutch Government has been working to improve the social and legal position of sex workers.

Diane Martin CBE, chair of A Model for Scotland, has urged the Scottish Government to be courageous as it tackles the sex trade. I pay tribute to her courage and her work, and I hope that MSPs will answer her call to action as we look at how to protect women from sexual violence.

13:04

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, thank Ruth Maguire for bringing forward the debate, and I pay tribute to the work of Diane Martin.

I, too, am a proud member of the steering group for the campaign, which has produced a number of reports, of which "International Insights" is the latest. That report highlights what Scotland can learn from other countries to combat commercial sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation is international, so it is important that we work together. We can learn from other countries.

Back in 1999, Sweden became the first country to combat commercial sexual exploitation by criminalising paying for sex. In 1996, 12.7 per cent of men in Sweden paid for sex. In 2008, the figure was 7.6 per cent. That is almost a halving of the number, just because of that change in the law.

Ruth Maguire talked about other countries. Among our nearest neighbours, France shifted the burden of criminality in 2016 and Ireland did the same the following year. In 2017, the USA tackled pimping websites and there was a huge decrease in the number of people who used those websites, and in demand. That was highlighted by A Model

for Scotland's report on online pimping, which is well worth a read for those who are interested in that area.

It is essential that we deal with demand, because trafficking for sexual exploitation is the most profitable form of modern slavery in the world and is fuelled by demand. It is a global industry of more than \$100 billion per year. In countries that take the more liberal approach of normalising prostitution, there are higher levels of trafficking. In those that take the opposite approach, human trafficking has decreased as a consequence.

We can learn four important lessons from the countries that have tackled the issue. It is crucial to support those who exit prostitution. In France, 600 women have benefited from the exiting programme that was set up in conjunction with the laws that were made in 2016. Support from that programme includes financial support, accommodation support, support for the damages that are caused by prostitution and help for people to get their lives back on an even keel.

We have also learned that training for law enforcement, including the police, is essential. In Sweden, that was perhaps not done as well as it could have been, given that it was the first country to promote such a law. It has since learned from that and put in place training. It is essential that law enforcement agencies know how to tackle the issue and how to prosecute.

We also have to make sure that online pimping websites are tackled, because that really reduces demand, given that those who use such websites can hide behind their computer.

We also need strong political leadership to do those things, because, in every other country that has tackled the issue, politicians have faced strong opposition to change. There are societal pressures, in that some people believe that a woman's place in society is lower than a man's. However, it is also the case that the industry is huge—people make a lot of money from the exploitation of others.

Ruth Maguire pointed out our international obligations to tackle violence against women, trafficking and exploitation, and it is important that we take that lead. The Scottish Government must bring forward a framework to challenge men's demand for prostitution. That framework needs to set out legislation to address demand and to put in place assistance for those who are exploited. Most of all, it needs to stop Scotland's provision of a favourable environment for exploitation.

13:09

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I commend Ruth Maguire for bringing this important

debate to the chamber. I agree entirely and wholeheartedly with the contents of her speech. I also commend A Model for Scotland for the work that it has done on this important topic in the past wee while. I read its report with interest a month or so ago. I thought that it was very good and that it helpfully set out information on the international context. I also commend the Parliament's cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation for all its work on the topic.

A Model for Scotland's report is about international insights. The international context is important and instructive for a country that is considering changing the law on the issue. The aim of the United Nations Palermo protocol is

"to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children".

It says that

"States ... shall adopt or strengthen legislative or other measures ... to discourage ... demand".

Article 6 of CEDAW says that states

shall take all ... measures, including legislation, to suppress ... exploitation of prostitution".

Again, one aim of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings is "to discourage the demand". Reducing demand is therefore the key part of that approach. Prostitution and trafficking are linked. Prostitution creates a market that traffickers then strive to fill. Reducing demand by creating a legal framework that diminishes it as much as possible is therefore imperative.

Sweden showed us the way on that. It was the first country to criminalise the purchase of sex with a view to achieving such suppression of demand. In the 20 or so years since then, other countries have followed suit—I think that it is up to around eight now. That gives us more data to examine and more experience to watch so that we can see how a country such as Scotland might be able to follow it.

The report mentions Sweden, which I visited when I was looking into the issue a few years ago. I remember prosecutors there explaining to me that, although they were very proud of their law—and rightly so—on reflection, they felt that there was no way to escalate penalties. Someone who had been caught a number of times would get the same fine each time. The report says that Sweden has now updated its minimum penalty, which I note with interest is now imprisonment.

The Scottish Government has a position on the issue. Its "Equally Safe" strategy notes that prostitution is violence against women, which is the position that many of us in the chamber would take. The problem with that is that "Equally Safe" has represented the Scottish Government's

position for more than 10 years but, unfortunately, the law has not been updated to reflect that.

I take some personal responsibility for that—as many members will know, for a number of years, I was the minister in charge of that area. It was a personal disappointment for me that I left office not having been able to change the law while I was a minister in Government. Unfortunately, I learned that the political will of just one person in a large Government is not enough, and it was not enough in that case. Ten years is too long, though, and it is not good enough that the issue has not been given higher priority.

I recognise that the Scottish Government has instead been focusing on other issues, some of which I consider to be detrimental to women, such as the discredited Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. Seemingly, the Government has learned nothing from that process over the past year, and it is now considering introducing a bill to end conversion therapy. Even the proposed bill on misogyny that the Government is considering should be introduced only after legislation is undertaken to update the position on prostitution law, because prostitution is misogyny in action.

Members might not be aware that I plan to introduce a member's bill on the topic this year. I am finalising my consultation, which I hope will be out in the next few weeks. I would be happy to discuss that with any member, and I hope to receive cross-party support for my bill.

13:14

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I thank my friend and colleague Ruth Maguire for bringing the debate to the chamber.

“As long as women are seen as a legal commodity to be bought by men, there will be no significant shift in men's violence against women. The ability fundamentally fosters a sense of male entitlement and ownership that permeates every aspect of our society.”

In addition,

“The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is unequivocal. States must address trafficking and prostitution if they are to eliminate discrimination ... against women.”—[Official Report, 29 November 2023; c 53, 52.]

That must be the starting point of our discussion. The words that I have stated are simply a quote from a speech that I made previously in this Parliament.

As we know, the Scottish Parliament opened in 1999. If we look at the record of the Parliament's first session, we see that the issues of prostitution and the need for legal reforms to protect women and girls and to prevent child prostitution were raised in debates, in committees and in ministerial questioning. It was an area that was pursued with

vigour by a number of members from different parties and, not least, the redoubtable Margo MacDonald. Discussions have continued through multiple parliamentary sessions since.

We have heard from Ruth Maguire about those countries that have managed to make a shift to combat demand for prostitution by criminalising paying for sex while decriminalising the victims of sexual exploitation. That means that there is a data bank that we can interrogate, be it data on public attitudes, deterrence or the all-important trafficking, which Rhoda Grant mentioned. However, here we are, 25 years after Sweden acted and 25 years after the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament, and we are still debating rather than having acted.

I, too, note the excellent report by A Model for Scotland, which recognises that

“the Scottish Government has pledged to adopt a model for Scotland to challenge men's demand for prostitution and support women to exit sexual exploitation. It has also developed policy principles to underpin Scotland's framework on prostitution.”

However, I must be frank. Pledges and principles are not enough. We should have acted years before now. Warm words and principles without action quite quickly become virtue signalling.

Violence against women and girls continues. Just recently, data pertaining to 2022-23 was released by the Scottish Government, from which I will give five key points. Nearly 15,000 sexual crimes were recorded by Police Scotland, and at least 37 per cent of those relate to a victim under the age of 18. Nearly 4,000 sexual crimes were cybercrimes, which is a trebling of the figure of around 1,000 that were reported in 2013-14. More than one in six women in Scotland have experienced online violence, and nearly 2,000 online child sex abuse crimes were recorded.

The most recent data from the Scottish crime and justice survey of 2019-20 showed that only 22 per cent of victims and survivors of rape reported it to the police. One in 10 people in Scotland still thinks that women often lie about being raped, and nearly one in three continues to believe that rape results from men being unable to control their need for sex. There is clearly no room for complacency.

I, too, express the view that the Government is currently consulting on niche issues that seem to be given higher priority than the protection of women and girls. Ideologies that are antithetical to the interests of women are given priority.

What I seek from the minister is a clear timeline for taking legislative action. I appreciate the complexity—I think that we all do—but it is being done elsewhere, so why not in Scotland? As Diane Martin, the chair of A Model for Scotland—

who has already been mentioned—so eloquently put it in the report's forward,

"The role of government must be to end male violence against women—not to mitigate or legitimise it."

Let us make that our north star.

13:18

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I thank Ruth Maguire for lodging the motion and bringing the debate to the chamber. I know that she is passionate about ensuring that progress is made in challenging men's demand for prostitution, as are Rhoda Grant and Ash Regan. I thank them for all the work that they have done in this area, and I thank members for all the contributions in the debate. I was pleased to see that Ruth's motion on this very important issue had cross-party support.

The debate is very timely, following the recent 16 days of action on violence against women and girls, when the Parliament again came together to send the strong message that violence against women is totally unacceptable. I am sure that we all agree that there is no place for sexual exploitation in Scotland.

I thank the A Model for Scotland alliance for its work in raising awareness of commercial sexual exploitation. Our engagement with members of the alliance is helping to shape the Scottish Government's framework to challenge men's demand for prostitution, and its recently published report, "International Insights: How Scotland can learn from international efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation", will help to inform the development of our approach.

I am sure that many members will have seen the Women's Support Project exhibition that was held in the Scottish Parliament in November, which detailed the project's work over the past 40 years in tackling commercial sexual exploitation. The exhibition highlighted the energy and commitment from stakeholders across Scotland in tackling such exploitation, and the progress that has been made as a result. I am very grateful for the project's on-going work.

I note Tess White's contribution and her insight into the model in the Netherlands. I would like to think that if we fast-forward 40 years from now into Scotland's future, we will—I hope—be living in a Scotland that has overcome the normalisation of behaviours associated with men purchasing sex. It is not acceptable, and challenging those attitudes is key to challenging demand.

Our equally safe strategy recognises commercial sexual exploitation as violence against women and makes clear our collective responsibility to tackle the attitudes that

perpetuate it in all its forms. Our efforts to challenge demand are clearly linked to wider aspects of policy. That includes contributing to our efforts to tackle misogyny and the on-going scourge of inequality and poverty, which we know can drive people into exploitation.

In order to truly tackle demand, therefore, we need an approach that considers the full range of social and economic factors that underlie it. Our framework to challenge men's demand for prostitution and improve support for those with experience of it, which will be published early this year, will bring wider efforts together. It will take an intersectional approach that sets out, for the first time, Scotland's strategic approach to tackling prostitution. Like the Nordic model, our framework will look at enabling women to exit from prostitution safely and sustainably. It will raise public awareness, including among those who deliver public services. It will also clearly recognise women with experience of selling and exchanging sex as victims of exploitation. I am clear that the framework's approach will provide the basis for any future consideration of legislation.

As members may be aware, in order to inform the development of our framework, we published "Challenging Demand for Prostitution: An International Evidence Review" on international challenge-demand approaches back in 2022. Both that report and the "International Insights" report from the A Model for Scotland alliance highlight that, in addition to the criminal law, other important components are needed within the challenge demand approach.

We need to continue to learn lessons from those countries that have progressed legislation as a matter of principle, and to understand why that has been so, and why so many today advocate for that. However, I am conscious that such approaches have not always been delivered with the necessary supporting structure, which our framework aims to deliver for those who are looking to move away from prostitution and to effect the societal change that we all know is required.

It is also important to recognise the need to work with international partners to truly address sexual exploitation rather than simply exporting it elsewhere. Our approach recognises that exploitation has no respect for borders. In that regard, Police Scotland continues to work with partners nationally and internationally to bring offenders to justice.

Just yesterday, I met the UK's new Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to discuss trafficking and exploitation strategy. She was very interested in the work that Scotland is currently doing with regard to commercial sexual exploitation. That is key to ensuring that our approach to tackling

demand is sustainable and that we have a joined-up and preventative approach.

The importance of a co-ordinated national approach was illustrated well at the commercial sexual exploitation-focused event in Ayrshire at which Ruth Maguire and I spoke during the 16 days of action on violence against women and girls. The event brought together a wide range of practitioners from, for example, housing, health and education, and the power of working collaboratively was evident.

Collaborative working across policy and services was key to the development of the framework's policy principles, which were published back in 2022. That is a fundamental aspect of the framework, which enables us to build on existing good practice and harness it to deliver a more consistent approach across Scotland.

One of the participants in the "Lived Experience Engagement" research that informed the framework said:

"there's lots of girls who do this who don't want to or have nothing else to turn to. They need to know what is out there to help them and who they can talk to."

Our framework looks to address that, by making support easier to access, through strengthened links between mainstream and specialist services, so that women, at any stage of their journey, can access the support that they need.

At last month's launch of our trafficking and exploitation strategy refresh, I heard directly from women who had been trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation, and meeting them and listening to their stories was incredibly moving. I am grateful for their brave and inspirational contributions, because it is important that we listen and learn.

The importance of trauma-informed justice was one of the issues that was raised. That aligns with the framework's approach, which acknowledges that people with experience of commercial sexual exploitation are victims of exploitation. Therefore, we will continue to work with Police Scotland and wider justice partners as we look to finalise, publish and implement the framework.

We are also aligning progress with our wider work on delivering trauma-informed justice. That includes ensuring that we build on the conclusions from the report that was published last year on the case for gendered intersectional approaches to justice. That report recognised that supporting women in ways that meet their individual needs could have a powerful impact on their perception of justice, leading to greater trust in the system. To that end, and in parallel with the launch of the equally safe refresh, equally safe in practice training modules are now available to civil

servants across the Scottish Government as part of their training offer and development.

It is important that our framework takes an adaptive approach that is cognisant of emerging risks related to commercial sexual exploitation. That includes online behaviours and considering our next generation by ensuring that young people understand the complexities of CSE and how to stay safe online.

We must also remain vigilant within our responses to crises—for example, our collective responses to the cost of living crisis and the on-going conflict in Ukraine.

Recognising the need for an adaptive approach and the need to bring together our approaches to tackle commercial sexual exploitation more holistically, we will establish a new multi-agency group on commercial sexual exploitation, which will support the framework's implementation.

As I have outlined today, there is clearly positive progress across Scotland in our collective efforts to tackle CSE, but we can and should do more, and our framework will pave the way for that. I look forward to updating the chamber following the framework's publication.

13:27

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio today is transport, net zero and just transition. Should a member wish to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or enter the letters RTS in the chat function during the relevant question.

Road Infrastructure (Maintenance and Rebuilding Policy)

1. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its policy is for the maintenance and rebuilding of road infrastructure. (S6O-02974)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is committed to maintaining and safely operating our transport assets, as set out in the national transport strategy. Our motorway and trunk road network is continually inspected, and the information is used to inform investment decisions.

Investment in safely operating and maintaining the network will increase from more than £510 million this year to more than £668 million in 2024-25, which is an increase of 31 per cent. That will be focused on the highest-priority safety-critical maintenance, as well as on supporting our wider commitments on road safety, air quality, climate change adaptation and resilience to severe weather events.

Stephen Kerr: Given the fact that spending on roads has reduced from £502 million to £26 million in eight years—that is a reduction of 4,000 per cent—is it not time for the Scottish Government to be honest and to tell the people of Scotland that it does not really care one jot about roads and that it thinks that car use is somehow malevolent? That is certainly what the Scottish Green Party, which seems to be in charge of the Government, thinks. How else would the minister explain those catastrophic reductions in spending on roads? Will the Scottish National Party-Green Government ever commit to properly funding road infrastructure?

Fiona Hyslop: I would explain Stephen Kerr's comments by pointing to the failure of the Conservative Party to even barely do its homework. He should read the budget and the budget statement, and he should have listened to

my answer. There has been a 31 per cent increase in road maintenance investment.

I think that Stephen Kerr might have been referring to a press release from the Scottish Conservatives that was about major developments, not major road infrastructure, which he asked about. They omitted £450 million for the work on the A9 that must happen. The cabinet secretary came to the chamber and announced that. If members of the Conservative Party cannot even get a basic understanding of the difference between the budget for road maintenance, which is up by 31 per cent, and the budget for road project development, they really have to get back to studying and doing their homework before they come to the chamber.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome what I read on page 62 of the budget document, which is a 41 per cent increase on trunk road critical safety, maintenance and infrastructure spend to £524.7 million.

Mr Kerr previously blustered that the budget is about priorities. Has he indicated to the minister where he or any other Tory MSP would deprioritise expenditure in order to fund the Tories' myriad demands for additional spending? Is the minister astonished that Mr Kerr, who clearly needs to go back to school, is not aware that we cannot reduce any figure by more than 100 per cent? Therefore, a 4,000 per cent decrease does not exist mathematically.

Fiona Hyslop: The Parliament is very lucky to have a talented and able convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee who can work his way through the budget document.

The Conservative Party and Mr Kerr do not put forward proposals on what they would deprioritise to fund their myriad demands for additional expenditure. Kenneth Gibson is quite right to identify the increase in critical safety, maintenance and infrastructure spending on the trunk road network. That element has increased by 41 per cent because we must—and this Government always will—keep our roads safe.

Bus and Rail Services (Rutherglen)

2. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to encourage more people to use bus and rail services in the Rutherglen constituency. (S6O-02975)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We have committed to invest almost £2.5 billion in the coming year to support the public transport network, ensure a viable alternative to car use and enable people to make sustainable choices.

In South Lanarkshire, more than 140,000 concessionary travel card holders benefit from free bus travel, who made more than 565,000 journeys under the concessionary travel schemes in December alone. Clare Haughey's constituents also benefit from a very frequent rail service, with six trains per hour to central Glasgow and the west end, and from lower rail fares, thanks to our peak fares removal pilot, which has been extended until June.

Clare Haughey: Getting more people to use public transport will help to tackle two of the most significant challenges facing us today: the cost of living crisis and the climate emergency. By bringing Scotland's rail into public hands, along with the pilot to scrap peak rail fares, as well as by enabling free bus travel for the over-60s, people with disabilities and young people under the age of 22, the Scottish National Party Government is taking decisive action to promote public transport usage.

Another way in which I believe that we could increase the number of people using public transport is through publicly controlled bus services. Will the minister outline how local authorities such as South Lanarkshire Council can now do that through the new powers that have been given to them under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019?

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government has now delivered all the bus powers under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which enable local transport authorities to consider all the powers that are available to them. Those include partnership working, franchising and local-authority-run services, which sit alongside authorities' ability to subsidise services. The 2019 act provides an enhanced suite of flexible options, allowing local transport authorities to improve bus services according to their local needs. It will be for each authority to determine which powers are suitable for its area.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): As the minister knows, it is my view that one of the best ways of getting people on to public transport, including in Rutherglen, is to have lower and simpler fares. Is it still her intention to publish the fair fares review this month?

Fiona Hyslop: It is my intention to publish the fair fares review as soon as possible. I would hope that that will be this month, but it may be into the beginning of next month.

I appreciate the member's interest, and he makes the very important point that simplification of fares, not necessarily just for buses but across all the different transport modes, is very important. I offer him encouragement by saying that, when the review is published, that is the type of

discussion and debate that we will have in taking forward policy in this area.

Greenock and Inverclyde Trunk Road Network (Investment)

3. **Stuart McMillan:** To ask the Scottish Government how much has been invested in the trunk road network in the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency since Amey took over management of the network. (S6O-02976)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland records trunk road maintenance and spend through the operating companies' contracts on a whole-route basis. Therefore, figures cannot be disaggregated for exact spend between specific locations. Notwithstanding that, since the start of the Amey south-west contract in August 2020 up to the latest report covering the period to the end of September 2023, the Government has invested £25.9 million in the maintenance of the A78 and £77.6 million on the A8 trunk road through Amey's contract. Those figures cover all aspects of maintenance, including resurfacing works, drainage improvements, road safety measures, maintenance of structures, incident management and winter treatments.

Stuart McMillan: Since Amey took over the contract from Scotland TranServ in 2020, it has been clear to see that additional work has been taking place on the A8 and the A78 in my constituency. Amey took over during the pandemic and inherited significant challenges, and I thank Amey for the work that it has done.

Can the minister assure my constituents that Amey will continue to invest in the trunk road network in my constituency and that further improvements to the road surface will take place in the next financial year, including at the Bogston train station?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the member for recognising the maintenance efforts and the investment in the Inverclyde area, especially during the challenges of the recent pandemic, as the member noted. Transport Scotland works diligently with its operating companies to ensure trunk road maintenance and to provide safe use and reliability for those who use the roads. I can reassure members that investment will continue in the 2024-25 financial year on the A78 and A8 trunk roads, with an anticipated programme of improvement works totalling £4.7 million. I will ask officials to ensure that Mr McMillan is updated when the dates are set for certain elements of that.

National Nature Reserves (Net Zero)

4. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to realise any potential of national nature reserves to help to achieve net zero through a large-scale impact on nature recovery and biodiversity. (S6O-02977)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): The purpose of all national nature reserves is to restore and manage Scotland's most important natural areas and to give people the opportunity to enjoy and connect with nature.

NNRs are crucial for restoring habitats in order to contribute to achieving net zero and raising awareness of the effects of climate change on people and nature. The Scottish Government is supporting extensive nature recovery work in our nature reserves, including large-scale peatland restoration, deer management for native woodland regeneration, freshwater restoration and coastal habitat creation. NNRs seek to minimise emissions that are created by their management by using electric vehicles and generating renewable energy.

Evelyn Tweed: Volunteers have been key to the success of Flanders Moss national nature reserve in improving biodiversity in my constituency. What does the Government consider the role of volunteering to be in achieving net zero? How does it intend to support volunteers in that area?

Lorna Slater: The Scottish Government is indebted to the vital contribution that volunteers make to biodiversity monitoring, restoration and management, thereby contributing to achieving net zero. There is a range of opportunities in NNRs or through other environmental organisations. At Flanders Moss, volunteers are removing encroaching scrub and installing and repairing dams on the moss to ensure that carbon is locked into the peat and that it remains there, which is an important nature-based solution for net zero.

Recognising the importance of volunteering, we are funding projects such as the Scottish invasive species initiative, which is removing invasive non-native species with the help of volunteers in order to restore biodiversity and capture carbon as those habitats recover.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Scotland is one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, ranking 212 out of 240 on the biodiversity intactness index. It is welcome that statutory nature restoration targets are being considered as part of the natural environment bill. However, does the minister agree that there is need for a more robust system of holding the Scottish Government to those targets, such as

exploring an option for a Scottish environmental court?

Lorna Slater: The member is absolutely right about the state of Scotland's nature and the work that we need to do to restore it. I am willing to hear his views about a potential environmental court. I know that that idea has been floated, and I am happy to discuss it further.

Budget 2024-25 (Net Zero)

5. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has made any assessment of the potential impact of its budget on its net zero ambitions. (S6O-02978)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): The budget includes a climate change assessment, which highlights that, in 2024-25, we are committing £4.7 billion in capital and resource funding for activities that will have a positive impact on the delivery of our climate change goals. Alongside the budget, we also published a taxonomy assessment of the impact of each budget line.

Pam Gosal: One of the shared priorities in the Verity house agreement is a commitment to net zero, but in the recent budget announcement, the regeneration capital grant fund has been cut by 27 per cent. Given that 82 per cent of all emissions are within the scope of influence of Scottish local authorities, it is extremely concerning that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is now casting doubt over Scotland's ambitions. Does the cabinet secretary share COSLA's concerns? What discussions have been had about allocating additional capital resources to allow Scotland's local authorities to make further investment in reaching net zero?

Màiri McAllan: The views of COSLA and our local authorities on our pursuit of our climate targets are very important to me, because we need a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach. Regeneration capital grants are an important part of that, but the clue is in the title—they are capital grants. It is a little ironic to be questioned by Pam Gosal on capital funding when her colleagues in the United Kingdom Government have dealt Scotland one of the most difficult budgetary challenges that we have had, certainly during the devolution era, on account of its financial mismanagement and, in particular, its failure to inflation proof the capital budget. It has therefore slashed what is available to Scotland and left us with the worst of all worlds, but the Scottish Government will do its very best to protect Scotland from that.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): What initial assessment has the Government

made of the potential impact of the UK Government's oil and gas bill on Scotland's net zero ambitions, given that it appears that no level of funding will be able to prevent Scotland's actions from being undermined by Westminster mandating annual North Sea licensing rounds?

Màiri McAllan: My clear view is that, instead of annually licensing ever more new fossil fuel extraction, as the bill that the member referred to proposes, the UK Government should be supporting a just transition. Alongside other recent commitments from the UK Government, the bill demonstrates that the Tories are not serious about tackling climate change or about supporting Scotland to realise our enormous renewable energy potential. That is yet another situation that makes clear the perversity of the fact that Scotland has the energy while Westminster has the power—a situation that cannot be tolerated for a moment longer.

Rail Travel (Mid Scotland and Fife)

6. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to make rail travel more affordable and attractive for passengers in the Mid Scotland and Fife region. (S6O-02979)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): A range of work is under way to improve services in Fife. As the result of a £160 million investment by the Scottish Government, a new line to Levenmouth will open, and services will commence in June. The ScotRail peak fares removal pilot has also been extended for a further three months, until June. That initiative will not only support the Government's ambitions for more sustainable travel but continue to attract passengers to rail in the member's electoral region and throughout Scotland, as it offers passengers significant savings.

Claire Baker: I welcome the extension of the pilot to remove peak fares, but the upcoming hike in rail fares that will hit passengers once the pilot ends is not so welcome. When the pilot ends, prices will increase by 8.7 per cent, which will follow a 4.8 per cent increase less than a year ago. Rail travel is becoming increasingly expensive, and people will see a dramatic increase when the pilot ends.

The minister said earlier that the delayed fair fares review will be presented to the Parliament in the coming weeks. When will an assessment of the pilot be made available? What is the Government doing to prevent people from being priced off the railways?

Fiona Hyslop: We will ensure that the evaluation of the pilot is made available. The

disruption because of severe weather at the end of 2023 might have had an impact, so the extension will help in providing a more rounded view over the piece.

Our fares are still comparably lower than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have postponed the increase from the normal January date to April and, with the extension of the peak fares removal pilot, most commuting journeys will remain cheaper until July 2024 and cheaper than in July 2023, when fares had had a below-inflation increase following fare freezes for season and flexipass tickets.

Even with the increase that will affect commuting journeys from July 2024, a return fare from Burntisland to Edinburgh will increase by just over £1 on the year before, which demonstrates that we are still trying to ensure that our rail travel is affordable.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Are there early indications of the impact of the peak fares removal pilot on train users in Mid Scotland and Fife? What are the most frequented trains in the region? What savings have patrons of the routes made as a result of the action that the Scottish National Party led Government has taken?

Fiona Hyslop: There have been extensive improvements across areas of the Fife region. I think that many who are commuting on longer journeys to Glasgow and Edinburgh will save between £6 following the fare increase and £7 now per journey—if those figures are not accurate, I will be happy to correct them. I want to see the evaluation of the difference that the pilot is making, and I want to reflect on the disruption that we might see to what was the regular return for journeys in the area.

The Government's continued investment in our rail services not only allows our decarbonisation to progress but ensures that we have affordable services. The member will reflect that bringing ScotRail services into public ownership has made a variety of initiatives for passengers' benefit more realisable.

Stewart Milne Homes (Administration) (Impact on A9 Works)

7. Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any potential impact on the proposed Shinafoot junction on the A9 at Auchterarder of the announcement that Stewart Milne Homes has gone into administration. (S6O-02980)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I was very concerned to hear that the Stewart Milne Group, which was one of a consortium of

developers that are delivering a new junction on the A9 trunk road at Auchterarder, had ceased trading. Our thoughts lie with the affected employees and their families at this difficult time, as well as home buyers.

The situation is clearly developing, so I have asked Transport Scotland officials to confirm their understanding of the implications of recent events and how they might impact on the delivery of the Shinafoot junction. I will respond to Mr Fairlie's question, and his subsequent correspondence, as soon as possible.

Jim Fairlie: Muir Homes and Stewart Milne Homes accepted the section 75 requirements that were placed on them, which would have seen them fund an on-ramp and an off-ramp at Shinafoot and the A9 near Auchterarder. However, after building half the site, they put in a subsequent application, which was rejected by the local authority, that would have seen them construct an off-ramp only. That would push a great deal more traffic through an already extremely congested Auchterarder, causing real safety concerns about a busy section of the A9 with a very dangerous over-carriageway crossing. The situation has caused a huge amount of upset among the local community, which fears that a serious accident will occur as a result.

Given the uncertainty that has been caused by the fact that Stewart Milne Homes is unable to carry out the work, is the minister prepared to look again at the current proposition and call in the reporter's decision to ensure that the residents of Auchterarder are served by a safe on and off junction that will provide the safest possible solution?

Fiona Hyslop: As I said in my initial response, I will need to take a more considered view of the issue, as it involves planning. In keeping with the majority of appeals that have been dealt with by the planning and environmental appeals division, the case has been delegated to a reporter to make a decision on ministers' behalf. Ministers therefore have no involvement in the process.

Although Scottish ministers can intervene at any point before a final decision on a planning appeal is issued, a recall direction is a matter for ministers' discretion. The power is used sparingly and normally only in circumstances in which a proposal raises an issue of genuine national interest. I understand that the reporter has issued a notice of intention. As the appeal is still live, it would not be appropriate to comment on the merits of the proposed development at this stage.

Energy Efficiency Upgrades (Regulatory Oversight)

8. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to whether there is a need for regulatory oversight of companies that install low-emissions heating systems and upgrade homes to be more energy efficient. (S6O-02981)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): The regulation of consumer protection is reserved to the United Kingdom Government, but the Scottish Government recognises the importance of consumers being assured that any work carried out is done to a high standard. Using microgeneration certification scheme installers and TrustMark registered businesses is a requirement of accessing Scottish Government funding. I encourage anyone who is considering energy efficiency upgrades to seek expert advice from trusted sources, such as the Scottish Government's Home Energy Scotland service.

Pauline McNeill: I thank the minister for exchanging letters with me on this subject, which I care a lot about. The minister will be aware that we currently have 1,300 companies, and there are only 4,000 installers across the UK, so we will need a lot more in time to come.

Last month, Citizens Advice Scotland warned that existing consumer protection is insufficient and could allow rogue traders and scammers to prey on people's good intentions. There have been many examples of that. Notwithstanding that the minister has said that the regulation of consumer protection is a matter for the Westminster Parliament, does he agree that the absence of minimum legal standards for all heat-pump installations means that there will continue to be a potential risk to consumers if there is not a single accreditation scheme for all installers in the net zero market?

Patrick Harvie: Citizens Advice Scotland and Pauline McNeill are right to draw attention to that. We are concerned about the risks that people could encounter and the kind of installers that the member is drawing attention to. We have to be clear about the things that the Scottish Government can do and the things that it cannot do, and we must put pressure on the UK Government to act.

On what we can do, we published "The Heat in Buildings Supply Chains Delivery Plan: Towards an Industry for Green Heat" more than a year ago. Since then, we have been working actively under that plan to ensure that we have the high-quality skilled capacity across Scotland that we will need if we are going to see the acceleration of energy efficiency and zero-emission heating systems that

the country needs. As I said, we make the MCS and the TrustMark requirements part of the Scottish Government funding package.

However, Pauline McNeill has colleagues who might come into ministerial office down south at some point later in the year, and the burden might fall on them to do some of the work that the current UK Government has failed to do.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): According to responses that I have received from the Scottish Government, it currently does not record or track the number of businesses that operate in the energy efficiency sector or the certifications that they hold. How does the minister believe that it is possible to effectively support the growth of the sector and ensure that home owners are protected from falling victim to cowboy contractors without gathering that kind of basic information?

Patrick Harvie: Rather like Pauline McNeill's initial question, some of that relates to the consumer protection responsibilities. Brian Whittle is asking about the regulation of businesses, which falls under consumer protection and is the responsibility of the UK Government. Brian Whittle might like this Parliament and this Government to take responsibility for more of the powers that are currently reserved, and we would do a better job than the current UK Government, which is ripping up climate commitments left, right and centre.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Beatrice Wishart, who joins us remotely, has a supplementary question.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): In the past, some properties in Shetland, where energy efficiency measures have been installed by certified non-local contractors, have been on the receiving end of shoddy workmanship, with little comeback for the householder once the non-local contractor has left the aisles. Meanwhile, local contractors—often small businesses—cannot compete for that work because certification takes too long and the cost is too high.

It is vital that reputable installers carry out such work, so how can the Scottish Government help to ensure that smaller businesses can access that important certification?

Patrick Harvie: That is an extremely important aspect in relation to not only Shetland but other rural and island communities around Scotland, where the kind of experience that Beatrice Wishart described has taken place.

There has been a recent consultation on the microgeneration certification scheme and a relaunched version of that is due to be in place later this year—I think by summer. That scheme is not under the control of the Scottish Government,

but we are pleased to see progress there. One thing that it intends to do is remove and reduce some of the barriers to certification that currently exist. I hope that we will be able to update Beatrice Wishart and other interested members on that activity, although, as I said, it is not within the direct control of the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on transport, net zero and just transition. In order to allow front bench teams to change position, there will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

XL Bully Dogs

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Siobhian Brown on new safeguards in relation to XL bully dogs. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:58

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I will begin by explaining the reason for the Scottish Government's policy decision to introduce new safeguards in relation to XL bully dogs. The new safeguards, which will include a requirement for XL bully dogs to be muzzled and kept on a lead in public places, will help to ensure public safety.

That decision was not taken lightly. It follows as a direct result of the United Kingdom Government's decision to introduce new controls on the XL bully dog for owners living in England and Wales. Such a decision was for the UK Government to make for owners in England and Wales, but the UK Government failed to fully consider the knock-on impacts of that decision. As the First Minister set out last week, the UK Government failed to act to stop dog owners in England and Wales from evading the new controls by bringing their dogs to Scotland. That changed the balance of whether we needed to act in Scotland.

These are exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves. They mean that it is now right and proper that we replicate the controls that are being implemented south of the border. That does not mean that the Scottish Government is moving away from the "deed, not breed" approach, which is recognised by dog control experts as the most effective way of keeping communities safe.

The Scottish Parliament should be proud of the legislation that has created a system of dog control notices that can be served on an owner of any dog that is out of control as a proportionate step to reduce the risk of the dog becoming dangerously out of control.

Scotland is in a unique position in comparison with the rest of the UK. The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 enables local authorities to serve dog control notices to deal with out-of-control dogs at an early stage. I can confirm that the Scottish Government will be looking in the medium term to work with key stakeholders and interested parties to look at potential improvements to the 2010 act that could enhance and strengthen the general preventative dog control notice regime in Scotland.

We recognise that the vast majority of dog owners are responsible animal lovers who will want to keep their XL bully dogs and comply with the safeguards when they are introduced. Responsible dog ownership is hugely important but, sadly, there are some cases of irresponsible dog ownership that can, understandably, lead to operational challenges for the police as well as local authority dog wardens.

Issues could also arise with dogs being neglected or not exercised, or with dogs generally not being compatible with the owner's lifestyle, leading to behavioural issues. Although the focus today is on XL bully dogs, any dog has the propensity to become out of control or even dangerous if not trained and socialised properly and not kept under proper control at all times in all places.

Last month, when I met someone who has lived experience of having been attacked by a dog, I was struck by their courage. The individual spoke bravely when telling their story of how they had suffered a dog bite attack that resulted in severe physical, emotional and financial consequences.

I am aware that there is a range of views on the decision that has been made, but I place on record my thanks to all those whom I have met in recent weeks for their helpful engagement, input, expertise and time.

I must stress that, just as is the case in England and Wales, these are new safeguards rather than a ban, and it is important that people understand the effect of the new safeguards. In England and Wales, there are thousands of applications from XL bully owners who have sought exemption certificates to enable them to keep their XL bully dogs. It would therefore be wrong to categorise the safeguards, whether in Scotland or in England and Wales, as a ban.

In recent weeks, I have heard many concerned voices around the impact of this policy. We will, of course, continue to engage with stakeholders to hear about the practical issues arising, and we will carefully consider those for Scotland. From my discussions to date, I am aware of concerns relating to veterinary capacity, given the uncertainty around the number of XL bully dog owners who will require vet assistance. I am also conscious of the possible impact on animal welfare organisations and of wider issues connected to the designation of dogs under the dangerous dogs legislation, both in terms of the impact of some of the safeguards and the wider implications. Those issues will continue to require serious consideration, and I am happy to discuss them as we implement the safeguards in Scotland.

It is important that members, XL bully dog owners and the general public understand what

the new safeguards will mean. Subject to approval by Parliament, the effect of the new Scottish controls will be that owners will need to make a decision about whether to keep their dogs.

There will be two stages to the new safeguards regime. From a date that we will announce, the first stage will mean that it is an offence in Scotland to sell an XL bully dog; abandon an XL bully dog or let it stray; give away an XL bully dog; breed from an XL bully dog; or have an XL bully in public without a lead and muzzle.

The second stage will be the deadline to apply for a dog to be added to the exemption index. After that date—which, again, will be announced in the coming period—it will be an offence for a person to own an XL bully dog unless they either have an exemption certificate or have applied for a certificate.

That two-stage approach will give a limited amount of time for XL bully owners to make an informed decision about what they want to do with their dogs. It is appropriate to give that opportunity. However, once the new regime is in place, the owner will need to decide either to keep their dog and, if so, to adhere to the new safeguards, or to no longer keep their dog.

For those who wish to keep their dog and comply with the new safeguards, a fee will be payable to apply to register a dog on the exemption index. Compensation will be payable for those owners who no longer wish to keep their dogs. The amount of the fee, and the compensation payable, will be set out in regulations and confirmed in the coming period. For reference, the equivalent amounts in England and Wales are £92.40 to register a dog on the exemption index, and either £100 or £200 for the loss of a dog that is subject to euthanasiation and payment for the process of euthanising a dog, depending on whether that service was paid for.

In addition to the need for a muzzle and to keep the dog on a lead, the new safeguards operating as part of an exemption include having the dog microchipped and neutered. The specific dates for those stages will be set out in the legislation to be laid and agreed in Parliament, but we are working at pace to urgently develop necessary regulations.

Dog owners in Scotland should therefore start to consider what they may wish to do with their XL bully dogs. Given what the Scottish Government has announced, I suggest that it would be sensible for any prospective owners of XL bully dogs to seriously bear in mind the need to adhere to the new safeguards, if they are minded to acquire an XL bully dog where they currently do not own one. We will develop guidance and practical support to allow owners to understand the legislation and what is required. That will include details on how

to identify an XL bully dog using the standard developed by the UK Government.

We must recognise the consequences for Scotland of the UK Government's policy on XL bully dogs. In effect, it would see owners in England and Wales able to get rid of their XL bully dogs here in Scotland. We therefore have to act and enhance safeguards that will help to keep the public safe. It is therefore right to replicate the regime in England and Wales so that we remove the ability of English and Welsh dog owners to use Scotland to get rid of their dogs.

Moving forward, we will be considering issues that have arisen as a consequence of the UK Government's policy. We will also continue to work closely with stakeholders to look at mitigating, where appropriate, the impact of any unintended consequences of these controls.

Despite the need to introduce these new safeguards, we remain committed to the fundamental principles of the Scottish approach. The situation with XL bully dogs is unique, but we remain unequivocally committed to the "deed, not breed" approach.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which time we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement. For fans of Scottish National Party grievance output, this really is a belter. Adults and children across the UK have been maimed and killed by XL bullies. In response—and quite rightly—UK ministers moved quickly to protect the public, and banned the breeding, sale, exchange or gifting of these dangerous and powerful animals. But the SNP decided to reject the same measures. We know that seeking divergence from the UK is what gets these people out of bed in the morning, but putting petty nationalist point scoring above public safety surely marks a new low.

I note that 11 SNP MSPs have already stated their opposition to the ban. Will they now show some teeth, or will they retreat with their tails between their legs?

My colleague Jamie Greene and others warned that the SNP's stupidity would result in an influx of XL bully dogs into Scotland, and that is exactly what is happening. For the minister to stand here today and try to blame others is pathetic. What an absolute brass neck. The people of Scotland are not daft. Can she tell them, while she and Humza Yousaf dithered, how many XL bullies have been brought into Scotland? Will she now take some

responsibility for her inaction and apologise to anyone who suffers harm as a result?

Siobhian Brown: For clarity, Mr Findlay says that we dithered and delayed and refused to follow the ban down south in England and Wales, but that is inaccurate. I wrote to the UK Government after I had my first letter in mid-November, saying that we would not be following the same timescale. We have in place dog control notices, which require dangerous dogs to be kept on a lead and muzzled. That measure was to be implemented in England and Wales on 31 December, but we already had that in place.

Over the past few weeks, I have engaged with stakeholders. *[Interruption.]* When I wrote to the UK Government minister, I asked about the legalities of dog owners—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, minister. I am not having all the sedentary chuntering. Mr Lumsden, please do not interrupt the minister. If it was Mr Findlay, I am sorry. It was one of the two of you, anyway. Both of you are looking equally sheepish, if I may say so.

Siobhian Brown: It is important to reiterate and to understand the reason why the Scottish Government has been left with little choice in making this decision. The Scottish Government was engaging with dog control key interests in Scotland in order to assess the principle of introducing new safeguards in relation to XL bully dogs, but that was based on the position in Scotland being unaffected by the introduction in England and Wales of the new safeguards in relation to XL bully dogs. Now that the UK Government has been unable to provide a definite statement on whether the new controls on selling XL bully dogs apply to dog owners living in England and Wales who seek to sell their dogs outside England and Wales, that has changed our consideration.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for providing advance sight of her statement.

This has been another example of the inability of our two Governments to work together. We have seen the consequence of that lack of alignment and confusion in recent weeks, but now that the Government has proposed a ban in Scotland, I hope that the minister will work with the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and others to ensure that it is workable, and that it will give the police, vets and local authorities the resources that they will need to enforce it. I also hope that it will provide support for owners on low incomes, given the cost of exemptions at a time of a cost of living crisis.

Will the minister recognise that appalling dog attacks occur when irresponsible owners fail to keep their dogs—this applies to many breeds—under control, yet those owners often escape with nothing more than a rap on the knuckles from the court? It is five years since the Government promised to take action against irresponsible owners and breeders, so it is simply not good enough for the minister to say that she will work in the medium term to look at potential improvements to the utterly inadequate Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. Does she not accept that we need action now from the Government to provide councils, the police and the courts with stronger powers that make it clear that, ultimately, responsibility lies with irresponsible owners and breeders?

Siobhian Brown: As I have done in the past several weeks, I will most definitely work with all stakeholders as we create the legislation to replicate the position in England and Wales.

In relation to the 2019 report that called on the Scottish Government to take action, action has been taken since that report in 2019. In 2021, the Scottish Government delivered a digital social media campaign to promote the importance of responsible dog ownership, and it has since rerun the elements of the campaign on several occasions.

In addition, in 2022, we implemented the dog control notices scheme across all local authorities. Currently, there are more than 1,200 dogs on the database. The figures for that are released on a weekly basis.

As I said in my statement, we are committed to reviewing the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. In relation to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, back in 2022, the Scottish Government led a working group made up of stakeholders, including Police Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, Royal Mail, the Communication Workers Union, the Scottish Community Safety Network and the Scottish SPCA, to assist us in taking forward our commitment to review the 1991 act.

The working group has undertaken that review and we are now considering the wide range of views offered to determine what next steps may be appropriate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members seek to question the minister, so I would appreciate succinct questions, and answers to match.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I have been contacted by constituents who are responsible owners of well-trained and well-looked-after American XL bullies who are beloved family pets. They rightly point out that bullies are a breed, not a type, of dog. For decades, various

dog breeds have been deemed dangerous when the problem was actually at the other end of the lead: “deeds, not breeds”, is a sensible approach. Can the minister outline whether the Scottish Government intends to keep the regulations under review and is she in a position to give an outline of any review process?

Siobhian Brown: The member raises an important question. I will be clear, as the First Minister was at First Minister’s questions earlier, that the introduction of safeguards does not mean that the Scottish Government is moving away from the “deed, not breed” approach that is recognised by dog control experts as being the most effective way of keeping communities safe.

The dog control approach in Scotland, as set out in the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, has been, and remains, focused on the actions of dog owners in order to maximise responsible dog ownership. I agree that it is owners who hold the key to keeping communities safe from out-of-control and dangerous dogs. However, given the specific situation arising from the actions of the UK Government, the Scottish Government has been left with little choice in making its decision.

In the medium term, we are committed to making a further assessment of how the local authority enforcement powers set out in the 2010 act can be improved so that communities can be better protected from out-of-control dogs. I will engage with all those who have an interest, including the member.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Sadly, lives and limbs have been lost as a result of the most horrendous dog attacks. Data that I have uncovered shows that there have been 9,500 hospital admissions in Scotland since the flagship 2010 act.

Any action taken in Scotland should be proactive, not reluctant, as it may currently be. Nonetheless, I ask the minister this: given that five specific dog breeds account for more than half of the current dog control notices, how confident is she that the Government’s “deed, not breed” approach is actually leading to improved public safety, because the statistics seem to suggest otherwise?

Siobhian Brown: I get dog control notices from local authorities each week. Those deal with more than 1,200 dogs but there is not one distinct breed. There are some crossbreeds, but I know that the XL bully is not among the top 10 of those, so I do not agree with Jamie Greene regarding the data.

I reiterate that I have been engaging extensively with stakeholders since the announcement. It is important for the member to understand why the Scottish Government has been left with little

choice about its decision. As the member will be aware, the UK Government has been unable to provide a definite statement on whether the new controls on selling or giving away XL bullies apply to those who seek to give them away in Scotland. That has significantly changed our consideration in recent weeks.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Since the announcement of the changes to legislation in relation to XL bullies in England, we have seen reports of people bringing XL bullies to Scotland, including examples of XL bully puppies being abandoned on the Scottish side of the border. Can the minister give an assurance that any legislation in Scotland will include the principles of animal welfare and that the Government is working with animal welfare organisations to ensure that any dogs that have been brought to Scotland are properly looked after and dealt with?

Siobhian Brown: As I made clear in my statement, the decision has not been taken lightly, but the Scottish Government has been left with little choice. I am aware that there is a range of views about the new safeguards.

We are mindful of the possible impact that the change in the law may have on animal welfare organisations and will continue engaging with those organisations and with other key stakeholders to understand the impact of the regulations that will be introduced to provide safeguards around XL bullies.

The Scottish Government has stated on many occasions that animal welfare is a matter that we take very seriously. I am happy to assure the member that we will continue to work closely with local authorities and animal welfare stakeholders as the matter is progressed. I confirm that I am urgently planning to discuss the issues that stakeholders have raised in my discussions with Gillian Martin, the Minister for Energy and the Environment, who has animal welfare in her remit.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Dog attacks are a serious issue. I have a constituent, Evelyn Baginski, who petitioned this Parliament demanding action on dog-on-dog attacks. I have an old friend, Dave Sneller, who I had to drive to Crosshouse hospital when part of his finger was bitten off as we delivered election leaflets. Far from being an excuse for postponement, the lockdown meant a huge increase in dog ownership and so is the occasion for change. When will the Scottish Government stop being piecemeal, stop dragging its feet, turbocharge its working group that is reviewing the 2010 act, undertake an urgent review and come back to this Parliament with clear and comprehensive reforms, instead of being reactive, haphazard and sluggish?

Siobhian Brown: On the member's assumption that we are being "reactive", I have to be honest that we had to be reactive in this particular situation. It was announced only on 31 October that the first stage was going to be implemented in England and Wales. That is why we did not follow the eight-week timescale that was followed in England and Wales. We have taken our time to speak to stakeholders.

We are not dragging our heels. As I said, we have reviewed the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and we will determine the appropriate next steps. As I said in my statement, we will look at potential improvements to the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 that could enhance and strengthen the general preventative dog control notices in Scotland.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The UK Government, by not consulting the Scottish Government and making a desperate knee-jerk election-year promise, has demoralised good responsible owners and is playing constitutional politics.

The DCN system is working well for all breeds in Perthshire. Can the minister say how many DCNs have been imposed in Perth? Also, if the UK Government's legislation states that an XL bully dog cannot be given away, how could it claim—or did it claim—that giving a dog to a Scottish rescue centre or a new home in Scotland would not be an offence but that doing the same thing in England and Wales would be?

Siobhian Brown: The member raises a very important point. It is a lack of certainty from the UK Government as to the effect of its legislation that has led to this decision. The UK Government is not certain that English and Welsh dog owners would be committing an offence in selling their XL bully dogs outside England and Wales. I think that the definition in the letter was that that was unlikely. That left the Scottish Government with little choice but to act to ensure that there is no undue risk to public safety in Scotland.

On dog control notices, I met the Perth and Kinross Council dog wardens team recently and I agree that they are doing a great job in using their powers. I think that they have 65 live dog control notices in place. However, we know that not all local authorities make such good use of their powers. I encourage all local authorities to seek to use their preventative powers to help to keep their communities safe, whatever the breed of dog. We will give more consideration to what we can do alongside local authorities to encourage more consistent deployment of their powers to help with dangerous dogs.

For clarity, I note that the statement that the Scottish Government refused to ban XL bully dogs

in Scotland, which was in the press, was inaccurate. I wrote to the UK Government in November saying that we would not be following the same timescale as England and Wales.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Given the loss of life and serious injuries in other parts of the UK pertaining to this dog breed, it is right that we bring forward measures to address the issue, such as the safeguards that the minister announced today.

However, the case has underscored the pressing need to review our legislation that covers dangerous dogs in its entirety and how dog control regimes interact across our four nations. Although those provisions may provide necessary safeguards for dogs that are homed in domestic settings, I want to interrogate part of the minister's exchange with Emma Harper. I seek some clarity from her on the XL bullies that are being looked after by organisations such as the Dogs Trust and the RSPCA. Could exemption certificates extend to dogs that are currently kennelled with animal welfare charities whose organisational values prohibit them from destroying a healthy animal, or will the law require those dogs to be euthanised, as they are in England?

Siobhian Brown: On legislation, as I mentioned in my statement, the Scottish Government will look to work with key stakeholders and interested parties to look at potential improvements to the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 that could enhance and strengthen the general preventative dog control notices in Scotland.

On the point about puppies being taken in at the border for rehoming, we will look at the legislation but, at this time, we are looking to replicate what England and Wales are doing. It is my understanding that anybody who has an XL bully dog in Scotland at present will have to follow the safeguarding procedures that we will legislate for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that four more members seek to ask a question. I hope to take all four, but I will need succinct questions and answers.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I am disappointed that we have to replicate the UK Government legislation, which has been widely criticised by animal welfare organisations and experts, such as the Scottish SPCA and Blue Cross, as being rushed through and having the potential to make the situation more dangerous, not safer. That said, this is not a criticism of the Scottish Government or the minister, who, I know, has worked her socks off to find solutions. Effectively, we have been backed into a corner due to the unfortunate influence of XL bullies from England, which is a result of the poorly drafted UK legislation.

Before the decision was made to replicate the UK legislation, what discussions and considerations were given to trying to find solutions—legislative or otherwise—to the issue of bullies being brought to Scotland?

Siobhian Brown: As I said in my statement, the Scottish Government's decision is not one that we have taken lightly; it reflects the specific circumstances that have arisen. We need to replicate the new safeguards that operate in England and Wales in order to reduce the undue impact on Scotland.

The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 is, of course, not focused on any one breed. Its approach is "deed, not breed". Specific measures to target XL bully dogs take a different approach, which will, of course, run contrary to the overriding principles of the 2010 act.

We need to acknowledge that situations like this one might arise in the future, and we will want to ensure that legislation here in Scotland enables us to keep people safe and enables the effective control of dogs in certain circumstances.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): After months of Scottish Conservative pressure, the SNP has decided to ban XL bully dogs in Scotland, despite the First Minister saying earlier this month that there was no need to do so, which contrasts rather with the confused attempts to suggest that the issue is one of timescale. How much taxpayer money has had to be spent—and how much will be spent, going forward—on things such as developing bespoke legislation and consulting with stakeholders, none of which would have been needed if the UK legislation had been adopted in the first place?

Siobhian Brown: It is important that we engage with Scottish stakeholders, not override them by putting through legislation that comes up from down south. I have been doing so in recent weeks. As the member is aware, throughout the duration of the process—we must not call it "months", as the process has been very short—the UK Government has been unable to give a definite statement on whether the new controls on selling or giving away XL bullies apply in Scotland. That is why our consideration has changed.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The Scottish Greens do not believe that banning ill-defined dog breeds is the best way to ensure either community safety or high animal welfare standards, so I welcome the minister's assurance that the measures are not a ban. How will the approach in Scotland allow us to tackle the problems of rogue breeders and irresponsible owners, and will the minister agree to a summit with animal welfare organisations, vets and others

to develop a coherent strategic approach on the issue?

Siobhian Brown: The issue of animal welfare is not only important; it is emotive. The Scottish Government takes animal welfare very seriously and is committed to the highest possible welfare standards. We need to emphasise to people that they must be responsible owners and act responsibly when deciding to buy a dog or take one into their lives.

I have met a number of animal welfare organisations as well as representatives of the British Veterinary Association to discuss XL bully dogs, and I am happy to assure Maggie Chapman that engagement with them and with other relevant stakeholders will continue. For a considerable time, the Scottish Government has engaged with key animal welfare stakeholders, including the veterinary profession, on the issue of low-welfare dog breeding, and we will continue to work with stakeholders to address the issue through the pet trade task force, which is led by the Scottish SPCA.

On the issue of a summit, I will be happy to speak to my ministerial colleague Gillian Martin.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I remain convinced, as I have been from the start, that the proposed regulations are ill considered and unjust to decent owners. Demonising a breed is not the answer. The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, which began as a member's bill in my name, introduced the concept of a "deed, not breed" approach. I say to Russell Findlay that if he could just switch off the sensationalism for a moment he would see that only 2 per cent of issued dog control notices apply to XL bully-type breeds.

I am pleased to hear voices around the chamber seeking a review of and amendments to the 2010 act. I hope that those are done urgently. I hope, too, that the 2010 act is given the publicity that it deserves. The public are not aware of it, and neither are some professionals.

My final request is that we have a national dog microchipping database, because there are various databases at the moment. That way we could track both the dogs and any irresponsible owners.

Siobhian Brown: I thank Christine Grahame not only for her question but for introducing her member's bill, which became the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. I have met her in recent days and am more than happy to consider any suggestions that she might have for strengthening the legislation.

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

Scottish Rural and Islands Youth Parliament

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11896, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament.

15:32

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): As we approach a number of pivotal points for rural policy, including the emerging rural delivery plan and consideration of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, I believe that it is of the utmost importance that the voices of young people living in our rural areas are more than just heard. We have a duty to listen to young people, as well as to work in partnership with them, if we are to achieve better outcomes for our rural and island communities.

In November, I had the pleasure of meeting more than 70 delegates at the first Scottish rural and islands youth parliament in Fort William, which was part of the wider Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament. I welcomed the opportunity to discuss with delegates the priority issues that they currently face, how they are working to address them and how they want the Government to take action. This debate presents an important opportunity to discuss some of those issues in more detail. I am especially glad that we were able to support delegates from the first Scottish rural and islands youth parliament to attend the debate, and they are in the public gallery today. It is great to see some familiar faces from when we met in Fort William.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that it is not just the conversations that we will have here in the chamber that are important; it is also those that young people have had, and will have, with one another as part of a network of rural and island youth. For my part, I am committed to continuing to engage with young people across rural Scotland following the debate. It is so important not only that their voices are heard but that they actively influence Scottish Government policies. Hearing them will help us to drive forward the First Minister's policy missions of equality, opportunity and community. This is a critical time for doing that, as we build the key levers for future rural development.

We already have a strong track record of engaging meaningfully with young people in our rural and island communities, but we also have many future opportunities to look forward to. Those include the publication of a rural delivery plan, a full review of the national islands plan, the

new Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, the publication of the addressing depopulation action plan and the good food nation plan, and the implementation of the rural and islands housing action plan.

There has already been engagement with young people through groups such as the community-led local development youth local action groups, the Young Islanders Network and the Scottish Association of Young Farmers Clubs. I want to ensure that young people have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

Following their discussions with each other and then with me, the young people at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament presented a number of key priority areas for action. I will take a little bit of time to address some of those priority areas. I look forward to exploring those topics further through the course of today's debate.

One area that was identified as a key priority was housing. Housing of the right type in the right place can have a powerful and generational impact, enabling young people to stay in the communities where they grew up. Despite United Kingdom Government austerity and the fact that we are facing the worst budget settlement since devolution, the Scottish Government continues to prioritise housing and affordable housing in rural areas, with investment of more than £500 million in affordable homes planned for next year. We remain committed to delivering 110,000 affordable homes, of which at least 10 per cent will be in rural and island areas.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As someone from a rural island area in the Highlands and Islands, I agree that housing is vital. We have a crisis in rural areas. How is cutting the housing bill by £200 million prioritising housing?

Mairi Gougeon: I reiterate the point that I have just made about us facing the worst settlement since devolution. We have had some very difficult choices to make, and we face a capital budget reduction of 10 per cent. However, we have continued to prioritise funding for housing—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Can we hear the cabinet secretary, please?

Mairi Gougeon: The funding for rural homes remains unchanged, and that is vital.

Our demand-led rural and islands housing fund has now become a recognised feature of the affordable housing supply programme, and it continues to play a critical role in helping community organisations and others to deliver affordable homes.

In October, we published a rural and islands housing action plan. Many of the actions in that plan seek to address the key challenges and put in place systems and support for the delivery of the right homes in the right places, so that our rural and island communities can thrive.

Frequently, it is communities themselves that are leading the way in building new housing stock or freeing up and refurbishing existing stock so that it meets local needs. My colleague Paul McLennan, the Minister for Housing, is looking forward to attending Rural Housing Scotland's conference, where he will highlight the importance of community-led housing in our broader approach to delivering more homes in rural and island communities.

Transport was identified as another important issue. Youth delegates asked for sustainable transport that works for everyone, and I could not agree more about the importance that that has for our rural and island communities. I know that many of the youth delegates participated in the Scottish rural and islands transport community workshop at the rural parliament, and I am looking forward to seeing the specific recommendations that came from that, as well as the views on a rural and island mobility plan.

I recognise the impact that recent disruptions have had on rural and island communities, and I underline our commitment to investing in ferry services and rural transport. Our national transport strategy is for all of Scotland, reflecting the different transport needs of island, rural and urban communities. Our planned islands connectivity plan will replace the ferries plan, and it will be broader in scope, taking into account aviation, ferries and fixed links, as well as onward and connecting travel.

On mental health and wellbeing, youth delegates called for empathetic interventions and recognition of social support spaces, as well as tailored solutions to specific age groups. All those are key components of the Scottish Government's new mental health and wellbeing strategy, which was published in June last year.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): In the Borders, which is a rural area, it takes young adults 39 weeks to get their first appointment for child and adolescent mental health services. That is unacceptable, and young people are calling for the Government to apologise to them because of that. What does the cabinet secretary say to that?

Mairi Gougeon: That is why the work that we are doing and the work that I just mentioned, which was published in June last year, is so important in trying to make a difference. I understand how critical those services are, and it

is important that we provide access to them. That is why that work is so important. The action plan that will underpin that strategy is still in development, and it is important that the views of our young people in rural and island areas help to shape it.

On skills, education and employment, the youth delegates called for a youth-led reform of education. That is timely, given the developments both in our school sector and in our economy and skills sectors, especially as we transition to net zero. Education and skills provision must be tailored to what young people want, where they live and what they want their future to be. That is not just about employment but about their wider fulfilment and wellbeing.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way on that point?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sorry—I will not at the moment. I need to make some progress.

We have opportunities to make that a reality through education reform, through the acceleration of flexible and remote learning and through apprenticeships and wider work to co-ordinate and deliver skills for rural Scotland, including as part of our response to the review of land-based learning.

In our discussions at the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, the importance of arts and culture and their role in community development was also discussed, and we are exploring how that role will be recognised in the forthcoming rural delivery plan. We are increasing funding to the cultural sector by £15.8 million in the next financial year. That is the first step in demonstrating our on-going commitment to the arts, and it will contribute to the cultural richness and resilience of our communities.

Agriculture and our environment were also among the key areas that were highlighted and discussed by the youth delegates. They discussed the need to ensure that farmers and crofters have good livelihoods and that they can work their land in environmentally friendly ways and help to feed Scotland's people.

We are due to publish our good food nation plan soon, and the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is currently progressing through the parliamentary scrutiny process. Through those key pieces of work, we will explore ways in which to promote local produce, reduce food miles, ensure our food security and recognise the quality and high welfare standards of the food that we produce in Scotland.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Mairi Gougeon: I cannot at the moment.

Another key matter that was discussed was the role of carers. The Scottish Government absolutely values the support that Scotland's young carers provide, and we want to ensure that there is appropriate support in place for them. We recognise that the issues that young carers face are often exacerbated when they live rurally. That is why it is so important that we hear from young people directly, in order to better understand and address those issues.

Finally, there was a very specific ask of me. I was honoured to have been asked to act as the spokesperson in the chamber for delegates at the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, and to commit to publicly demonstrate what was learned from the event in Fort William last year and take tangible actions. That is why I am delighted to be holding this debate in the chamber today, and to bring to Parliament directly some of those issues that we discussed at the inaugural Scottish rural and islands youth parliament. I am delighted that the young people who are here in the public gallery today have also had the opportunity to put their issues directly to the First Minister and to each member of the Government just prior to this afternoon's session.

In closing, I say a massive thank you to all the youth delegates in the gallery today and those whom I met in November. I thank them for their ideas, energy and passion. In particular, I thank Ellie Moore, who I know is also in the gallery today, for representing the youth delegation and presenting the statements to the audience on the final day of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament.

Finally, I reiterate the Government's commitment to listening to rural community and youth voices and acknowledging the important contribution that the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament makes in influencing policy development. The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament is a unique success in the UK—

The Presiding Officer: I must ask you to conclude, minister.

Mairi Gougeon: —and without the dedication and hard work of adult and youth volunteers, it would not be possible. I say a final thank you to them and to our youth delegates; I look forward to continuing to work with them.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges the important contribution that the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament (SRIP), including the Rural and Islands Youth Parliament, makes, particularly in influencing future policy development; notes that the SRIP, which held its fifth gathering in November 2023, is unique in the UK; welcomes the opportunity that young people from rural Scotland now have to engage with the Scottish Ministers; recognises the value and importance of hearing the experience and ideas

of young people who live and work in Scotland's rural and island communities to inform Scottish Government policy priorities and of ensuring that their voice is heard, and welcomes the involvement and commitment of youth and adult volunteer delegates who made both parliaments a success.

15:43

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament serves to unite people. Unfortunately, however, the cross-party groups in the Scottish Parliament were not invited to meet the youth parliament. Nevertheless, I welcome its delegates to the chamber today, and I hope that they have enjoyed their day.

The youth parliament offers a platform for young people in Scotland to have their voices heard on the issues that matter most to them. That is important, because it stimulates discussion and debate and allows ideas and inspiration to take root and grow, which is what our rural communities—one of which I represent—need most. However, I believe that the Scottish National Party is more interested in sowing the seeds of division than in building the backbone of tomorrow's rural Scotland. We have to double down on our engagement with the next generation. Too often, the voices of young people in rural and island communities are ignored and overlooked by the Scottish Government.

The youth parliament seeks action on several priorities that the cabinet secretary highlighted, such as transport, education and the environment. Many of those challenges are similar to those experienced across urban Scotland, but there is one difference: the Scottish Government is not delivering on those objectives for the people of rural Scotland.

Young people in rural areas are equally entitled to a good education, and a rural upbringing should not detract from their access to opportunities. Given the ferry issues, the Scottish Government is denying people in island communities the opportunity to travel.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): If Rachael Hamilton is concerned about young people being able to travel, does she regret the loss of the Erasmus scheme?

Rachael Hamilton: It is clear that Jim Fairlie has missed the UK Government's delivery of the Turing scheme. I am quite surprised by that.

With 13.2 per cent of schools in rural areas being classed as in a poor or bad condition compared with just 5.2 per cent of schools in urban areas, students and teachers in rural communities have been unfairly forgotten about.

The Scottish Government has failed to invest in the fabric of the next generation's future.

On housing, the SNP has presided over unprecedented depopulation in our rural communities by failing to deliver on the affordable home targets for the next generation.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does Rachael Hamilton think that many rural communities would find it helpful if local authorities had the power to consider whether a given community had too many second homes? Would that help young people who are trying to find a house?

Rachael Hamilton: It is, of course, important that the economy is driven by tourism. A lot of accommodation in Scotland is important to rural areas, particularly the Borders, because it attracts people to visit and stay here. Families want to come to Scotland to enjoy it. People with a pension are ensuring that they can buy a second home and rent it out. That could be a good thing.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Dr Allan has raised an important issue. Does Rachael Hamilton think that what he said was slightly hypocritical, given that the health secretary has a second home? *[Interruption.]*

Rachael Hamilton: Perhaps somebody should register their interests while they are chuntering from the sidelines.

In 2016, the Scottish Government pledged £25 million to boost rural housing. However, as of 2023, only £18 million of that had been spent. The Government is failing to secure affordable homes for young people. I say to Alasdair Allan that young people are being forced out of their communities for that very reason. By failing in its commitment to invest in rural housing, the Government has failed to support young people.

We must value our rural communities. With their strong traditions and sense of belonging, towns and villages on our islands hold an important role in the culture and history of Scotland. If we are to continue the cultural and historical nature of our rural communities and allow people to contribute to rural and island communities, we must offer them every opportunity to stay.

The cabinet secretary mentioned transport among the list of challenges highlighted by the youth parliament. That is one of the key areas in which the SNP has failed. It has not sorted out the A9, which is a lifeline for many rural communities in Scotland. We recently found out that works to dual the A9 will not be completed until 2035. Tragically, 83 people have lost their lives on that road since the SNP promised to dual it by 2025. That is just another example of the SNP letting down rural Scotland.

To list all the transport failings of the Government and their impacts on young people would take up a lot of time. However, a key issue that the cabinet secretary did not mention is ferries. There were 689 ferry cancellations across Scotland between 1 January and 16 May 2023. That is just appalling. We have heard about the issues that islanders have in running businesses on the islands and ensuring that they are able to stay, work and live where they grew up.

On farming and agriculture, many farmers and crofters are deciding on their future right now, while the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is being considered by the Parliament. Farmers and crofters want to take the next steps to secure Scotland's food future, agriculture future and crofting future, but the Government is blindfolding our young farmers and crofters by failing to give them the ability to plan for the long term. If we want Scotland to be a market world leader that produces wonderful high-quality produce, we must back the next generation. There has been a £78.4 million cut to the rural affairs and islands budget and a further £33.2 million cut to the agriculture budget. The message is not a positive one for young people.

I know that I have only limited time, Presiding Officer, but if you were to place yourself in the shoes of a young person growing up in rural Scotland, I think that you would be as worried as I am about what the future held for you. I speak to many young people who are not positive about their future because of the Government's crumbling schools, unreliable local transport, poor employment opportunities and lack of investment in their future. Those are a number of challenges that they face.

On a positive note, I want to ensure that we can provide the young people of Scotland with a good vision, with ambition, not a stale and footsie Scottish National Party Government that has let them down.

I move amendment S6M-11896.2, to insert at end:

“, and notes that the Scottish Rural and Islands Youth Parliament raised a number of issues affecting young people in rural Scotland, including the Scottish Government's lack of long-term commitment to the rural and island environment, the lack of mental health support for people in the Highlands and Islands, a transport system that is not fit for purpose and a housing sector that fails to meet the needs of the population.”

15:51

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I was glad to be able to attend the rural and islands youth parliament in Fort William. To see so many young people there was really refreshing. The parliament gives them the opportunity to talk about

the issues that have had an impact on them. It is very important that we listen to young people, because they are the very people we need to retain in our rural and island communities to address depopulation.

I welcome the tone of the cabinet secretary's comments in that regard, and I hope that they lead to a step change in dealing with young people's very real concerns. At the moment, we are forcing them out of rural and island communities, rather than retaining them.

Rightly, housing was one of the main issues that the youth parliament talked about, and it called for reform of the housing market to meet the needs of rural and island communities. The market is failing those communities, and there needs to be a rebalancing of power between communities and the market. Those communities need to be empowered. They need affordable housing. However, by “affordable housing”, we are not talking about what urban communities would see as housing association housing or council housing, although rural and island communities need that, too. The truth is that price inflation is so great that it does not reflect the market conditions in those areas, and it does not reflect the average wages there. A lot of people in rural and island areas simply want to buy, like everybody else, and to be able to enter the market.

On top of that, we need to consider a range of options, such as council housing, affordable housing through housing associations and croft housing. However, the croft housing grant does not allow for such things as an office, an extra room for bed and breakfast or a room to work as a weaver. It does not allow for remote working from the croft house. We need to consider different solutions for different people, and there has to be a diverse range of solutions for young people.

Investing in housing is good at the moment, and that can have an impact on one person. However, if we do not consider ways to retain that housing for the population who live and work in rural and island areas, we are wasting that money. We need to take rural housing burdens into account to ensure that the houses cannot be sold on as second homes or holiday homes.

The young people at the youth parliament rightly talked about health and wellbeing. We can understand why when we listen to young people talking about their access to health services and their distance from them. The parliament focused a lot on mental health—as young people do—and talked about self-help and online support. There is no such thing as privacy in a rural area. There is no access to public transport. People cannot go to access services on their own. They need to involve others, and that comes with stigma.

The youth parliament talked about the desperately long waiting lists for CAMHS and about young people's transitions to adult services. My colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy tried to address that issue through her Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill. Sadly, this Parliament voted it down, but it would have addressed some of the young people's concerns.

We also need to look at transport in relation to health. Once again, the A9 north is blocked because of the snow. Imagine being in labour and giving birth while on the A9 when it is blocked because of a snowdrift. That is a possibility. We have been told that it is unsafe for any pregnant women with complications to give birth in Wick. We need to make sure that local services are in place so that people never face that situation.

It is the same with ferries and buses. There are very few buses, and ferries are often cancelled, which means that young people cannot access the services that they need.

However, it was not all doom and gloom. The young people talked about there being lots of opportunities. They saw themselves as being involved in reform to address the problems. They wanted to be directly involved in the reform of education, which does not meet their needs. They were very clear that there are opportunities, not just in traditional industries but in new technologies, which they want to be able to access. There is no reason why they cannot do that, because of the way in which those are delivered. That would give them a huge opportunity to be able to stay in their communities and access not just traditional jobs but new and different jobs.

The Scottish Labour Party brings those issues to the Parliament every week. We need the Scottish Government to listen to young people and to support them to attain their ambitions for themselves. Their ambitions are for the survival of our rural and island communities, because, without young people, those communities will not survive.

I move amendment S6M-11896.1, to insert at end:

“; considers that access to health services, homes and opportunities are essential to young people in rural and island areas; believes that young people who live in these areas are best placed to advise on what is needed, and urges the Scottish Government to address the issues highlighted and put in place a strategy and timeline to address them, as it is vital to halt depopulation and retain young people in rural areas.”

15:56

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome the debate and the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. First, I express my disappointment at not being able to join members in the chamber. I had hoped to meet with some of the youth delegates who are in the Parliament, too, but Arctic weather conditions have defeated me and Ellie Ratter from Shetland, who had also hoped to be present.

Our rural and island areas can often feel distant from Holyrood and even distant from bigger settlements where local decisions are often made. We should not allow such a feeling to arise from the entrenched means of conducting politics and decision making. The Scottish Liberal Democrats fundamentally believe that decision making should be done as close to the people as possible, empowering communities and individuals. The Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament and the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament are a great means of allowing direct contact between rural and island community members and the Scottish Government, supplementing more traditional mechanisms of contact. The fact that they are the only projects of their kind in Scotland reflects the unique challenges of Scotland's geography.

Those who have involved themselves in the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament are particularly to be commended. To those delegates, I say that in giving up your time you are helping others in the best civic tradition. I hope that the experience will encourage you to continue to engage—after all, it is those who turn up who make the decisions.

The rural and islands youth parliaments fly in the face of popular opinion that young people do not want to be involved, or have no interest, in politics. Rural and island areas have their own needs and challenges, but, ultimately, residents want a good life with reliable services and connections.

That makes the asks of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament not unexpected. Those are: long-term thinking to protect nature and the environment; sustainable transport that takes people where they want to go; a focus on sustainable food, reducing food miles and carbon costs while promoting Scottish produce and our high animal welfare standards; a desire for greater community empowerment in local housing sectors, which others have highlighted; youth-led reform of education with the freedom to choose, incorporating life and work experience; out-of-school support for young carers; and accessible mental health support with empathetic interventions.

We find ourselves in a world of spreadsheets and algorithms that cannot estimate the dramatic difference that long-term investment can make for smaller communities. Young people do not want that model to govern their lives; they want long-term compassionate thinking as the road map to change. I hope that the voices of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament will continue to steer the Scottish Government in such a direction.

Before I conclude, I will highlight the work of other grass-roots movements that are attempting to steer Government policy. It is no secret that I am a long-term advocate of short subsea tunnels to connect islands in Shetland. At the end of last year, I brought the wider debate on that idea to the chamber. We heard in that debate about the transport connections of rural and island Scotland and about local residents' appetite to have their voices heard. The island tunnel action groups that have been set up in Shetland highlight that appetite. I hope that their engagement with Shetland Islands Council, local representatives and the Scottish and UK Governments will result in the investment that they are pursuing. Tunnels would reinvigorate the local economies of Shetland's islands and present opportunities for a more prosperous future for the young people of those communities and a reversal of depopulation in our islands.

The young people who are getting involved in the youth parliament and their contemporaries are our future. Investment in them and their communities is an investment in all our futures.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

16:01

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): In gathering 75 young people from across Scotland, the inaugural Scottish rural and islands youth parliament was a real success. The feedback has been resoundingly positive, and it is clear that attendees gained a great deal.

One of the asks from the 2023 parliament was about leadership, engagement and participation, which I will focus on. The delegates asked to have a voice in Parliament, and I was pleased that the cabinet secretary spoke to that. It is great that a number of the delegates have been here today and have met the Cabinet, the cabinet secretary and the First Minister.

All of us in the Parliament have a responsibility to act on behalf of our rural and island youth in everything that we do, because so much that happens here will impact them. We need to ensure that that impact is positive and is informed by young people's views.

When it comes to engaging young people, the issue is not the need to support them to develop their ideas, as they know exactly what they need. Their understanding of the challenges and opportunities for their communities is sophisticated. When school students from my constituency visit me, their questions are thoughtful and incisive. The issue is how we change our processes to include young people. The Government has taken excellent steps towards that through the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, as well as the Cabinet takeover by the Children's Parliament and the Scottish Youth Parliament. I would also like to see conversations about widening participation in consultation processes. Young people in my constituency have started the Forth Valley youth local action group, and they join us today. It was lovely to chat with them earlier about how their day was going. They were really enthusiastic about the Government's work.

Members of the Forth Valley group attended the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, and, ahead of our debate, one member talked about making it easier for young people to find out about and contribute to local consultations. They highlighted the need to make consultations less hostile to those who do not have professional lobbying experience. Children in Scotland says that young people should be given the opportunity to influence the methods of their engagement in policy making, and I call on the Government to work with young people to allow them to shape how they engage with our consultations.

The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament and the Forth Valley youth local action group—that was a lot of words; it would be nicer to have shorter titles—have both highlighted the importance of resources. Research has found that engagement work with young people has had big impacts, but those impacts could still be increased. Children in Scotland notes that, when projects have long-term or permanent funding streams, participation work tends to be more meaningful.

More resources would allow for increased participation, deeper engagement and, crucially, greater impact. Secure funding streams would also ensure a wider range of views. It is important to remember that, although there are a lot of commonalities across our rural areas, there are also specific needs and challenges. For example, Strathard, in my constituency, has been working hard to design community life plans. However, in this one community council area, four separate life plans have been developed because the needs, requirements and priorities of our rural areas, even in one small area, are very different. It would be wrong of us to homogenise those rural areas—they must all have their voice.

The SRIYP is a great way to identify shared issues and common themes, but it must prompt us to hold space for more specific challenges. Children in Scotland has also highlighted that including the views of young people whose voices are seldom heard requires time, resources and planning. Large engagement events are useful, but they do not work for everyone. I am eager to hear how the Government intends to find a balance. We know that consensus is powerful, but we also know that it is not always there. It would do a disservice to the vibrancy and diversity of our young people and our island and rural communities to homogenise them.

Like many, I am looking forward to the national islands plan and progress on the implementation of other plans. I am also eager to hear how the Government will increase engagement with rural and island young people and, crucially, how that will be resourced.

16:06

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Evelyn Tweed hit the nail on the head in her last couple of sentences. It is not good enough to produce lots of plans and strategies and have lots of talk and not actually implement anything.

I welcome the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament to the Scottish Parliament. I do not think that I will be very controversial in saying that it is absolutely vital that we, as parliamentarians, are committed to engaging with our young people. We need to give our young people reasons to trust and have faith in our democracy and democratic institutions. It is also important that we do everything within our power to foster aspiration among our young people.

I hope that we will have generations of young Scots, like the generations of young Scots before them, who want to change the world for the better, who believe in equal opportunity, justice for all and freedom of choice. Those are the things that have imbued this country with the energy that we have needed through our long history to make progress. So much rests on the shoulders of the rising generations.

I say gently but directly to the cabinet secretary that lots of talk about listening is not the same as delivery. Lots of talking about talking is not the same as delivery. The making of announcements does not presuppose that the thing that is being announced has suddenly happened. If only there were an Olympic sport for speaking, making announcements, issuing strategies, having reviews and talking about setting up this body and the next body—my goodness!

This Scottish National Party Government has created a clutter of public bodies in Scotland in the

past 17 years. None of that adds up to delivery. It is not the same thing. We must not patronise our young people by talking to them and engaging with them and pretending that that somehow automatically brings through a bunch of implementation or delivery. Audit Scotland has repeatedly pointed out to the Cabinet that, although it is great at producing strategies, lots of paper and lots of consultations, those things do not actually deliver, and it is very hard to measure anything as delivered.

I have great concerns, as I am sure the young people of Scotland do, particularly those who live in our rural areas and on the islands, about depopulation. We have to give young people who live in rural Scotland and on the islands the real belief that their future can be lived out in the places that they are growing up in. Currently, too many of them make plans on the basis that they will not be in the place that they are growing up in.

That is why I welcome the important priorities that the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament has come up with, which are published on its website. It is talking about the right things. We have already mentioned issues to do with housing. I believe that it is a good thing to inculcate into every young person that it is a good thing to desire to own their own home.

Alasdair Allan: I absolutely agree that the ambition to own their own home is a great ambition for people to have, but does the member recognise that there are parts of Scotland where the free market in houses that currently exists means that owning a home is entirely outwith possibility for many young people?

Stephen Kerr: Dr Allan raises an important point and I think that he may have mistaken me for someone else. I do not believe that the market is the answer for everything; I believe that Government has a very important role to play. That is why I am a Conservative—I believe that there needs to be a partnership in our country, in our society and in our economy to make good things happen. One of those good things is housing and we need to instil within our young people the worthy ambition and aspiration to own their own home.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Would Mr Kerr accept that we do not have a free market in housing? We have incredibly restrictive planning rules that mean that, for example, in rural areas, farmers who want to earn some extra income by selling off building plots and young people who want to access those building plots to build their own homes cannot access that land, because planning rules make it so difficult. If we freed up our planning system, we could create more low-cost housing, which would be accessible to the families that Dr Allan is referring to.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to Murdo Fraser, who invites me down a rabbit hole, in a sense, because he knows very well that I feel passionately about the fact that, although I speak about a partnership between the people and Government, between business and Government and between communities and Government, I think that at the minute we have too much Government in this country. We need to look at how we rebalance things in Scotland so that more power is devolved to communities and so that some of the things that he described in his intervention can happen.

I have run out of time and I have not had a chance to talk about education, which I am passionate about, or the need for local services and for connectivity. Connectivity is such a big issue. I will wind up by saying this: when the cabinet secretary talks in such a flowery way about listening to the young people of rural Scotland, she should remember that much of rural Scotland does not think that this Government cares tuppence about their concerns. I just hope that these young people, when they were speaking to the cabinet secretary, got through, because so many other people have tried and failed to do so.

16:12

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I start by congratulating Finlay Shand, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association young gamekeeper of the year, who is from the Angus glens.

There are questions to ask. Why would the young get involved? What would be their incentive and how would that be encouraged? Those are perfectly valid questions that require action and engagement if we want to be truly representative. I have to say that—remarkably—I found myself agreeing with an awful lot of the ambition that Stephen Kerr was just talking about.

I remember meeting a young lad in my constituency by the name of Beinn Grant not long after I was elected to this place. He was attending the Auchterarder community action plan community engagement day, which is a fantastic event allowing the community around Auchterarder to voice their opinions and develop plans for what is happening in the town and what they would like to happen. Beinn was there with his colleague Hannah Lewis and, as members of the Scottish Youth Parliament, they were encouraging the young folk of Auchterarder to get involved.

Beinn was a member for Perthshire North and I was struck by his enthusiasm and his determination that the voices of the young should

be heard. Despite him being a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament as opposed to the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, he was absolutely advocating for those in rural areas, who face different challenges to their peers in the more urban areas. It was striking and also refreshing to see such a fresh-faced pair of young folk being so passionate and engaged in a sea of middle-aged folk like me.

Stephen Kerr: Jim Fairlie is making a really important point and it is a point that I did not get to in my speech. I hope that he will agree with me that it is good that we have a rural and islands parliament for our young people, but we need people who live in rural parts of Scotland and people who live in urban parts of Scotland to come together and try to understand each other's ways of life better, surely.

Jim Fairlie: As the person who started the farmers market in Scotland in Perth in 1999, for exactly that reason, yes, I can only agree.

The youngest member of my office staff in Perth, John Redpath, stood as a candidate for the Scottish Youth Parliament in the Scottish Borders constituency of Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire. He was just pipped to the post. The whole experience for him was bruising, which I am sure we can all relate to, but it was also extremely inspiring, and it enthused him to get more involved going forward. He now uses as many opportunities as arise to encourage young folk and his peers to get involved, so that there is not that malaise that is all too common these days—the “But what can I do?” syndrome.

That is the crucial point about the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament and the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament. Their purpose is to give a voice and to change that phrase from, “But what can I do?” to simply, “What can I do?” I must, of course, give credit to Alastair Campbell, because that is exactly the tack that he is promoting in his excellent book of that name.

I could not attend the conference last year, but I took great comfort from looking at the website, which gave details of the programme for the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament that was held in Fort William, and there were some key asks from that session. There is no getting away from the fact that we face significant challenges, but one particular challenge for young folk is the ability to live in a rural location that does not require staying with mum and dad until they save enough money to get a deposit to compete with second-home buyers who have much deeper pockets and only inhabit their home for a few months of the year.

With that in mind, I was delighted to see the Government proposals to allow local authorities to

increase council tax on second homes by 100 per cent, with the proceeds going to help to build more rural homes for the future. I might have gone a bit further, but at least it is a good start. If someone cannot get a house there, they cannot live there, so I am keen to see how the £20 million fund for purchasing unused rural housing stock will help to deliver more rural homes. On top of the commitment that the cabinet secretary talked about regarding 10 per cent of the planned 110,000 homes, I hope that that will improve the number of homes that are available for young people.

I was also intrigued by the proposal from the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament that said:

“Supermarkets must have a target imposed that a percentage of produce must be offered for sale from their region to reduce food miles and carbon costs, promote food security, recognise quality, and high welfare standards of Scottish produce. For example, seafood, protein, fruit and veg, meat, dairy, and eggs.”

That proposal is well worth drilling into—not just to have a pop at supermarkets but as a method of finding out how much that already happens and, more important, what more can be done.

It will be very interesting from my point of view—

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: I will not—I have only a minute and a half left and I want to get this point out. I apologise.

It would be very interesting if the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament instigated an inquiry and, in the same way as committees in this Parliament do, took evidence from the stakeholders and presented the findings in a report for us all to scrutinise. If it takes up that challenge, I will be fascinated to find out exactly how it gets on with engaging with the supermarkets and how the supermarkets deal with the very direct questioning that comes from the confidence of youth—I speak from experience. I look forward to hearing whether that develops, and I wish the members of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament every success in their endeavours.

I will pay close attention to the deliberations of the young people who represent the future of rural Scotland, who will have many ideas of what that future looks like.

16:18

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament provides a great opportunity for young people to help to shape the future of Scotland’s rural regions

and islands. Those young people who attended the inaugural parliament in November should be commended for the invaluable insights that they shared on the challenges that our islands and rural regions face and what we can do to build stronger, more vibrant communities. I welcome many of them here today.

The parliament has to be more than just a platform for young people to voice their concerns and share their ideas; it needs to lead to action. However, when it comes to action, the Government does not have the best track record. We have had strategies and working groups, but delivery has not been good enough.

The themes raised by those young people who gathered in Fort William have been flagged over and over again: the need for affordable housing at a time when homelessness is on the rise but housing budgets are falling; better public transport at a time when bus route after bus route is being axed in rural areas; improved mental health support at a time when CAMHS waiting lists in areas such as the Borders, as we have heard, are at record levels; better support for young carers in rural areas; further and higher education opportunities in rural communities, not just in our big cities; and, crucially, the high-skilled, well-paid jobs that are needed to keep young people in those rural communities, when low pay plagues far too many of those communities.

If we fail to act, young people will continue to leave our rural towns and villages for the cities and the crisis of depopulation will grow and grow.

I will always remember a conversation that I had with a sixth-year class when I was a teacher at Stranraer academy. It was just before the end of term and I asked them what they planned to do when they finished at the academy, and many said, “leave Stranraer”. They did not believe that they had the opportunities locally to stay or, if they left for college or university, the opportunities to attract them back home.

That echoes concerns that were raised almost eight years ago, during a workshop in Dumfries and Galloway that was organised by the National Council of Rural Advisers in 2018. One young person said:

“Young people want to have a purpose to stay, live and bring up their families.”

Another said:

“We need affordable housing for young people who want to stay, to bring up young families, to stay for education.”

Those concerns have grown. Last year, Dumfries and Galloway Council’s excellent youth work team surveyed in excess of 10,000 young people aged 10 to 25. The majority said that they wanted to leave the region—unlike in 2018, when the same

questions were asked and a majority wanted to stay.

Jim Fairlie: Will Colin Smyth give way?

Colin Smyth: If I have time, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I call Jim Fairlie.

Jim Fairlie: We hear about the problems in rural communities and that people want to leave. However, one of the biggest problems that farmers have is the fact that they have no certainty of funding from the UK Government post-2025. Will the Labour Government that is due to come in next year or later this year give a commitment to on-going funding on a five-year basis?

Colin Smyth: I am delighted to hear from Jim Fairlie the phrase that the Labour Government is “due to come in”. I very much look forward to that.

We need to give rural communities certainty, both at UK level and in this Parliament. We have not had that when it comes to the legislation coming forward and future agricultural support. As we have heard, we have commitments around a depopulation action plan, and a rural delivery plan is apparently also on its way. However, we have been here before. We cannot have more recommendations and strategies left on a shelf to gather dust; we need to see action being delivered.

In 2018, the National Council of Rural Advisers published an economic blueprint for the rural economy. When it examined the legacy of rural policy making and listened to the voices of rural Scotland, it became clear that, although there had been ambitious recommendations in the past, “the same challenges remain.”

The conversation that I had with young people in Stranraer has stayed with me for more than two decades. It drove me as a local councillor, when I chaired the local economy and connectivity committee, to campaign for what is now the South of Scotland Enterprise agency, which I very much welcome. It was also one of the reasons why I stood for the Scottish Parliament—in order to fight for better opportunities for young people in a rural part of Scotland that, frankly, is too often forgotten.

The voices of young people in that survey of 10,000 people, and the voices of the members of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, have shown us all that so much more work still needs to be done. We need to channel the passion and energy of those young people into action and deliver the real change that they need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is the member concluding? I was generous with the time for the

intervention, so could the member please bring his remarks to a close?

Colin Smyth: Absolutely.

One of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament’s asks was that we need to be their spokespeople in this Parliament. That is a message for the cabinet secretary, but it is also a message for all of us who have the privilege to represent those young people in this Parliament. We need to start to deliver for them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kate Forbes, who joins us remotely.

16:23

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I start by congratulating all the members of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament for the work that they do. I got involved with politics in the first place because I was particularly exercised by the way in which young rural people—particularly from the Highlands and Islands, but the point extends to all rural parts of Scotland—felt disenfranchised and disempowered, with decisions being taken that felt like they were being done to them, without thought for them.

That is why the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament are so critical in offering a mechanism by which young people in rural parts of Scotland, as well as in communities in general, can have a say on the issues that are of particular importance to them.

It is important to reflect on just how critical that is for rural Scotland. I am sure that the census figures will be unpacked in greater detail over the coming months and years, but what we are already seeing in the initial figures confirms what most forecasters, including the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the National Records of Scotland, have been warning us about—namely, that we are facing enormous demographic challenges. In rural areas, especially in coastal parts of Scotland, our population is set to decline quite considerably over the next 40 years.

We also know that, in some rural areas—the Highlands and Islands in particular—those figures are probably masked by growth in some parts, especially in the cities; Inverness is an example. The figures also do not tell us that it is primarily the working-age population that is in decline. The current generation of young people who are growing up in rural parts of Scotland such as the Highlands and Islands will have to choose whether to leave those rural areas or to stay in ever-declining numbers.

That is why I have previously described the issue as a national emergency, in that we need to focus very much on how we bolster and support

rural parts of Scotland to ensure its very survival. Whether we want to unpack policy areas such as housing, transport or digital connectivity, all those issues are part of the approach that Government and others need to take in order to change the trajectory that I fear that those of us in rural Scotland are on, which will only exacerbate inequalities and is likely to increase poverty. It will certainly put a strain on public services, because when the working-age population reduces, we end up in a vicious cycle of struggling to recruit and retain staff in our public services to support the people who need them, especially those who are ageing.

I commend the work that the Rural and Islands Parliament has already done in raising those issues, but the extent to which the importance of their work is recognised will lie in the extent to which decision makers in this Parliament—decision makers such as me, the cabinet secretary and others—take their requests and considerations seriously and genuinely deliver on policies that will transform lives.

The number 1 issue that is constantly raised is, of course, housing. I heard the exchange about that between Stephen Kerr and Alasdair Allan. Although the supply of housing is increasing significantly, we need to make sure that there is a diversity of tenure available to young people in rural Scotland, including housing for rent, which we know is one of the most affordable routes to being in safe accommodation. That is at the heart of how we rebuild such communities.

As I said in an interview that I did with the *West Highland Free Press* this very week, our focus should be on retaining the population that we have, because it is a lot harder to attract people in once we lose that critical mass.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ariane Burgess, who joins us remotely. I hope that Ms Burgess has her camera on—or, indeed, that she is there at all.

16:29

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Hello, Ms Burgess. Please proceed.

Ariane Burgess: It is a pleasure to participate in this debate and discuss the priorities of young people across rural communities. As I participated in the first Scottish Rural Parliament in 2014, I know what a fantastic place it is to share ideas, and it is inspiring to see how it has developed.

This year, the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament has taken form. I had hoped to attend last year's Rural and Islands Parliament in Fort

William, but parliamentary business, including a Rural Affairs and Islands Committee meeting, kept me away. Perhaps next time and going forward, the committee might benefit from attending the Rural and Islands Parliament as part of our formal business.

My Green colleague, Orkney councillor Kristopher Leask, did take part in discussions at the first Scottish rural and islands youth parliament meeting and remarked on the value of young people coming together to work on finding common solutions to common challenges.

The priorities of the rural and islands youth parliament will be familiar to all members who have engaged with young people in rural constituencies. We have heard that today. In some regard, they are the concerns that we hear about from all residents: a lack of warm affordable homes, poor transport links and a failure to fully grasp the challenges of the climate and nature crises that we face.

If we look deeper, though, we will see new solutions as well as common challenges. Those young people's priorities for transport are sustainability and reliability. They do not want to build more and bigger roads but to look at all the ways that we travel, not only by car. On housing, the parliament identified the market failings that need urgent solutions and spoke of the importance of community-led solutions, which is something that I have highlighted by championing the community-led housing trusts that are challenging the failed commercial status quo and creating the high-quality, affordable homes and community enterprises that rural Scotland urgently needs.

We cannot overstate the importance of the arts to young people in rural Scotland. As well as providing a key economic driver, the arts are vital to creating vibrant communities and often underpin hubs such as village halls and local cinemas. Creative practices enhance the sustainability of rural communities and are vital to quality of life, community development and social cohesion. The sector is also integral to our changing employment landscape and has a huge potential for growth in the just transition to a low-carbon economy.

Young people have been seeing the failings of the short-term approach to tackling our climate and nature crises and are rightly calling for long-term funding to support rural communities in prioritising nature restoration. The nature restoration fund is an important step along that path.

Our carbon-neutral islands project has employed many local young people to lead community approaches to tackling climate change. I was fortunate to meet some of them, including Tom and Rosie, on Raasay this summer. Their

vision it is absolutely inspiring. They are working hard to take the project forward and bring much energy and real-life experience to their development work.

That kind of work offers opportunities to young people who are seeing many of the industries that provided employment for previous generations become increasingly automated. Youth-led reform of our education system could create a generation of young people with flexible life and work skills that would enable them to adapt to the changing workplace as well as to our changing environment. Depopulation and ageing need not be the defining characteristics of our rural communities, which are extraordinary places to raise families, start enterprises and build communities.

Let us heed the youth parliament's request to listen with purpose, not only acknowledging young people's priorities but looking at how well we can deliver on them. For too long, young people have been at the periphery of our ideal of rural Scotland. Let us take this opportunity to move their concerns and priorities to the heart of what we do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Alasdair Allan will be the final speaker in the open debate.

16:33

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As others have said, ensuring that young people in Scotland's rural and island communities have a say is not only a good idea but essential for the survival of those communities. My island constituency often faces unique challenges that have an impact on all age groups, and one challenge that has already been alluded to—demography—has been compounded even more since Westminster's decision to take Scotland out of the European Union against our will.

Historically, my Western Isles constituency has faced the serious consequences of having a decreasing population, whether because of the impact of global conflict such as the first world war, if one wants to look that far back, or because of a more general perception of a lack of opportunity for young people. However, if we listen genuinely and actively, we can hear many good news stories to tell about young people in rural Scotland.

I am thinking, for instance, of Uist Beò in my area. It represents a group of young people who have dedicated themselves to making Uist a home for their families and a base for their businesses in the face of the sometimes daunting challenges to those things. Members of Uist Beò were in attendance at the recent meeting of the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament and its youth counterpart. Indeed, many of the younger islanders from Uist were in attendance and, to use

their words, they "did not hold back" in providing their valuable input and experiences to help ministers to strengthen future generations of island communities.

To some extent, of course, young people can already express their views to legislators, either directly or through their members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. However, the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament has a different function. It provides young islanders and young people aged between 16 and 30 from throughout rural Scotland with opportunities to assemble and discuss and agree policy ideas. As MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, I believe that the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament can play a hugely important role in constructively collaborating and influencing policy making.

There are many successes that show the ways in which Scotland values its young people. I am thinking, for instance, of Scotland's investment in social housing in rural areas, free bus passes and the imminent introduction of free ferry journeys for young islanders. However, there is still a great deal to do, and I am sure that the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament will have a role in achieving that. When it met most recently, in November 2023, it was able with one clear voice to express young people's desire for the housing market to be reformed in rural communities and to ask members of this Parliament to develop housing policies that will empower them and their communities. The Scottish Government's continued support, including up to £30 million for the rural and islands housing fund, will be helpful in that respect.

However, it cannot be overstated how critical affordable housing is to ensuring the future of young people in our rural and island communities, so I welcome the Scottish Government's acknowledgement of what the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament has said on that and many other issues.

I hope that we all recognise the work that the body does, its unique role, and the way that it involves young people directly in how our policies are developed and pursued. In that vein, and as a member who represents an island constituency, I am delighted to support the motion that the minister lodged to recognise the work that the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament does.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:37

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a privilege to close for Scottish Labour. "There should be nothing about us without us" is a mantra of the disability movement and it is one that

applies to the subject of this debate. The people who live in rural areas are the best placed to know what their communities need, and that is especially true for young people, whose future is at stake. I am pleased that the minister stated a commitment to that approach in her opening remarks and that other members did so in their speeches. I note in particular Evelyn Tweed's comment that rural areas are not all the same.

The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament does crucial work to ensure that young people's voices are heard. As colleagues have said, including Beatrice Wishart, those who take part give up their time to do so. I put on the record my thanks to them, including those who are in the public gallery this afternoon.

We must value the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament not just because it allows those voices to be heard but because it is often at the forefront of highlighting and offering solutions to the challenges that are faced by the communities that it represents. As my colleague Rhoda Grant said, those challenges have in some cases forced young people out of rural areas. I think that we all agree that we have to address that, and a good place to start is, of course, with the issues that the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament has highlighted: housing, transport, the arts and culture, food and agriculture, the environment, mental health, depopulation, young carers, and skills and education. We in the Scottish Labour Party believe that all those areas are crucial to protecting the future of our rural and islands communities.

I want to spend a bit of time talking about education before I reflect on some of the speeches that we heard in the debate. Young people across Scotland must have the opportunity to reach their potential, through high and rising standards in our schools, and to aspire to change the world, as Stephen Kerr noted. As Rachael Hamilton said, young people in rural areas have an equal right to education. However, as elsewhere in Scotland, education faces considerable challenges in rural areas. That is recognised by the rural youth parliament as an area of concern.

I went to a rural school—Milne's high school in Fochabers—and loved it, but I know only too well the challenges that we faced. Many challenges remain. Despite that, rural schools punch above their weight. However, we know that they are struggling with recruitment, the conditions of the school estate and, for some staff, access to wraparound childcare. The youth parliament is right that we need to embrace technology and innovation, to ensure that young people in rural areas can access the education for the jobs of the future that they cannot currently access. As my colleague Colin Smyth has said, ensuring that

young people feel that there are opportunities for them in rural areas is essential to encouraging them to stay there.

Key to that, of course, are colleges. That is why I am deeply worried about some of the cuts to budgets for further and higher education. Those are having real-life impacts, not just on the number of Scottish students who can go to university but on colleges. One example of that is the impact of the proposal by UHI Shetland to offer voluntary severance to 18 full-time lecturers—one third of lecturers at Shetland college. The two worst-hit areas will be community learning and business and creative courses, both of which are needed for the future of our country. That represents a loss of opportunity. In addition, many of those courses include students with additional support needs, so the impacts do not fall equally. Despite that, I understand that no island communities impact assessment has been carried out and that no equalities groups have been consulted. I hope that the minister will reflect on that and confirm that she will look into it.

In addition, we need to mention the incredible organisations that work locally. One such organisation is the Usual Place in Dumfries, which I have had the pleasure of visiting. It works hard to support education and young people, including on transitions, as my colleague Rhoda Grant mentioned. I thank it again for all that it does. It has not been immune to cuts so, please, we must remember the importance of not allowing such organisations to feel precarious. They are needed to support young people across the country—specifically, in rural areas.

We have heard a lot about the lack of suitable housing in our island and rural communities, which is a factor in the challenges for the people who live there and for the numbers of people who come to live, work and study. Kate Forbes and others have focused on that. I encourage the minister to consider seriously Rhoda Grant's suggestion that we introduce rural burdens to ensure that homes cannot be sold on for holiday lets. That could also help to address some of the points that were made by Jim Fairlie, who is my new favourite prophet.

As many members noted, good transport links are also crucial. Fears of being stuck on islands do not encourage people to come or to stay, and they encourage the people who live there to leave.

Access to culture, which we also heard about—in particular, from Ariane Burgess—is crucial. There is a growing culture sector in our rural and island communities, but the impact of Covid restrictions and budget cuts has weighed heavily, including in rural areas. We have to address culture cuts and teacher shortages in those areas.

We need not just to encourage more people to live in rural areas but to ensure that the people who are already there do not leave and that they have the services that they need, such as health and social care. Key to that is sustained and connected action on depopulation, as members have said, including Alasdair Allan, who spoke just before me. That is key to keeping people in, and attracting them to, rural areas.

The debate has shone a light on crucial issues that young people face on the islands and in rural areas, and has given us a chance to recognise the key role of the young people who live there. Scottish Labour believes that a full strategy—listening to young people and putting them at the heart, covering access to health services, homes and opportunities, and with a timeline attached—must be developed in order to address the challenges, so that we can halt depopulation, retain young people in our rural areas and deliver the reality of opportunity for all across Scotland.

16:43

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given the subjects that I intend to cover in my speech, I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business. In addition, I am a member of NFU Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland. I am also somebody who lives in rural Scotland, on one of our islands, and who was, a very long time ago, considered youthful, although I appreciate that those days are long gone.

The debate has been interesting and important, and has highlighted many issues that I have raised a number of times in this place, as a Highlands and Islands MSP. We all know that it can be challenging to live and to grow up in rural Scotland or on one of our islands. That is why responsible Governments recognise the need to support rural and island communities to overcome or reduce those challenges, where they can do so.

However, that is not the record of the Scottish Government, for which rural Scotland has too often been an afterthought, as other members have said. That does not appear to be about to change any time soon. Holyrood's Finance and Public Administration Committee, of which I am a member, is currently scrutinising the Scottish National Party-Green Government's latest budget. As I raised last week with the Deputy First Minister, it is one that will see rural Scotland being hit hard. Agriculture support has been cut by more than £33 million; a similar amount has been cut from forestry; £7 million has been lost from the marine budget; nearly £2 million has been slashed from islands funding; and land reform funding is down by £3.5 million. That amounts to nearly £80

million in cuts to the rural affairs, land reform and islands budgets alone.

However, that is not all. Next year's budget for Highlands and Islands Enterprise has been cut by another £8 million, while South of Scotland Enterprise will lose £7 million. Those bodies are important, because they are tasked with supporting businesses, creating jobs and driving economic growth in much of rural Scotland and on our islands.

As other members across the chamber have mentioned, at a time when we have a housing crisis across much of rural Scotland, the Scottish Government has cut the housing budget by £200 million. Although the SNP is pushing ahead with its plans for a visitor levy, making visiting parts of Scotland more expensive, even for those of us who live here, it has cut the tourism budget by nearly £6 million, yet tourism is important to so many rural and island communities.

Education has not escaped either, with college funding being cut by nearly £60 million, while 1,200 fewer Scots will be able to attend Scottish universities.

Local council budgets have been under increasing pressure for years, hitting public services and councils that have to deliver them to our most remote and vulnerable communities.

Therefore there is pressure on housing, farming, crofting, fishing, tourism and support for higher and further education, and on local government and the services that it delivers. That is the record of the SNP-Green Scottish Government—it is not one to be proud of.

The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament is right to raise concerns about housing provision. As other members, including Rhoda Grant, Stephen Kerr and Kate Forbes, have highlighted, more must be done to ensure that housing meets the needs of local people so that they can stay in the communities in which they grew up.

The Scottish rural and islands youth parliament is also right to push for transport that meets the needs of local communities. I repeat my support for access to our islands ferries being treated as we would buses on the mainland, so that young people on our islands are not disadvantaged. As a farmer, I certainly welcome calls for supermarkets to ensure that more local produce is available on our shelves and that we continue to meet high welfare standards.

I also very much recognise the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament's concerns over the provision of mental health support in rural areas and the need to provide better support to young carers, who often face additional challenge—but

with less support—because they live in rural Scotland.

I turn to other members' contributions. Rachael Hamilton and Pam Duncan-Glancy rightly highlighted the appalling condition of many rural schools. Only last week, my Scottish Conservative colleagues on Highland Council lodged a motion calling for a school estate emergency to be declared in that area, but it was voted down by SNP and Green councillors—one even blaming the poor state of Highland schools on Ukraine, Brexit and Liz Truss. What a shambolic and shameful deflection of responsibility. Rachael Hamilton was also stark in her warnings that the SNP-Green Government has failed young people and our rural and island communities.

My colleague Stephen Kerr was absolutely right when he said that the problem is not that the people of rural Scotland do not have a voice but that the SNP and Greens often do not listen to it. We have seen that time and again across a myriad of issues, from the ferries crisis to the contempt shown to Highland communities over Government ministers' reluctance just to admit what everybody knew—that they would miserably fail to hit their targets to dual the A9.

One recommendation of the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament with which I respectfully disagreed was on leadership, when it called for the cabinet secretary to be its spokesperson in the Scottish Parliament. That highlighted an area on which the youth parliament must engage more widely in future. As far as I am aware, there has not been widespread engagement by either the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament or the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament with MSPs other than those in government. However, I say to them that those of us who shout loudest for our rural and island communities are not sitting on the Government benches; they are here among the Scottish Conservatives and among Opposition members. To Humza Yousaf's frustration, they are even on the SNP's back benches. That is from where Scottish ministers are held to account, and where pressure is exerted on them to deliver on their promises and to meet their responsibilities to rural Scotland.

It is important that the voice of rural and island Scotland and of those who are the next generation of—in my region—highlanders and islanders are heard in the Scottish Parliament. However, hearing is not the same as listening. They must be listened to, as well, and their concerns must be acted on, and ministers must deliver on actions and promises. The SNP-Green Government has never been very good at that.

16:50

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): It is a pleasure to close what has mainly been a constructive debate. I reiterate my gratitude for the opportunity to address some of the critical issues that our rural and island young people face, and I pay tribute to and welcome to the public gallery the delegates from the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament. It was great to meet many of them in the Scottish Parliament earlier. The points that they raised at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament, which I, too, had the privilege of attending in November, have been integral to shaping our discussions here today.

The debate has been a testament to the collaborative spirit that defines our shared commitment to better outcomes for all our rural and island communities. I should say at this point that we will accept the Labour amendment but reject the Tory one. The debate has provided an opportunity to discuss in more detail how the Scottish budget, which I presented to the Parliament on 19 December, will support our rural and island communities. It is a budget that is a reflection of some of the stark consequences of the UK Government's spending decisions. I will point to two, in particular, that have been touched on in the debate, because the spending decisions of Whitehall departments flow directly into the Scottish Government's available budget.

One such decision was the decision at Whitehall to cut the housing and communities budget by nearly 53 per cent, which has had a direct impact on the housing budgets that are available to the Scottish Government. The second was the decision to cut the environment, food and rural affairs budget by more than 12 per cent. It is fine for members to make demands of the Scottish Government, but it is a bit rich when they do not follow through in the funding and budget decisions that they make in their own Government, given the impact that those have on our budgets.

Rachael Hamilton *rose*—

Shona Robison: I will give way in a moment.

Despite that, our budget aligns very much with our commitment to tackle many of the issues that we have discussed today, where we have the power to do so. I will come to a couple of those in a minute, but I will take the intervention just now.

Rachael Hamilton: The SNP promised to dual the A9 back in 2007. That was more than 15 years ago. Can the cabinet secretary still use the same grievance and excuse—about the highest block grant ever—for that particular failure?

Shona Robison: Màiri McAllan has laid out the plans for the A9. What is not helping the

infrastructure investment plans in Scotland is the more than 10 per cent cut to capital budgets that we will see over the next five years. What also does not help is the reduction in the financial transactions budget that is available, which has supported the affordable housing supply programme over a number of years.

Housing has been mentioned a few times in the debate, and it is important to recognise that the affordable housing supply programme has delivered more than 10,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities since 2016. However, there is more to do. In recognition of the importance of housing for key workers in rural and island areas, we are making up to £25 million available from the affordable housing supply programme budget over the period from 2023 to 2028. That is in addition to the £30 million that we are making available for the rural housing fund.

Kate Forbes was quite right when she pointed to the need for diversity of tenure. Rhoda Grant also raised some important points about the practical issues of crofting housing. We would be happy to look at those further. She also talked about rural housing burdens. Some organisations, such as housing associations and rural housing community trusts, have been able to deliver rural housing burdens, but, again, we will be happy to look into those further.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the minister take an intervention?

Shona Robison: No—the member did not take any interventions.

The point that was raised about second homes is important, because the point that too many homes in rural communities are lost to second homes was made by a number of young people at the parliament that I attended. It is good to see the widespread political support from most parts of the chamber—with one obvious exception—with empowering local government to take action on second homes.

We have also sought, in the budget, to address some of the challenges that the hospitality sector faces in island communities. In 2024-25, we will offer 100 per cent non-domestic rates relief, capped at £110,000 per business, to hospitality businesses that are located on islands. We will also invest a further £12.1 million in our rural and island communities to support community-led local development and similar initiatives, in addition to the £24.5 million that we have invested since the closure of the European Union LEADER programme in December 2021.

Some action has been taken, but I acknowledge the need to go further. That is why I am working with Mairi Gougeon to take a cross-Government approach, so that every part of Government is

interrogating the work that it is doing to ensure that it is delivering for rural and island communities, and to challenge ourselves and our agencies—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Shona Robison: No, thank you.

We will do that to ensure that we and our agencies are delivering for rural and islands Scotland—*[Interruption.]* Jamie Halcro Johnston did not take any interventions, but, in the spirit of consensus, I will do what he did not and let him intervene.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for taking an intervention, given the greater amount of time that she has in comparison with mine.

She has talked about collaboration across a number of departments. How does that work when the rural affairs and islands budget is being cut by £80 million? How helpful can collaboration across departments be when that amount of money has been taken out of the budget?

Shona Robison: As I set out at the Finance and Public Administration Committee on Tuesday, we have prioritised the spend on front-line services—such as health, local government, police and fire—on which those in rural and island communities rely. If Jamie Halcro Johnston thinks that that is the wrong priority, he has the opportunity to come forward with alternative spending proposals. I will await his doing so.

I welcome support from across the Government to enable younger generations to thrive in rural and island places. We have more work to do to ensure that that is the case, but it is already clear—as my attendance at the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament in Fort William confirmed—that there is an incredible opportunity across rural Scotland to build fairer, stronger communities and a stronger rural economy in which the opportunities are shared.

The energy in the room at the very first Scottish rural and islands youth parliament was palpable, and that is a testament to the delegates who attended and their ideas. We want to work with all those young people and with that institution so that they hold us to account for the delivery of the aims and ambitions that we have set out.

As I said at the start of my speech, the debate has, in the main, been constructive. It is the start of a process of listening and then delivering what needs to be delivered, focusing on the key priorities, and working with young people and being held to account by them for the delivery that we will take forward.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament.

Point of Order

16:59

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I want to raise a point of order in relation to First Minister's question time today.

During his questioning, Douglas Ross mentioned a case of people from Fife—a postmistress, Mary, and her daughter Myra. At the start of his question, he talked about the obligation—as he feels it to be—on the Lord Advocate to come forward with a process for quashing the convictions, and he finished his question with the demand that convictions be overturned. The example that he gave was a harrowing one. It involved Mary, who was wrongly suspended from her job in the Auchtermuchty post office, with a devastating impact on her family—her daughter Myra, in particular. He mentioned that Mary died before the Horizon scandal came to light and, as he said, she died without knowing or its being proved that she was right. That is a tragedy and a harrowing story.

Douglas Ross then made demands for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to overturn those wrongful convictions, and he also said that there had been no prosecution or conviction in the case. Surely it is important, when the Parliament discusses such issues and decides on them, that we know where accountability lies. In that case, accountability clearly lies with the Post Office, whose egregious actions caused distress to that family and many others, and with United Kingdom ministers, but not with the Crown Office.

Does the Presiding Officer agree that we should be very clear about where accountability lies when we make such demands in Parliament?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Mr Brown for his contribution.

The content of members' contributions is not ordinarily a matter for the chair. Therefore, that is not a matter that I will rule on. Members will be well aware of the need to ensure that comments are accurate. Wherever there are any inaccuracies, members will be very well aware, at this point in the session, of the mechanism that exists to correct them.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-11896.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11896, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:02

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-11896.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton.

Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted no.

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

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)

Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)

Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11896.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11896, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, is: For 52, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11896.1, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11896, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11896, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Scottish rural and islands youth parliament, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament acknowledges the important contribution that the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament (SRIP), including the Rural and Islands Youth Parliament, makes, particularly in influencing future policy development; notes that the SRIP, which held its fifth gathering in November 2023, is unique in the UK; welcomes the opportunity that young people from rural Scotland now have to engage with the Scottish Ministers; recognises the value and importance of hearing the experience and ideas of young people who live and work in Scotland's rural and island communities to inform Scottish Government policy priorities and of ensuring that their voice is heard, and welcomes the involvement and commitment of youth and

adult volunteer delegates who made both parliaments a success; considers that access to health services, homes and opportunities are essential to young people in rural and island areas; believes that young people who live in these areas are best placed to advise on what is needed, and urges the Scottish Government to address the issues highlighted and put in place a strategy and timeline to address them, as it is vital to halt depopulation and retain young people in rural areas.

Meeting closed at 17:08.

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