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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 6 November 2024

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands.

I remind members that questions 4 and 8 are grouped together; therefore, I will take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered. Question 1 is from Jamie Halcro Johnston, who joins us remotely.

Fishing Sector (Science and Data)

1. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that the most accurate and up-to-date science and data are used when making decisions that impact Scotland's fishing sector. (S6O-03877)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): It is critical that the best available science is used for the management of Scotland's fisheries. The marine directorate makes a significant investment of £9 million in an annual programme of data collection, dedicated fisheries surveys, stock assessments and scientific advice. Much of that programme is delivered in partnership with the industry and academia and through international collaboration under the auspices of the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, and it follows standardised, transparent and quality-assured procedures. Fisheries managers also draw on socioeconomic evidence such as that which is published in the sea fisheries annual statistics report.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: After I repeatedly raised with the Government the issue of a derogation from catching squid, the cabinet secretary finally wrote to me in May, admitting that

"We have concluded that there is not sufficient evidence to support the immediate introduction of a derogation but there is also not sufficient evidence to refuse it",

so no derogation was granted.

I recently met the industry to discuss other restrictions that were announced in May, which used data that was collected between 2016 and 2019 to restrict some larger shellfish vessels from

fishing their traditional grounds. Both of those decisions, which impact on fishermen's livelihoods, were made using old or insufficient data, and fishermen do not believe that the data reflect what they are seeing on the grounds. Does the cabinet secretary have confidence in the data that is being used to make these decisions?

On the crab and lobster fishing restrictions that came into force on 12 May, can she tell me when the assessment of the restrictions, which was meant to be concluded later this year but has been pushed into next year, will finally be published?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises a few different points, which I will try to address as best I can. On the last question, about crab and lobster fishing restrictions, we said at the time that those are interim measures that we will keep under review while we look at measures more widely. If, as we develop those discussions, any changes are to be made, we will make those with stakeholders and the industry.

Going back to the member's initial question about the squid fishery, it is important to note that Scottish ministers granted a limited trial—a pilot project—in which a limited number of inshore vessels will gather more information to support a longer-term policy decision on fishing for squid. That is a positive step forward.

I believe that the first stakeholder co-management group meeting took place on 1 November. The group includes representatives from industry as well as from environmental non-governmental organisations. I believe that the first meeting was thought to be very productive, and there was a lot of enthusiasm in the industry for establishing the project ahead of the next fishing season.

We are moving in the right direction when it comes to that fishery.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary outline what the economic impact of Brexit has been on Scotland's fishing sector, according to the available data?

Mairi Gougeon: One thing that we can say for sure is that all the promises that were made for Brexit, particularly in relation to our fisheries, simply did not materialise. We did not see the sea of opportunity come to fruition as we had been promised at that time.

We also see an impact when we look at our seafood industry, at exports and at the costs and the bureaucracy that have been added for our businesses. We know that Brexit has had a devastating impact on businesses more widely, but we will always continue to do what we do for our industry in Scotland. That is why our negotiators are working really hard at the moment

to secure the best opportunities for our fishing industry.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The cabinet secretary will know, from our earlier correspondence and discussions, about the concerns around the failure to designate Scapa Flow, in Orkney, a designated mud area, which risks completely undermining the important prawn fishery. The Scapa Flow sea bed is similar to that of Burgh Head, which has been designated. All the data to support the case for designating Scapa Flow has now been provided to the Scottish Government. Will the cabinet secretary take the necessary steps to ensure that Scapa Flow is designated as soon as possible, so that the valuable and sustainable local fishery in Orkney can continue?

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate that Liam McArthur has raised that point with me previously and has been driving this issue forward in Parliament. I understand that officials met Liam McArthur as well as the Orkney Fisheries Association and local fishers just a couple of weeks ago to discuss that request.

What I can commit to today is that we will continue to have those discussions with the member. I appreciate that we need to see movement on that, so I am more than happy to keep the member up to date as it progresses and, of course, to treat the matter with the seriousness that it deserves.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the request to undertake a trial reopening of the Solway cockle fishery. In the absence of regular monitoring of stock levels by Marine Scotland, the sector has carried out that work and has provided data to Marine Scotland. However, the data has sat with Marine Scotland for months. When will we hear the Government's response to the request? Given the delays, does the cabinet secretary think that the Government is really meeting its obligations under the Fisheries Act 2020 when it comes to using the best available scientific advice and data in its decisions?

Mairi Gougeon: As, I hope, the member will appreciate, even from just the round of questions that we have had so far this afternoon, a lot is happening in our marine space at the moment and a lot of work is going on across a number of different fisheries in a number of different areas. I know that the work has been done on that data. I have not seen a copy of that report yet, and I will need to get advice on that before we determine the next steps. As soon as that information becomes available, I will be happy to discuss it with the member and set out what the next programme of work will look like.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Protected areas such as the Lamlash Bay no-take zone are vital in allowing Scotland's marine life and stocks of commercially important species to recover from overfishing. A skipper was recently found guilty of scallop fishing in the zone and was fined £4,175 at Kilmarnock sheriff court. The Community of Arran Seabed Trust—COAST—believes that the incident and the outcome raise issues around the challenges for fisheries management, monitoring and enforcement. Can the cabinet secretary advise whether her officials will discuss the incident with COAST and say what lessons can be learned to prevent such incidents from happening again?

Mairi Gougeon: I will state right from the outset that the marine directorate takes incursions into any protected area of our seas seriously and will continue to promote the prevention of non-compliance and respond where non-compliance has been detected. I understand that marine directorate officials have met COAST members to discuss that case.

Kenneth Gibson also raises important points about our overall enforcement. We spend around £23 million a year on our compliance, and we have a number of vessels and aircraft. We take a risk-based assessment approach to all of this and we take any reports very seriously. I encourage members of the public to continue to report cases where they think that there may have been incursions.

Agricultural Property Relief

2. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of the United Kingdom Government's decision to reform agricultural property relief on the future of family farms in Scotland. (S6O-03878)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): To say that I am disappointed that the chancellor did not listen to the comments from NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates and chose not to work with the Scottish Government to consider the impact of these changes would be an extreme understatement.

The Government, farmers and rural communities now need to come together to think through how the UK Government's decision will impact on family farms. In the meantime, I urge the UK Government to engage in immediate dialogue to ensure that any tax changes take account of Scotland and its distinct features where family and tenant farms and crofting are key parts of rural life. We want a tax system that supports, not hinders, orderly succession planning and transfer of land to the next generation of custodians of the land.

Sue Webber: I share the minister's disappointment in what we have seen unfold. Labour has betrayed Scottish farmers in its budget by introducing a family farm tax, and it is disappointing to see so few Labour members in the chamber today. It is estimated that the tax will affect 70,000 family farms across the UK. Our food security will now be put at risk and local people will be forced to pay higher prices in the supermarket as a result. Will the minister support the Scottish Conservative campaign to reverse Labour's deeply harmful family farm tax?

Jim Fairlie: I disagree with very little of what Sue Webber has said. In fact, I will quote the NFUS:

"From a farming and crofting perspective, the Inheritance Tax and changes to Agricultural Property Relief will be devastating to the vast majority of farms and crofts. This is something we will demand the UK government to review and amend as the pressures both financially and mentally this will put on family farming businesses will be immense. The sheer lack of understanding of how agriculture works throughout the UK has been highlighted by this Government which has clearly gone back on its word."

It continues:

"Changes to Inheritance Tax and Agricultural Property Relief will affect the liquidity on succession for farms above the £1 million threshold set, hitting many family farms, regardless of size or type. Decisions to reinvest in these farming businesses will be shelved and the knock-on ramifications for the wider rural economy, and businesses up and downstream will be significant."

That is not a Scottish Government political statement—the NFU is saying that.

The Labour Party's actions at Westminster have been catastrophic for the farming industry in Scotland. We would seriously urge the UK Government to rethink its position.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am thankful that this very important issue has been raised in the chamber, as it affects many of my constituents. As we have heard, NFUS Scotland has said that it will be devastating to the vast majority of farms and crofts. What engagement has the minister had with the NFUS and farming stakeholders in the light of the very disappointing UK budget? Can you outline the support that is available to the sector in Scotland to ensure its viability for the years to come?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should always speak through the chair.

Jim Fairlie: At the very start, when the new Labour Government was elected, I and the cabinet secretary were hopeful that there would be a better line of engagement, a better dialogue and a much better relationship than the one that we had with—dare I say it?—our colleagues who are sitting to the left of me. We have discussed the

importance of providing sufficient ring-fenced multiyear funding to support agriculture, rural and marine sectors across the UK and to provide those sectors with long-term clarity as soon as possible, noting that the UK Government would consider a funding settlement for future years at the next spending review. Well, all of that has now gone out the window.

In 2024-25, the Scottish Government will invest more than £1 billion in the rural affairs, land reform and islands budget. We have committed to supporting active farming and food production with direct payments to provide certainty to the industry, and we have brought forward payment dates in order to pay farmers and crofters at the earliest possible opportunity, to assist with cash flow. The UK Government's autumn statement does not provide the uplift in agriculture funding that stakeholders have called for to reverse the real-terms cuts of recent years, nor does it provide the multiyear certainty that we lost when we exited the European Union. The imposed settlement compounds the issues that were created by the former UK Government, and some serious conversations need to be had going forward.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): One Labour member at the back of the chamber is shaking their head and one at the front is looking at his phone. Some pretty shameful spin has come from Labour about the inheritance tax, which is destroying family farms.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): That is rubbish!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please.

Tim Eagle: Members can shout all they like, but both the minister and I know that it is spin and that engagement is the key. The industry is hurting. I am pleased with what the minister has said, but will he do all that he can to engage with the industry? It needs that now more than ever.

Jim Fairlie: I cannot disagree with Tim Eagle's sentiments. We are actively engaging with the sector—we did that as soon as we received the budget—and we will continue to engage, because we need to get the issue sorted in order to ensure the viability of family farming in Scotland.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Although the Scottish Greens support the use of inheritance tax measures as a means of redistribution, the lack of information about the impact of the UK budget changes is making small farmers in the Highlands and Islands nervous. Concerns have been raised that those changes could inadvertently lead to small farms ending up in the hands of big agribusiness. What steps will the Scottish Government take to provide more information to the sector and ensure that the

changes do not have a negative impact on Scotland's land reform journey?

Jim Fairlie: All that I can say to Ariane Burgess is what I have already said to members on the left-hand side of the chamber. We will continue to do all that we can to ensure that we have a successful, viable family farming sector in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has not been lodged.

Basic Payment Scheme

4. Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government by what date it expects all farmers to receive payment through the basic payment scheme. (S6O-03880)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The payment strategy, published on 9 February 2024, sets out our regulatory targets. For the basic payment scheme, that is 95.24 per cent of the BPS value by June 2025, which is on course to be met. As in any year, there can be a number of complex cases that require investigation to determine eligibility, and we will work with customers to pay the remaining claims at the earliest opportunity.

Sandesh Gulhane: Although early payments are welcome, I understand that, to date, only some smaller farms have received their single farm payment. On 4 September, the cabinet secretary stated:

"Rural payments and inspections division staff will continue to work through remaining payments as soon as possible over the coming weeks."

That was eight weeks ago.

Following what has been, for many, a difficult harvest, it is now imperative that all farmers get that vital funding. Can the minister give clarity to the industry by confirming when it will receive the rest, and will he guarantee that?

Jim Fairlie: If Sandesh Gulhane has specific cases that he wishes to raise with me, he should by all means bring them to our attention. I am more than happy to look at them.

There have been some delays, but we are still well on track to cover the vast majority of payments well within the timeline that we have.

Basic Payment Scheme

8. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind the chamber of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a partner of a small family farm in Morayshire and that, as such, I am entitled to grants for the farming enterprise.

To ask the Scottish Government what percentage of payments under the basic payment scheme had been made to farmers by 15 October 2024. (S6O-03884)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): My answer will go some way towards giving further clarity to Sandesh Gulhane, too.

As of 15 October 2024, 76 per cent of the overall value of the basic payment scheme had been paid out, with 83 per cent of the total number of eligible businesses having received payment.

Edward Mountain: I am slightly concerned that a disastrous and expensive computer system that was installed to distribute the basic farm payment scheme has caused the delays that we have seen. Can the minister confirm whether that is the case? If that is not the case, were any delays caused by software issues?

Jim Fairlie: We are delivering in line with our payment strategy. I fully understand the premise of Edward Mountain's question, given some of the issues that we have had historically, but there was a planned pause in the payment-run processing from 12 September to 2 October 2024 to allow the Scottish Government to incorporate wide upgrades to the Oracle cloud.

The basic payment scheme and greening advance payment runs started again on 2 October, and all claims that progressed to ready-for-payment status during the pause were processed by 15 October. The normal payment run is progressing and payments resume from this point onwards.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): It is vital that we press ahead with work to ensure that we are giving farmers and crofters the support that they need. Can the minister say any more about the total funding that has been provided to support farmers through the basic payment scheme this year?

Jim Fairlie: It is fair to say that the Scottish Government absolutely recognises the importance of that support to farmers and crofters. As I said, at 4 November 2024 more than £367 million-worth of payments had been processed. That means that 87 per cent of the overall value of the basic payment scheme has been paid out, with 92 per cent of the total number of eligible businesses receiving a payment.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Last month, I wrote to the cabinet secretary on behalf of a Moray farmer who normally gets his basic payment in September and has still not received it. Would it be possible to get a response from the cabinet secretary?

On the point that we have heard about information technology, that farmer has also been told by the department in Inverness that the software upgrade is going to delay future payments. He describes this as

“a pretty stupid time to do an upgrade, and it must be a pretty slow one at that”.

Does the minister agree?

Jim Fairlie: The upgrade happened across the entire Scottish Government: it was not just to do with the system for rural payments.

As I said in my previous answer, the payment system is back on track. We will have completed the process well before the deadline of June 2025, and I hope that that gives farmers confidence that the payments are coming.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 has been withdrawn, and question 6 was not lodged.

Carbon Emissions Land Tax

7. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the potential implications for its policies on land reform and land use of a carbon emissions land tax. (S6O-03883)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Ministers meet regularly to ensure that work that is under way across Government takes into consideration potential cross-portfolio implications.

Bob Doris: As a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I am currently scrutinising land reform legislation. Under initial Scottish Government plans, large landowners will be required to consult on, produce and comply with land management plans, and constraints, such as lotting, will be placed on the sale of land.

Given that there might soon be a requirement for large landowners to pay a carbon emissions land tax, will the Scottish Government give consideration, with some potential exemptions and caveats, to aligning the qualifying threshold for all three measures to ownership of land of more than 1,000 hectares? Such an approach might benefit communities, nature restoration and net zero goals.

Mairi Gougeon: I am grateful for the committee’s scrutiny of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. Ultimately, we set out the different thresholds to ensure that the measures are justified in relation to the policy aims, and do not have a disproportionate impact on smaller landholdings. I welcome the committee’s consideration of those issues.

The Scottish Government is committed to exploring options for a carbon land tax to support emissions reductions, but any potential new measures in relation to that would have to be rigorously assessed and based on strong evidence to ensure that they meet the objectives of introducing such a policy.

In the development of that work, we would collaborate with stakeholders, including landowners, to consider all available options, including any relevant thresholds and what they might look like.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I am sorry that, in my frustration over Labour’s family farm tax, I forgot to declare my interest as a farmer who is in receipt of funding from the basic payment scheme.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Eagle.

There will be a short pause before we move on to the next portfolio, to allow front bench teams to change positions, should they wish to do so.

Health and Social Care

Monklands Hospital Replacement

1. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what recent discussions it has had with NHS Lanarkshire about the replacement Monklands hospital. (S6O-03885)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): NHS Lanarkshire provided an update to the national health service capital investment group on 25 September on the progress that it is making with the development of the full business case. The update session confirmed that good progress is being made and that the board remains on course to submit the full business case in late 2025 or early 2026.

Graham Simpson: I thank the minister for that answer, but good progress does not mean money on the table, and that is what is required. A recent NHS Lanarkshire report dubbed Monklands hospital a “risk to life”, highlighting floods, bacterial outbreaks and major heating failures. Colin Lauder, director of planning at NHS Lanarkshire, has said that Monklands

“is not suitable for 21st century medical practice.”

A recent briefing for elected members told us that not replacing Monklands is simply unthinkable.

Will the minister commit to funding Monklands hospital? In the spirit of collaboration, will she agree to host a meeting of interested MSPs from the area to discuss that?

Maree Todd: I will take the several points that Mr Simpson raised in turn. It is not the case that NHS Lanarkshire has not adequately made the case for replacement. The situation is that we are still in the process of finding the money. In the meantime, we expect all health boards to undertake appropriate maintenance work in their healthcare facilities in order to manage and mitigate risks. We continue to work with health boards to manage estate-related costs.

I absolutely recognise the importance of national health service infrastructure in supporting services. To that end, we are working with all our health boards to develop a whole-system infrastructure plan. In the context of a very challenging financial position, it is a positive and practical approach that reflects on the needs of the whole of Scotland and will support the continued safe operation of existing NHS facilities as well as the determination of longer-term investment priorities.

In answer to the question about meeting members, I am happy to meet them at any time to discuss the issues that interest them.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): A report that was leaked just last month reveals that the existing Monklands hospital is “beyond its serviceable life”. The replacement hospital has been delayed by three years already. A week ago, the Scottish Government learned that it will have significant additional resources for the NHS from the new Labour Government. Will it use those additional resources to get the new hospital built as a matter of urgent priority?

Maree Todd: The consequentials from the budget last week turned out to be £89 million of capital, which, as we all know, does not build a modern hospital.

We welcome the clarity from the United Kingdom Government around our 2025-26 capital funding envelope and we will target that funding to deliver on the Government’s priorities. However, we need longer-term assurance on multiyear capital investment in order to commit to some of the enormous capital costs that are building within our NHS in Scotland.

Hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and Hypermobility Spectrum Disorders Care Pathway

2. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what it is doing to establish a care pathway for people living with

hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and hypermobility spectrum disorders. (S6O-03886)

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): I assure members that the Scottish Government, through the rare disease implementation board and wider engagement, remains committed to exploring how care for rare conditions can be improved through the use of pathways and resources that support healthcare professionals. Given how important it is that people with a rare or long-term condition receive effective care, and with predicted increases in the number of people in Scotland with such conditions, we believe that it is time to revisit our approach to long-term conditions. We are exploring how to better support people with long-term conditions, as many of the outcomes that we seek for patients are similar across different conditions.

Emma Roddick: I am grateful to the minister for meeting me last week to discuss the issue further. Research that was published by the University of Edinburgh earlier this year found that people with EDS and HSD in Scotland endure an average wait of 20 years for a diagnosis, and a significant number resort to private healthcare or to travelling abroad as a result. I know well the knock-on impact that such a lack of support can have, as well as the frustration that comes from a lack of public awareness. Will the minister outline what steps the Government is taking to ensure that the provision of training and education around EDS is enhanced?

Jenni Minto: I acknowledge the work that Emma Roddick is carrying out to raise awareness of EDS and I thank her for that. As was noted in the August progress report on Scotland’s action plan for rare diseases, our rare disease implementation board, in conjunction with NHS Education for Scotland, is developing awareness-raising video resources to support healthcare professionals in thinking rare.

We will also be encouraging the use of digital tools such as the right decision service that is hosted by Healthcare Improvement Scotland, which provides tools to build guidance, pathways and other decision-support resources. Guidance for hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos syndrome has already been developed by NHS Dumfries and Galloway and is available on the right decision service website to support healthcare staff across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 was not lodged.

Gender-Affirming Surgery Referrals (18 to 24-year-olds)

4. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of recent reports that Chalmers gender identity clinic has paused gender-affirming surgery referrals for people under 25, what work it is doing to ensure that such referrals for 18 to 24-year-olds can be reinstated as soon as possible. (S6O-03888)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Before I answer Lorna Slater's question regarding NHS Lothian, I reassure the member and anyone listening to this session that there has been no change in national policy in relation to the provision of gender identity healthcare or related surgical referrals for 18 to 24-year-olds.

National health service boards are responsible for the care of patients. I understand that NHS Lothian is currently reviewing its internal clinical governance procedures to ensure that its assessment and referral processes are meeting patients' needs in a holistic way. That work by NHS Lothian is on-going, and I have asked that it is done at pace to reduce anxiety for the patients who are involved and to ensure that referrals resume as soon as possible.

Lorna Slater: I thank the minister very much for her answer. In the wake of the gender identity healthcare protocol for Scotland being published by the Scottish Government in September, a number of constituents have written to me with the specific concern that the Chalmers gender identity clinic is waiting for the national work on gender identity healthcare provision for young people, which is mentioned in point 8 of that protocol, to be completed before it reinstates referrals.

Knowing that timeliness of care is vital, that gender-affirming care saves lives and that lives are potentially at risk while referrals are unavailable, I ask the minister how long the national work will take. Did she anticipate clinics pausing support for patients while the work was undertaken? I note that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has not paused referrals.

Jenni Minto: I understand that a short-life working group that was established by NHS Lothian is progressing work at pace to consider pathways for 18 to 24-year-olds and that the group is expected to report early in the new year. I also understand that, if there are any interim steps as part of the process, those steps can progress before the report concludes and they will be put in place as soon as possible by the board.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The overriding premise of healthcare professionals is to do no harm. Can the minister confirm that the pause to gender-affirming surgery has happened

at least in part because of concern about the health outcomes from those treatments, and that it can be reinstated only when a full investigation into harms or otherwise has taken place?

Jenni Minto: As I understand it, the question was on the process of referrals and suchlike. That is what the short-life working group is looking at. As I said in my response to Ms Slater, we expect the report to be concluded early in the next year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Colin Smyth to ask question 5.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, but the member is not in the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Whitfield for that helpful clarification, which we have all noted. I think that the member was in the chamber not so long ago. I apologise to those who were seeking to ask supplementary questions, because that will not be possible.

Disadvantaged Communities (Life Expectancy and Health Inequalities)

6. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to improve life expectancy and tackle any health inequalities affecting the most disadvantaged communities. (S6O-03890)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Government has an unwavering commitment to increasing life expectancy and reducing health inequalities across our communities by undertaking a range of actions to address the underlying causes. They include allocating around £3 billion a year since 2022-23 to tackle poverty, initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles through tobacco control, preventing alcohol-related harm, and promoting healthy eating and being physically active.

We are working with our partners to develop a collective preventative approach to tackling health inequalities through the creation of a population health framework. The most recent life expectancy figures, which were published last month by the National Records of Scotland, indicate a moderate increase for both men and women, compared with previous estimates.

Annie Wells: The leading causes of avoidable deaths include alcohol and drug-related conditions. People living in the most deprived fifth of areas are two to three times likely to die from such causes, which are categorised as being potentially preventable through treatment. What is the Scottish Government's response to calls from the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland to increase investment in general practice, alongside the review of all funding

streams to channel more spending to the most deprived areas?

Jenni Minto: I thank Annie Wells for her question and welcome her to her new portfolio. I look forward to meeting her with regard to women's health. She has raised some important points about dependency on alcohol and drugs in our deprived areas, and we are very receptive to her suggestion with regard to discussions with GPs and that particular funding.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a bank nurse employed by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

How successful has the inclusion, health and general practice programme been in tackling health inequalities across disadvantaged areas of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and how will that work be supported over the next year?

Jenni Minto: Since March 2023, we have invested £2.3 million in the inclusion health action in general practice project in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. More than 60 GP practices in highly disadvantaged communities have used the funding to take practical actions to tackle health inequalities.

An early evaluation that was published in July clearly shows that the funding is driving improvements in those practices. Those improvements include enhanced care through more than 7,000 extended and outreach consultations with patients who have complex health needs but are often excluded from healthcare. More than 200 staff have also undertaken training related to health inequalities, and £1 million was paid to practices this financial year to continue their work to address such inequalities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a supplementary from Paul Sweeney, who joins us online.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The reality of health inequalities in Scotland is persistently laid bare in the national dental inspection programme data. For example, last week's figures showed that just 60 per cent of children in the most deprived areas showed "no obvious decay experience", compared with 84 per cent in the least deprived areas. Has the Government accepted that level of inequality in dental health as standard in Scotland?

Jenni Minto: No, the Scottish Government has not accepted those levels of dentistry as standard; indeed, we continue to invest in the childsmile programme to ensure that our children get the best support when they are learning to brush and keep their teeth clean. We all recognise that the

mouth is a key area for showing your general health, and that it is important for our teeth to be as healthy as possible.

Breast Cancer Outcomes

7. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is improving outcomes for people affected by breast cancer. (S6O-03891)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We are implementing the cancer strategy and cancer action plan for Scotland, which take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways in cancer, from prevention and diagnosis to treatment and post-treatment care.

We continue to invest in our detect cancer earlier programme. We have invested £11.3 million in cancer waiting times funding in 2024-25, and that funding is directed towards our most challenged tumour types, including breast cancer. We have also commissioned the Scottish cancer network to publish the first national clinical management pathway for breast cancer in 2023, to bring consistency to the patient journey from diagnosis onwards and to improve outcomes.

Clare Adamson: I urge any woman who is invited to a screening programme to take up that opportunity.

In light of the national cancer medicines advisory group issuing advice supporting the use of anastrozole, raloxifene and tamoxifen for the primary prevention of breast cancer, what steps have been taken to establish the necessary national health service pathways to ensure that those medicines are readily available to women who choose such risk-reducing treatment options?

Neil Gray: I recognise that Clare Adamson's interest in this area is long-standing, and I reiterate her call for women and all others to take up cancer screening opportunities when they present themselves.

I welcome the national cancer medicines advisory group's decision to support the use of anastrozole, tamoxifen and raloxifene treatment to reduce the risk of breast cancer. The Scottish Government is currently working with national genetic and clinical colleagues to consider the implications of undertaking a nationally agreed pathway for chemoprevention of breast cancer. In the meantime, the Scottish Government expects health boards to explore the safe, effective and equitable introduction of those medicines.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I understand that there has been recent confirmation of significant shortages of radioisotopes across the world, including those

which are mainly used for diagnosing cancers, including prostate and breast cancer. Will the cabinet secretary outline the Scottish Government's latest position following that announcement and advise how the Government will support affected patients and their loved ones?

Neil Gray: I thank Colin Beattie for raising an important issue that has been of concern to me over recent weeks. Work is on-going with suppliers. Given its responsibility in relation to medicine supplies, the United Kingdom Government has a responsibility to resolve the shortage of generators that are used in the preparation of radioisotopes in nuclear medicine for diagnosis and treatment, particularly for cancer.

There have been positive developments, with the affected reactors in Poland and the Netherlands coming back online sooner than expected. Consequently, we should shortly be able to confirm that all radiopharmacies in Scotland will receive their normal generator capacity.

I thank the radiopharmacy and associated clinical teams for working collaboratively to minimise the impact of the shortage on patient care in Scotland and for the work that has been done across the UK to co-ordinate that. I intend to keep colleagues across the chamber, and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee in particular, updated as matters progress.

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

My constituent Shareen Auckbarallee was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy, which, as members can imagine, was devastating for her. She requires breast reconstructive surgery at the Glasgow royal infirmary but, on asking when she might receive it, she was simply told, "Years."

When Pam Gosal raised the issue at First Minister's question time last November, she was told by the First Minister that the Scottish Government was working hard to reduce waiting times. However, a freedom of information request has shown that Glasgow's average wait has increased, the maximum wait has increased and the number of patients waiting has increased, too. That is unacceptable. When will the cabinet secretary take steps to improve the situation, and will he apologise to Shareen?

Neil Gray: I very much recognise the trauma that Dr Gulhane's constituent Shareen will be feeling at this time, and I am very sorry for the delay in that important reconstructive surgery. We are investing in support to boards to provide capacity for that work. In Dr Gulhane's question

and narration, he referenced the fact that there is an increased demand on those services. In both the 62-day and the 31-day cancer pathways for breast cancer, we are seeing increased demand, and we are treating more people in those pathways compared with the situation before the pandemic.

However, I recognise that that is cold comfort to Shareen. I am more than happy to hear more from Dr Gulhane in writing about the individual circumstances and to consider whether anything more can be done to help.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will know from public health figures that the gap between our most and least deprived communities remains stubbornly high. Women between the ages of 50 and 70 from our most deprived communities are less likely to attend their routine breast screening appointments and have a 64.2 per cent screening rate, compared to 82.8 per cent in the most affluent communities. Given that I have raised screening inequalities in the chamber on a number of occasions, and given the Government's commitment to reducing inequalities in cancer screening, will the cabinet secretary agree to bring to the chamber a debate in which he can update us on the status of the equity in screening strategy and allow scrutiny of the Government's commitment to targeted work in that area?

Neil Gray: Obviously, the scheduling of parliamentary business is a consideration for all of us, but I recognise Carol Mochan's request and the figures that she narrates, which I have seen. I am as concerned as she is about the current inequity between the most and least deprived areas in the uptake of screening opportunities. That serves to illustrate the need for us to reiterate the importance of people taking up screening opportunities, as I mentioned in response to Clare Adamson. If there are structural barriers to accessing those opportunities for people in the most deprived communities, we need to tackle them, and I would be interested in working with local boards and health and social care partnerships on how that can be brought about.

We will give due consideration to the member's request for chamber time. In the meantime, I would be more than happy to discuss those areas with her at a further meeting.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

8. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to eliminate long waits in A and E departments across Scotland. (S6O-03892)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I am committed to addressing long waits in our emergency departments, which is why we are supporting health boards through our urgent and unscheduled care collaborative improvement programme to improve patient flow through our acute sites.

The key issue impacting performance is in-patient capacity and the block that that causes for people who need to be admitted to hospital. Through our improvement approach, we are working with the centre for sustainable delivery and local systems to implement actions that will release in-patient capacity, such as strengthening same-day emergency care services, optimising flow navigation centres and enhancing the discharge process to ensure that people are discharged as soon as they are medically fit.

Sharon Dowey: A and E waiting times have risen and remain critically high across Scotland. In the week ending 27 October, more than 9,000 patients were not seen within the Scottish National Party's four-hour target. In Ayrshire and Arran, only 63.9 per cent of patients were seen within four hours at emergency departments. What immediate actions will the cabinet secretary take to protect staff from burnout and improve the patient experience as we prepare for increased winter pressures?

Neil Gray: I thank Sharon Dowey for bringing that important issue to the chamber. We have too many people waiting too long in our accident and emergencies, particularly to get admitted. I was able to see that for myself not only when I was at University hospital Ayr on Monday, but when I was visiting the accident and emergency there earlier in the summer. It has brought in good innovations, including the frailty assessment unit.

However, there is clear variation in performance among our health and social care partnerships, including around delayed discharge. We can see that in Ayrshire and Arran: in South Ayrshire, the number of delays was sitting at 91 in September; in East Ayrshire it was 25; and in North Ayrshire it was 74.

We need to understand what can be done to ensure that we bring up the performance of all those local areas, so that we can see a better flow through the system. I just made a commitment to all health and social care partnership chairs and vice-chairs in a meeting before this question time session—I meet the collaborative response and assurance group on a weekly basis—in relation to what is needed in local areas in order to see a response and to see the numbers come down, so that we can see a better flow in our accident and emergency settings.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): We know that a key way to reduce the pressure on A and E is to ensure that people know where to go to access the healthcare that they need. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the work to alleviate pressures on emergency departments? What can be learned from exemplar A and E departments such as those in NHS Tayside? Will he comment on how A and E waiting time figures in Scotland compare with those across the rest of the United Kingdom?

Neil Gray: The right care, right place campaign that was launched last week promotes awareness around the appropriate use of urgent care services to help reduce pressures on the system during winter. Alongside that, a record number of NHS 24 call handlers are available to direct people to the most appropriate care, which helps to reduce unnecessary accident and emergency attendances.

The direct answer to Joe FitzPatrick's question is that Scotland's core accident and emergencies have been the best performing in the UK for nine years. Monthly statistics for September show that Scotland's performance for core A and Es was 6.1 percentage points higher than that of England and 8.7 percentage points higher than that of Wales.

I do not rest on that. It is not good enough for us just to be the best in the UK; we must do better for the people of Scotland, which is what I am committed to doing.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Yesterday's Public Health Scotland statistics revealed that A and E departments continue to struggle. The latest monthly figures showed that 13,000 people waited more than eight hours to be seen, and 5,000 of them waited more than 12 hours. We see ambulances backed up at the hospital front door, which causes huge pressure on the system and delays their getting to further emergency calls.

Will the cabinet secretary commit to using some of the new funding from the UK Labour budget to tackle the winter pressures on our NHS and social care services?

Neil Gray: I very much agree with the first point that Jackie Baillie made about the assessment of Public Health Scotland figures in relation to the challenges across the system.

This is not about the performance of accident and emergency departments, which I think are doing very well; we need to look at the performance of the entire system, including social care, as I narrated to Sharon Dowey. I take the point that Jackie Baillie makes.

On the impact of the UK budget, I think that it is a mixed bag. Progress is undoubtedly being made. However, for this year, the consequentials

were—as had been anticipated—as telegraphed by the previous UK Government as well as the current one.

We will use all possible resources to improve the situation for our health services. We will take forward progress on that front as we develop the budget process for 4 December.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is bewildering that the cabinet secretary tells us that it is about flow through the hospital, including social care, when we have £13 million-worth of social care cuts in Fife, which were agreed to by NHS Fife. That is having a direct impact on social care packages and respite, and it has a direct impact on discharge from hospital. Why on earth is he telling us that it is about the flow through the hospital when he is imposing such cuts?

Neil Gray: That is partly because, as Mr Rennie knows, it is not me who is imposing such cuts—those are local decisions.

However, I want to work with local systems, because I recognise that there is pressure across the public sector after a decade and a half of austerity. I also recognise the challenges that are being faced in local areas, including in Fife.

That is why I meet the whole system on a weekly basis through the collaborative response and assurance group, which includes the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and health and social care partnerships. People are able to voice concerns about funding in that forum, and we take those points seriously in order to address the situation that is being faced by too many partnerships, and by too many individuals. At the end of the day, it is individual people who experience delays in being discharged to their home, or who are not able to get into the hospital or the accident and emergency department. I am focused on seeing a better situation for people who use our health and social care services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on health and social care. I have a point of order on my screen from Colin Smyth.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I apologise for getting my timings wrong for portfolio questions on health, and I will write to the Presiding Officer to apologise for missing my question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Smyth.

Finlay Carson has a point of order.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In the light of the response that we have just heard from the cabinet secretary, can you offer any

advice to members who were preparing to ask a supplementary question on an urgent matter? An example is maternity services in Dumfries and Galloway, and the outrageous decision by the integration joint board to ignore the views of pregnant women and independent maternity professionals and withdraw midwife-led services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I say to Mr Carson that that is not a point of order. There will be many opportunities for him to raise issues, as he well knows. However, I see that the cabinet secretary also wishes to make a point of order.

Neil Gray: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. As ever, if questions are not taken in the chamber, I would be more than sympathetic to writing back in a timeous fashion to members whose questions could not be taken.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Keeping the Promise

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15205, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, on keeping the Promise. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

14:52

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to bring the debate to the chamber. As minister for the Promise, I have seen progress, listened to heart-warming stories and witnessed the energy and activity that are under way across Scotland to bring change. I have also listened to what needs to improve. I am delighted to have the opportunity for members to come together across the chamber to reaffirm the Promise that we all made, from every seat of the Parliament, to our children and young people with care experience.

The debate and the motion provide an opportunity for all members in the chamber to make clear to Scotland's care-experienced citizens that each and every one of us has a responsibility to keep the Promise that we made to them four years ago. I welcome Martin Whitfield's amendment to the motion, which upholds that core principle. The important thing when it comes to decision time this evening is that the Parliament comes together to reaffirm our commitment to the Promise.

On that note, I will start by addressing the children, young people, adults and families across Scotland with care experience. The Government is committed to ensuring that families receive the right support in the right way and at the right time. Both the First Minister and I are clear that keeping the Promise is not an ambition in isolation. It is aligned closely with our programmes of work to tackle child poverty and reduce the number of families in crisis.

I know that we need to keep moving to make change happen, and I know that we need to move faster in some areas. However, I also know that much work is under way and that there is an incredible drive across organisations, systems and our communities to bring the change that is required. I reassure members that progress is being made. I am committed to making that happen, and I am committed to working with you all to make it happen.

In that spirit of collaboration, I acknowledge all the people and organisations across Scotland who are focused on delivering change—our social

workers, our teachers, our health workers, our emergency service workers, our volunteers, our local and national public sector, our third sector and our communities. Thank you—your commitment and hard work is evident, and it is so welcome. Let us keep going together.

I am sure that my colleagues across the Parliament are poised to provide the challenge that the chamber is so effectively designed for them to provide. However, let us keep in mind that, across the parties, we have all jointly committed to change, so we must move jointly in a solution-focused way to keep the Promise and build on its five foundations: voice, family, care, people and scaffolding.

In March 2022, the Government published a comprehensive plan that set out actions and commitments, and, in September this year, we published a detailed update on progress on each action. Since the publication of the Promise oversight board's second report last year, there have been a number of developments, including the publication of "Plan 24-30" in June this year by The Promise Scotland.

I extend my thanks to Fiona Duncan, the independent strategic adviser on the Promise and the co-chair of the Promise oversight board, who continues to work hard with her team to set the route map for what needs to be done, by whom and when. Ms Duncan's assessment that we remain on track to keep the Promise by 2030 furthers my confidence that we can do so and that, together, we will.

There is clear evidence that progress is being made. Indeed, early evidence demonstrates that there has been a 15.6 per cent reduction in the number of looked-after children in Scotland since 2020. Although I fully appreciate that that does not tell us the full story, it tells us that the system is changing. We are safely keeping more families together, and we are changing our approach to better meet the needs of children and families.

At the heart of that work is the whole-family wellbeing funding programme. For example, in South Lanarkshire, funding has supported the scaling up of centralised family support hubs, which have contributed to a more than 60 per cent reduction in the number of referrals to statutory services. That early support has avoided the need for crisis intervention.

For our children and young people who require to enter care, we know that, for some, that might be for short periods and that, for others, it might be for longer.

The Promise tells us that developing a universal definition of "care experience" will help more people to understand and relate to what it means to be a person with experience of care. That work

is under way, and I thank Who Cares? Scotland, Barnardo's and all the children, young people and stakeholders who are engaging in events across Scotland to inform it.

The contribution that is made by our kinship carers and by our foster carers and foster families, when it is not safe or possible for children and young people to remain with their birth families, is of the highest value. I reiterated that message when I met the kinship care advice services advisory group yesterday.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The definition of "care experience" is becoming one of the most important elements, and it is right that that definition is developed with people with care experience and those who surround them. Will the minister give an indication of how far we are along that pathway? Will there be a definition before we have to address the question of the proposed bill?

Natalie Don-Innes: We are consulting on that matter, which will be considered in anticipation of the bill.

In August 2023, I was very proud to introduce the Scottish recommended allowance for kinship and foster carers, which benefits more than 9,000 families and ensures that, for the first time, every eligible foster and kinship carer receives at least a standard national allowance. Last week, we launched a new kinship care assessment framework, which is intended to assist social work practitioners to assess kinship carers and their needs.

I recently met foster carers and their families in Perth, where I launched the next stage of our work to set out a vision for the future of foster care in Scotland—a vision that prioritises children's experiences in order to best meet their varied needs. It is vital that Scotland has enough capacity to provide loving care, so, in 2025, we will prioritise a national campaign to recruit more foster carers.

Scotland's children's hearings system continues to play a pivotal role in our support and decision making. I am grateful to the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and to Scotland's diverse pool of panel members, who continue to support children, young people and families who attend hearings. I am also grateful to Sheriff Mackie for the work that he has undertaken with those with lived experience of the children's hearings system to lay the foundations for a redesign of that system that best meets the needs of our children and young people. The next stage of development in advance of the legislative and non-legislative change that is required is under way.

In May 2024, I was honoured to support the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 into law. That has already facilitated an end to the

placement of children in young offenders institutions in Scotland. For our children and young people who are engaged with the justice system, we have taken a significant step forward with the bairns' hoose pathfinders and affiliate test sites under way, backed by an investment of £10 million.

I recognise that young people who are transitioning out of children's services might still need access to financial, practical and emotional support at that stage in life. We continue to work closely with corporate parents and our partners to better co-ordinate and make available the support that is required by those who are leaving care. We will continue to make improvements in the year ahead, including through the development of the care leaver payment, which will be co-designed with care-experienced people and those who support them.

We will also take action in response to what we have heard in the recent moving on from care into adulthood consultation and the Care Inspectorate thematic review of transitions for care-experienced young people.

As minister, I have had the privilege visiting a broad range of projects and meeting some incredible care-experienced children and young people along the way. I am encouraged by the quality of work that is under way throughout Scotland. In education, we have provided more than £60 million to local authorities through the care-experienced children and young people fund. We have also seen real successes in schools across Scotland through the virtual headteacher network and other supports that aim to increase attendance, improve attainment and reduce exclusion.

In housing, I have met staff and young people who are involved in the Midlothian house project and heard about the real impact that the team has had on their lives. The project won the outstanding corporate parent award at the first corporate parenting award ceremony that was held last August.

Through the Promise partnership fund, we have supported projects such as the Aberlour perinatal befriending service, which is an early intervention approach for mothers and mothers-to-be with mild to moderate perinatal mental health illnesses. I also recently visited Young Scot and spoke to young people about their experiences of transitioning out of care. I heard about the difference that the Promise is making and how those young people can see that changes are happening.

I know that good things are happening in every corner of Scotland on the Promise, and I encourage local systems to challenge themselves,

to learn from each other and to continue to build a culture where the best of practice is the reality for all children and their families. Understanding the progress that has been made so far is essential in ensuring that we remain on track, but also so that we can flex and direct that attention where it is required, informing the oversight board for the Promise, as it holds all of Scotland to account on progress.

I also know that statistics alone are not enough. We will continue to ensure that the voices of our care-experienced children and young people remain at the heart of our story of change. For example, our joint work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and The Promise Scotland to develop the Promise stories of progress project will launch by the end of this year.

As I have set out, implementing change requires partnership across the board. To help enable that, the Government is committed to introducing a Promise bill during the current parliamentary session and I hope that we will be able to pass it with cross-party support. Again, in the spirit of collaboration and keeping in mind the collective promise that all of us have made to care-experienced children and young people, I hope that all parties will commit to working constructively together on that legislation when it is introduced.

I lodged the motion to acknowledge the commitment that this Parliament made to keep the Promise to care-experienced people by 2030. The Government's focus is on action that will help children, young people and families across Scotland. Keeping the Promise will have benefits for everyone in Scotland. That is why the legislation that we will introduce by the end of the current parliamentary session will provide the further direction that we need.

By voting in favour of the motion, members will send a message to the children, young people, adults and families across Scotland with care experience that their voice matters. They will be supported in the years ahead and the Promise that we made as a Parliament four years ago will not be broken.

I move,

That the Parliament reaffirms its collective commitment to Keep The Promise by 2030.

15:04

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the minister for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I welcome the opportunity to reaffirm the commitment of Scottish Conservative members to the Promise. I would also like to apologise for the small error in our

amendment and I thank the Presiding Officer and her team for sorting that.

We must never forget that not only was the Promise made and agreed by all parties in the Parliament, but that a promise was made to make tangible change to the lives of care-experienced people in Scotland. That is a promise that we must not break.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the topic that we are debating is of personal interest to me. I have listened to many care-experienced people over the years, and it is just as important now that action is taken as it was 20 years ago, when my husband and I embarked on our journey to foster and adopt.

I note the tone of the motion, which we will vote for, but it would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to express the concerns that have been raised by stakeholders—Ms Don-Innes is well aware that I take every opportunity to do so—about the lack of progress and time delays regarding implementation of various parts of the Promise, so I will do so in today's debate. We rarely have a chance to debate the issue, so forgive me for taking the opportunity when it arises.

However, before I do that, it is only right and fair that I recognise the good work that has been done so far. There has certainly been a pivotal change in the way that children and families are supported. The drive to keep siblings together has meant that more and more young people are cared for with their brothers and sisters, which is a good thing. We know that attachment is essential to the building of strong relationships, and that such family bonds play a crucial role. I am looking forward to the remaining quarter, who do not stay with their family and are separated from them, becoming a thing of the past.

There has been a move towards redesigning the children's hearings process. Although I have some reservations about whether the intentions will be met, it is right that we listen to children, families and care-experienced adults, and that we place them at the centre of decisions about their lives.

I want to raise concerns about the treatment of volunteers and the lack of transparency in relation to staffing decisions, which could be taken into consideration as part of the redesign process. With the increased role of children's hearings, we must be mindful of the fact that everyone who gives of their time for the good of our children needs to be respected and offered the same protections as employees.

Even though there is a long way to go, it is excellent to see the shift in provision of support for young people who are moving on from care into adulthood. The understanding that corporate

parenting, just like any form of parenting, does not stop when a person reaches 18 is a welcome shift towards supporting care-experienced adults, which should be applauded.

I thank the Promise oversight board for its continued work in ensuring that The Promise Scotland is continually assessed. It is concerning that the board has raised fears about a lack of focus. That sentiment is echoed by The Promise Scotland in relation to what more is required from the Scottish Government. I thank it for its briefing for today's debate, in which it states:

"there needs to be a step change in pace and scale".

I agree.

At a recent meeting with the Promise oversight board, I recognised its frustration at the lack of drive to achieve the remaining objectives, and its disappointment about the absence of the next steps for "Plan 24-30" and the dearth of grass-roots changes from "Plan 21-24" that will actively make immediate improvements for the experiences of those who are on the edge of care.

The oversight board correctly highlighted its concerns earlier this year, when it said that "Plan 21-24",

"the strategic implementation of what needs to happen each year to achieve the Promise, will not be fulfilled",

and it has concluded that the original aims of the plan will not be achievable by the end of the year. We are at the end of the year, and I fear that the oversight board was right.

It cannot be acceptable, as Who Cares? Scotland highlighted in its report from October 2024, that income gaps for care-experienced individuals have grown from 25 to 29 per cent to as much as 38 per cent, which amounts to nearly £10,000 a year. The issues are all still there, and they must be addressed. We must make sure that the same thing does not happen again when we implement the objectives over the next five years to ensure that the deadline of 2030 is met.

I would like to take a moment to look specifically at the whole family wellbeing fund, which was mentioned by Ms Don-Innes. That £500 million fund is to make on-the-ground support for families as accessible as possible. It is solely for projects in the community and will be in place until the end of this session of Parliament. It was even highlighted to me by the then First Minister, Ms Sturgeon—I am glad that she is in the chamber today—that that important fund is instrumental in keeping the Promise.

I note The Promise Scotland's comments that

"There must be a renewed effort, building on the strong emphasis on whole family support in the recent Programme for Government, to ensure that all families are able to

access emotional, practical, and financial support to stay together, wherever it is safe to do so."

It is therefore concerning to find from a freedom of information request that most councils are currently using the fund to supplement their staffing requirements, which is not the purpose of the fund, and it raises concerns that the original objectives might not be met by the full funding allocation. It would be a pity if implementation were again to be the downfall of the project, so I urge the minister to look at how outcomes of the fund will be measured rather than look at money spent. The minister alluded to that in her opening remarks.

Barnardo's highlights in its briefing for today that

"the Scottish Government's Promise Plan Progress Update 2024"

says that the

"investment in the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund will remain static, and that the £500 million commitment will not be delivered by 2026."

That is disappointing to hear. Although I understand the financial limitations—which the Scottish Government will undoubtedly mention—it is incumbent on this Government to put its money where its mouth is and to show its full commitment to keeping the Promise.

Presiding Officer, I realise the time, so I will wind up.

Who Cares? Scotland highlighted in its February report that 2023 had the highest levels of social worker absence due to sickness. In 2021, 65.2 per cent was the greatest rise in one local authority, and in 2023 the rise was 83.3 per cent in one local authority. That highlights a problem in social work in our local authorities. Each year, a different authority has the highest level of staff absence, which shows that it is a nationwide problem. The United Kingdom market rate average for employee sickness is 2.6 per cent, which demonstrates that there is an alarming crisis among social workers in our local authorities.

We know that we do not have enough social workers, and we know that the retention rate is low, with most newly trained social workers leaving the profession within four years. We also know that we cannot keep the Promise without them. I urge the minister to ensure that strategic leadership is at the forefront, moving forward.

I recognise the work that has already been done, but there is so much more that we need to do. Now is not the time to step back: it is the time to step up. I am up for the challenge. I am sure that the Government is, too.

I move amendment S6M-15205.2, to insert at end:

“; notes with concern the findings of The Promise Oversight Board’s second report, which raised doubts about Scotland’s progress towards delivering The Promise by 2030; acknowledges the February 2024 report from Who Cares? Scotland highlighting that in one local authority area over 83% of social workers experienced sickness-related absences in 2023; is concerned that local authorities lack adequate resources to ensure sufficient staffing, thus impacting support for care experienced children, young people and families; notes The Promise Oversight Board’s call for a focused approach to effective implementation, sufficient resources, and workforce recruitment and retention; understands that care experienced pupils are often removed from school to attend social work meetings and hearings, resulting in 1,304,088 days of missed school across 22 reporting local authorities; acknowledges Who Cares? Scotland’s October 2024 report, which found that income gaps for care experienced individuals have grown from between 25% and 29% to as much as 38%, amounting to nearly £10,000; highlights persistent health inequalities among care experienced people, who face greater risks of chronic illnesses like hepatitis, depression, lung cancer and heart disease due to adverse childhood experiences, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that funding reaches those in need to implement effective, empowering solutions for care experienced individuals.”

15:12

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I am a proud member of the Children’s Parliament “unfearties”; I stand with children to make rights real in day-to-day life. Today, as part of that journey, I stand here and reaffirm Scottish Labour’s commitment to keeping the Promise by 2030. I will join all those across the chamber who want to reaffirm at decision time this Parliament’s commitment to keeping the Promise by 2030.

The journey has not been easy, and I am minded of the care-experienced children and young people who do not feel that the Promise has changed anything for them. I hope that this rapidly becomes a historical feeling. However, it is the reality of where we are today that we must look at.

The cultural shift that we have begun to see around how we support care-experienced young people is not insignificant, and seeing the importance of capitalising on any momentum is essential. The momentum must not abate: we are but 2,191 days from that date in 2030.

Members will recall—indeed, they might balk at recalling—my contributions during the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill and the constant reminder of the time that had passed.

We are but 2,191 days from the date in 2030—that is all the time that we have until then. That is a long time in a young person’s life. It will take them from birth all the way through to primary 2. It will take them from P1 through to P6, and from secondary 1 to S6. However, it is not so long when

it comes to the time that is required to implement the Promise.

To that end, I am extremely grateful to the minister for her assurances about the Promise bill and, indeed, my amendment to the motion. I welcome that openness.

I echo the remarks of The Promise Scotland, and acknowledge and celebrate the fact that,

“Over the last 4½ years, substantial progress has been made towards keeping the promise—change has happened.”

We have dedicated and hard-working people going the extra mile—actually, in all probability, going an extra 10 miles—to implement the Promise. They work on the relationships with care-experienced young people and they support young people in the important transition into adulthood, doing all that they can—as we have heard—to keep siblings together, to ensure that children and young people feel loved, and to see that care-experienced adults receive the support that they need. I want to take a moment to celebrate them and to thank them because, without them, no change is possible.

I also thank the 5,500 children, young people, families, care-experienced adults and members of the paid and unpaid workforce who shared their stories with the independent care review. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to do that. It is up to us and up to the Government to act on what they have told us.

We have heard time and again how important getting this right is; we have been reminded of just how important the Promise is to those who are directly affected. Yet, instead of acting—for example, by introducing legislation with urgency and properly funding and resourcing the workforce—we are here again, reissuing the Promise. It is important. It is arguably one of the most important things that we can achieve as a Parliament, but it is also important for the Government. It is important for the Government to show up and to show how important it is, not just to repeat the messages.

When the Promise oversight board came to meet MSPs last month, it highlighted the reality that is still faced by social workers, children, young people in care and those around them. The job is not yet done. As the Conservative amendment in the name of Roz McCall correctly highlights, there is so much that we still have to do—so many ways in which we can continue to fail care-experienced children, young people and adults if we let that continue.

We can see the educational outcome for care-experienced young people. The percentage of looked-after school leavers who are staying on after S5 is down by 2.7 per cent. The percentage

of looked-after school leavers with one or more qualifications at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 4 or better has gone down by 2.6 per cent year on year. Exclusions are going up and attainment is falling.

I am grateful to the minister for her offer to work cross-party on the Promise bill and I look forward to those conversations and discussions, as well as to the debates that we will have in the chamber, to which I will bring contributions and ideas. I am heartened by the latter stages of the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill, which was passed only yesterday, that show that the Government can operate in a cross-party manner. The bar has now been set for the minister.

We can stand here in the chamber and discuss how much we want to keep the Promise, but without the Promise bill—without tangible and measurable action and progress—it is nothing more than wishful thinking. The foundations include clear and transparent funding that shows us—and, more importantly, that shows the children and young people and their families who so desperately need the Promise—that the Scottish Government is serious about keeping the Promise. Hence the disappointment that the Scottish Government's promised planned progress update for 2024—the investment in the whole family wellbeing fund—will remain static, and the £500 million commitment will not be delivered by 2026. The Scottish Government cannot make a legitimate promise or, indeed, make a promise with legitimacy, and expect it to be delivered without taking substantive action towards delivering it.

The Government has a destination, the Government has a route map, and the Government has the support of this Parliament, but it is up to the Government to start driving the Promise forward. Today, we are voting to reaffirm the whole Parliament's commitment to keeping the Promise. We must now move from the foundation of keeping the Promise to the structure that will deliver the Promise. Delivery requires action today, not just a promise of action tomorrow. It is about delivering on growing up loved, on growing up safe and on growing up respected, and delivering all of that before 2030—a mere 2,191 days from today.

I move amendment S6M-15205.1, to insert at end:

“, and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment that the proposed The Promise Bill will be in place before the end of the current parliamentary session, and its commitment to productive cross-party engagement on the Bill's contents.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Whitfield. I call Gillian Mackay, who joins us remotely.

15:19

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, thank the minister for holding this hugely important debate. Like others, I reaffirm the Scottish Greens' commitment to achieving the Promise.

I do not think that anyone could argue with what the Promise is at its heart. The recognition that important structural and societal barriers remain for care-experienced people reminds us of the urgency with which such barriers should be dismantled. What we have done so far and how we have pushed progress forward are really important. If the importance of an issue could be measured purely by the number of briefings and emails that we receive on it, this issue would be a high priority for the chamber.

With regard to steps forward, The Promise Scotland, in its briefing ahead of the debate, highlighted the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024. My colleague Ross Greer managed to secure amendments to that legislation that sought to improve the way in which secure transport is delivered and scrutinised, because the transport provision for young people in secure care had been a bit of a missing link in the gradual raising of standards, quality and accountability over recent years.

The hope instead of handcuffs campaign raised the profile of the issue, too, highlighting that children in Scotland were being inappropriately restrained when in the care of secure transport providers, with handcuffs, for example, being used in situations in which they simply were not necessary. The use of restraint against children has, rightly, been the subject of significant scrutiny and debate in the Parliament and in council chambers across Scotland, and I am glad to note that progress has been made specifically in relation to schools, with greatly improved guidance being produced.

The availability of secure transport has also been an issue. The Education, Children and Young People Committee heard that, due to the lack of specialist providers in Scotland, transport providers were coming from hundreds of miles away to take young people relatively short distances. That was not good either for young people or for providers themselves. However, as the “Plan 24-30” document says:

“Keeping the promise will never not be urgent. Childhood is short, and precious.”

That should focus minds on how we continue the pace of change and adapt current plans when issues arise.

Support for families and early intervention have been raised by several organisations. Helping families to thrive, and giving support and guidance before a crisis, are essential to keeping the Promise. The whole family wellbeing fund has been hailed as a positive step forward, but many families are still finding it difficult to navigate systems when they need help.

We must also remain aware of how budgets impact on the financing of third sector and other organisations that provide support and advocacy to families, as well as the effects on funds such as the whole family wellbeing fund. Projects under that fund cannot sustain many third sector organisations on their own. We know that financial positions are difficult, but often it is all too easy to cut funding for some of that vital work in order to plug gaps in statutory services. The reality is that many third sector organisations are either catching people who do not qualify for support, or preventing people in need from accessing statutory services in the first place.

I have attended a few events with organisations such as Who Cares? Scotland at which I have spoken directly to young people who are care experienced and have heard from them what they need from us, and I have found kinship care and relationships with siblings being mentioned often. There is a perception that kinship care is often dismissed as it can be too difficult to establish, or that only immediate family were considered for it. The definition of “kinship care” in the Scottish Government’s guidance is actually pretty broad, but it seems that, in certain cases, it might not be being explored to its full extent. I was going to ask the minister for an update on work in that space, but I am grateful to her for outlining some of the measures that are under way. I am particularly interested in the guidance to the social work sector to support kinship care. If she has any further information, either now or at a later point, I will be hugely grateful to get that detail.

As Roz McCall mentioned, there has been some progress on keeping siblings together, but the briefing from The Promise Scotland once again raises the issue of the lack of contact with siblings for care-experienced people. It is an issue that I have heard repeatedly from children and young people right across the country, and it appears that we are not yet getting it quite right every time. There needs to be a consistency of approach for siblings who have individual plans and orders through the hearings system to ensure that the system that is supposed to support them is not putting in place competing orders with different contact requirements. Not taking wider

circumstances and important people in the care-experienced young person’s life into account is not getting it right for that child or young person.

The language that we use around care experience can also carry stigma. In the process of preparing for the debate, I read about some work that Clackmannanshire Council has undertaken to make the language that it uses about care experience more accessible. That could be the language used in reports, or in meetings, and it would ensure that the young people being talked about know what it is that people are saying, so that they can have meaningful input into their care. That very much prompted me to go back through this speech to see whether I had lived up to those accessibility standards.

We are talking about the simple things—things that we know make a lot of what we do more accessible, such as not using jargon or too many abbreviations, and making sure that the child or young person understands what is being said before moving on to the next topic. That might sound patronising, but the entire document is about how those little things encourage children and young people to be equal partners in their own care, to be able to participate and to explain their own view and experience.

I know that I am rapidly running out of time, and there are several more things that I wanted to cover and which I hope to be able to address in closing. In the interests of time, though, I will leave it there for now.

15:35

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Of course, we in the Liberal Democrats recommit ourselves to the Promise, which is why we will support the Government’s motion this afternoon. However, we will also support the two amendments. We are particularly drawn to Roz McCall’s amendment, which details some of the challenges that we face.

There is no doubt that progress has been made. Who Cares? Scotland tells us that the situation is “encouraging”, particularly with regard to

“the rights of brothers and sisters, work to re-shape the youth justice system and ... challenging stigma.”

However, there is a disconnect. When I, along with others, met care-experienced young people earlier this year, they were seething at the slow pace of change—indeed, I was quite taken aback at the degree of frustration that they felt. They left me in no doubt that they were losing faith in the Promise.

It is the responsibility of those of us in this Parliament to raise the issues that are being raised today. Doing so is not an attack on the

Promise or the system; it is about providing robust scrutiny and challenge to make the change, so that those young people do not still feel frustrated the next time that we meet them.

Children First says:

“we are still a long way from Keeping the Promise.”

In fact, it believes that the wider problems have become so severe that it has declared a childhood emergency. Last year, the Promise oversight board said that it did

“not believe that delivering the original aims of Plan 21-24 is realistic”

by the end of the plan period. Kezia Dugdale, a former member of the Scottish Parliament and a member of the board, said, in a personal capacity:

“the experience of too many children and families is of a fractured, bureaucratic, unfeeling care system that operates only in a crisis.”

That is certainly my anecdotal experience from my casework in my constituency. We see evidence of constantly changing social workers and a system that does not respond to pleas for help and responds only in a crisis. That pattern is repeated on numerous occasions.

Who Cares? Scotland, which brought those care-experienced people to the Parliament, has produced an excellent and grounded piece of evidence on the lack of progress on “Plan 21-24”. As we have heard already, there should be a presumption of brothers and sisters staying together, but the report showed that one in four siblings are still separated. That is an improvement on the three out of four who were separated at the start of this process in 2017, but seven councils did not know how many were separated. How could they not know? We are talking about one of their main responsibilities, and they admitted that they did not know.

The Promise made a commitment to end school exclusions for care-experienced children. However, 23 local authorities said that they continued to formally and informally exclude care-experienced pupils. One has ended the practice, and three will do so soon, but five did not even answer the question, which was asked by the main organisation that lobbies on behalf of care-experienced young people.

Restraint is supposed to end, but there is concern from Who Cares? Scotland that there is an attempt to redefine restraint as “safe holding”. Daniel Johnson’s proposed bill on restraint could clarify that area. In fact, clarification is important, especially as, alarmingly, three councils did not know how many incidents of restraint there had been and nine did not even respond. There was also a lack of knowledge of practice in non-council facilities.

Out of the 29 local authorities that responded to Who Cares? Scotland, 13 said that they did not currently provide independent advocacy services for care-experienced people at all stages of their lives, services that they are supposed to provide. Moreover, on kinship and foster carers and their being paid at the same rate, 10 councils confirmed that they paid the same, while two responded that they did not.

From the 28 local authorities that responded, 75 to 108 children and young people have experienced a breakdown of their adoption since the publication of “The Promise”. However, two councils did not even record that those breakdowns were happening. How can we understand how the system works if we do not record the data necessary to scrutinise it?

Trauma-informed training is very important; nine councils provide it, but 11 councils do not know whether they do. There is a commitment to valuing staff, but, as we heard from Roz McCall, absence rates in one particular council were going up at a shocking rate—from 65 to 78 to 83 per cent. That was just one council, but I know from my local authority in Fife that there are significant problems, and it is a sure sign of a system under considerable strain. Throughout the committee’s scrutiny of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, we found that that was certainly the case. I also note that, of the 32 local authorities, 10 did not provide any trauma-informed training to corporate parents, pupils or families.

A thematic review from the Care Inspectorate published yesterday found that, although

“the rights of care experienced young people are being upheld as they move on from being in care ... The experience of moving on from care, envisaged by the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant ... has yet to be achieved for all young people. Variable approaches to keeping in touch also means that not all ... have equity of access to all the necessary information during the stages of transition.”

The Care Inspectorate also found that

“Access to suitable housing was the most significant challenge”.

Indeed, we know that those who have had care experience have a particular problem with accessing housing.

Children First says:

“too many are ... struggling to find help when they need it.”

The whole family wellbeing fund was slow to get off the ground and be spent. We need it to be more transparent, and we need to get it out the door, so that we can invest in families and make sure that they stay together.

There is much more that I could say, but I hope that the minister understands that scrutiny is

essential if we are to deliver the Promise by the end of the period.

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

15:32

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate. Hard as it may be for folks in the chamber to recognise, I was first elected to Aberdeen City Council in May 1999—some 25 years ago. I know that I look much younger, Presiding Officer.

In the first few weeks after I was elected, a very senior social worker asked me how many children I was responsible for. I said to the social worker that I had no kids, so I was responsible for none. I learned very quickly from that woman that I was responsible for a great number of children. The words “corporate parenting” were not used in those days, but it came as a bit of a shocker to me that I had responsibility for so many young people. I took that responsibility very seriously indeed—so much so that some folk said that, for a while, I never shut up about the situation.

I quickly came across practical issues, such as inadequate provision. In particular, in Aberdeen City Council at that time, there was too much use of care homes, and many of them were not of a great standard. A number of years later, I had the great pleasure of closing the Netherhills children’s home and replacing it with a facility that was fit for purpose and could be called a home. All of us, whether in this chamber or in council chambers across the country, must realise our responsibilities and realise that we should do the very best for the children and young people for whom we are responsible.

I have a confession—I was unable, for good reason, to attend a seminar on the Promise that was held in Aberdeen recently. I made the effort afterwards to speak to the organiser, Georgette Cobban of Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations, and to listen to organisations that were involved in the day. The conversations were very interesting, and I hope that the minister will address in her summing-up some of the suggestions that I will highlight.

One of the organisations that I talked to was Home-Start Aberdeen, which is an immense organisation. Many members will have experience of Home-Start in their constituencies. One of the things that Home-Start Aberdeen said—I thought that it was a bit unusual at the time but, the more I thought about it, the more I saw that it was right—relates to Roz McCall’s point about pay gaps. Home-Start Aberdeen said that the seminar had been good and worth while, but there was disappointment that no private organisations were

there. We need to pull in private organisations to help us to deliver the Promise. I have already spoken to the minister and written to Fraser McKinlay about that, because we should pick up on it.

On a visit to Befriend a Child, the differences between the treatment of kinship carers in Aberdeen city and their treatment in Aberdeenshire were highlighted to me. As in Mr Rennie’s experience, there was a comment that, far too often, social workers are changed suddenly, which can cause real difficulties for families in building trust. It was highlighted to me that getting support for kinship carers is easier in Aberdeenshire than it is in Aberdeen. We must ensure that support and knowledge are provided to kinship carers, no matter where they are in the country.

I was also told that some kinship carers—particularly older kinship carers—are scared to ask for help for particular things, in case that leads to them losing their children. We must take cognisance of that and ensure that people know that asking for help is the right thing to do and that they should not feel threatened if they have to do so.

A key point that comes up in all such debates is that we must all listen. By listening, we can make real changes to people’s lives. I will give members an example. A number of years back, I talked to and—more important—listened to a young woman with lived experience. One of the difficulties that she had experienced was in paying council tax—council tax came as a surprise to her. I fed the issue through the system, because it was obviously a problem, and I was pleased when the then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced that care-experienced young folk would be exempt from paying council tax.

Through listening, every single one of us can make that change—sometimes a very small change; sometimes a life-changing change. I hope that we will all continue to listen and to be good corporate parents.

15:39

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): On reflection, I wonder whether I have been in the Parliament for too long, because I find debates such as this one quite hard. I do not want to sour the tone of the debate, but sometimes when we discuss topics such as this, we go round in circles and go through the motions, and we pay lip service to the Promise.

I do not doubt that the minister is committed in this area. I have listened to members speak of the progress that has been made, and I have read a number of the briefings that have come in. There

are things to welcome, but I look round the chamber and see that colleagues are not here for the debate. All 129 of us should be pretty ashamed of the situation that still persists when we hear some of the points made by Willie Rennie and Gillian Mackay. We are not keeping the Promise. The amount of action does not match the commitment that we have collectively made, and I worry about the chronic implementation gap that Claire Burns from the University of Strathclyde talked about.

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not think that anybody is arguing that we have kept the Promise; we are on a journey to keep the Promise by 2030. I welcome hearing about the challenges in the chamber, and I wanted to have the debate so that I could hear about members' priorities. However, I do not think that we can deny that there has been clear progress and clear change—we have heard some stories of that today—and that our children and young people are benefiting from many of the policy changes and the direction that we are moving in. The member has to at least appreciate or acknowledge that fact.

Oliver Mundell: If the minister was listening, she would have heard that I did say that there are some things that we can be pleased with. However, although I do not want to be unkind, we need to be challenged and we need to keep challenging ourselves to keep the Promise. The Promise is not like an ordinary pledge that political parties or politicians make; it is of a different character and nature. We should not be forced to do it kicking and screaming or because facts and anecdotes from around the country make us feel uncomfortable; we should be driving it forward at great pace.

The ground will probably open up and swallow me, but I have a lot of respect for Nicola Sturgeon in relation to the policy. Some of the symbolic action that she took while she was First Minister—for example, she brought 1,000 care-experienced young people into Bute house to spend quality time listening to them—sent out a very strong message. Without being too political, I note that the changes that have happened since then have meant that there is not the same priority in this area, and sometimes it feels as if the foot has come off the pedal a bit. That is not good enough.

During the past week alone, I have seen examples of issues in my constituency work. I was contacted by a foster carer who has a young person who is well settled and doing well at a school. They were told by their local authority, Dumfries and Galloway Council, that it can no longer provide transport for that young person to get to the school where they are settled, because another school that is nearer could meet their educational needs. That completely ignores all the

friendships and bonds of attachment that that young person has, and the potential changes that might come for that young person in the future.

In other bodies that the Scottish Government is responsible for—I am not talking only about councils—the bureaucracy that Willie Rennie spoke about has kicked in. Cost and an easy-life culture mean that, when such problems appear, they are too difficult to address. A mindset shift is needed to deliver the Promise to the timescale that Martin Whitfield was right to speak about, which is coming down the line. It does not feel as if that mindset shift has carried forward from the Government down to the level at which things are delivered. That is why we have ended up with a delivery gap.

I do not want to go back through the points that Willie Rennie listed, but that we have councils that do not know where siblings are cannot possibly be right. There are 80 recommendations in the care review. Some of the easy ones have been implemented, and some of the ones that can be delivered most straightforwardly have happened, but the Promise cannot be kept unless all 80 recommendations are met.

We cannot say that we are on a journey or are moving towards things when, at this stage in the process, basic things such as knowing where people are and where they are based, and keeping them in touch with known siblings for whom the state is also responsible, are not happening. That is not good.

Although I will soon vote with my colleagues to support the motion, it is right that we question whether we are going to keep the Promise on the timeline that has been set out and whether the things that we have done to date are good enough. I do not think that they are. As colleagues have heard through their engagement, a lot of young people are not happy. They do not feel that we care or that we are getting it right.

15:45

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): It is easy to forget what a powerful statement it was when the Promise was launched and voices across the Parliament and our public services used the word “love”. “Love” is a word that is not often used in politics, so that was a powerful use of language that demanded and commanded our attention and action. At that time, we, as a Parliament, collectively made a promise to children and young people that they

“will grow up loved, safe and respected”.

Following on from the independent care review, the Promise was a radical statement, and it was clear that nothing less than systemic change

would deliver it. The Promise Scotland sets out very clearly the case for why change was necessary and how outcomes for the care-experienced community could be improved by thinking, acting and investing differently. We should be proud of the collective achievements that have been made towards that aim, while remaining clear that the focus and pace of change must be sustained.

I welcome the opportunity to recognise the significant amount of positive and transformative work that is under way to keep the Promise across Scotland, which is making a difference to the lives of children and families, as well as the hard work and dedication of those who deliver services day in, day out. A lot has changed since the keeping the Promise implementation plan was published, in 2022. Services have continued to move forward from the pandemic and to navigate through other challenges, such as the cost of living crisis. We should recognise that the workforce is delivering services in an often extremely difficult context.

The stories of change conference held by The Promise Scotland earlier this year showcased and highlighted examples of excellent practice that is taking place across Scotland. The same was the case during the Who Cares? Scotland care experienced week at the end of last month.

South Lanarkshire Council, where my Rutherglen constituency is based, was an early adopter of the champions board model, which is set up to enable care-experienced children and young people to articulate their views and experiences and to be heard. It has already played a key role in helping to shape and adapt practice in my local area.

I thank members of the care-experienced community in South Lanarkshire and across Scotland for their time and engagement through fora such as that. Their experience and voices are imperative in making sure that change is delivered in the right way and that we make progress together.

So far, 2024 has been a significant year for the planning and the system-focused work that is required to keep the Promise. "Plan 24-30" launched in June, and work to develop it continues, led by the Promise board. "Plan 24-30" complements the work of the Scottish Government and is founded in realistic delivery. It sets out what success will look like, what should happen next and a route map, which, crucially, has room to evolve and grow.

When aiming for complex systemic change, tracking and understanding progress can be very challenging. We have heard examples of that already in the debate. "Plan 24-30" is designed to be dynamic and iterative in its structure while

being clear about which bodies must work towards change, who is doing what and where collaboration must happen.

This year's programme for government shows the Scottish Government's commitment to driving progress through its multiyear approach to the whole family wellbeing fund. Its vision of support is that the fund will be readily available to families so that they can access the help that they need, where and when they need it. The Government this year has confirmed its commitment to introduce additional local flexibility to the ways that budgets and services can be reconfigured in the pursuit of a whole-family approach.

In my home local authority of South Lanarkshire Council, increased investment and buy-in has seen a range of actions move forward via the children's services partnership. Those include the development of family support hubs to enable easier access to support; a refreshed parenting support pathway; the pathfinders project to deliver early interventions; and more initiatives that are all designed to shift the focus towards supporting families via prevention and reducing the need for crisis intervention. The case for prevention over reaction is, of course, not a new one, and prevention is not an easy thing to deliver in the context of running crucial day-to-day public services, but the Government's focus on a whole-family approach and the action that that is driving across Scotland demonstrates the power and ability of prevention to sustainably change outcomes for children and families, both now and in the future.

The implementation plan also told us that "a strong legislative framework" would be crucial to achieve the aims of the Promise, and important progress has been made in key areas. That has included the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law, which strengthens a key commitment of the Promise that protecting and upholding children's rights will underpin all approaches to improving outcomes for those with care experience. The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 will enable improvements to youth justice, secure care, aspects of the children's hearings system, victim services and the criminal justice system. In particular, the provisions to end the inappropriate placement of 16 and 17-year-olds in young offenders institutions and the extension of provisions on the children's hearings system to further uphold the rights of older children are significant steps forward.

The next few years will see more crucial developments in our collective drive to deliver the Promise. With "Plan 24-30", which sets out a dynamic route map, along with the Government's key strategic aims and drivers, the commitment and hard work of those on the front line of service

delivery and the voices of the care-experienced at the heart of everything that we do, more progress can be made and the Promise kept.

I will close on the theme that I started on: love. It must be at the core of the work that we do to fulfil the Promise. Although we can debate and disagree over policy, guidelines or legislation, we must all remember that at the heart of this work should be our shared commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people, adults and families with care experience across Scotland to ensure that they do, indeed, feel safe, respected and loved.

15:52

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the news that the much-needed Promise bill will be introduced during this session of Parliament. That will be a relief to care-experienced campaigners, who have for years been calling for legislation to be strengthened to better support care-experienced people throughout their lives. The bill has been a long time coming since the launch of the care review and the publication of the Promise report, in February 2020.

There has clearly been some progress, which we should all welcome. I listened to what the minister said, but I wonder whether we are as close to keeping the Promise as we should be. We now know categorically that the first phase of the Promise has failed and that the objectives that were set in “Plan 21-24” were not met. The research report “Is Scotland Keeping the Promise?” makes it clear that Scotland is not keeping the promise that was made in 2020. Care-experienced children are still being excluded from our classrooms, which leads to those children having some of the poorest attainment levels in the country. While we continue to exclude care-experienced children from education, that will have a huge impact on their ability to reach a positive destination when they leave school.

We know that Scotland is in the grip of a housing emergency and that care-experienced people are twice as likely to experience homelessness. “Plan 21-24” stated:

“Housing pathways for care experienced young people will include a range of affordable options that are specifically tailored to their needs and preferences. Youth homelessness will be eradicated.”

We have to wonder how close we are to keeping that promise. It went on:

“Scotland must avoid the monetisation of the care of children and prevent the marketisation of care”.

That was at the centre of the Promise, as we know how greed in the care sector can lead to a race to the bottom to maximise profits for shareholders, and the impact of the huge cost of private care

placements on local authority budgets. That has not ended. Can the minister outline what the plan is and when that will end?

Although the decision to stop sending under-18s to Polmont is to be warmly welcomed, we also know that there can be issues in secure care settings—for example, the reports of abuse and children facing what was described as a “serious risk to ... life” at St Mary’s Kenmure.

The importance of truly independent advocacy should not be underestimated, as it can have such an impact on the lives of care-experienced people of all ages. We know that being in care as a child can have lifelong consequences, but the Scottish Government almost always puts arbitrary age limits on the support that it offers. We need the introduction of a truly lifelong advocacy service, to build on the good work that is currently done by the helpline run by Who Cares? Scotland. That radical change would really make a difference.

The Promise Scotland, an arm’s-length company owned by the Scottish ministers, does not have any powers to hold Scotland to account on keeping the Promise. It does not seem to take responsibility for the failure of “Plan 21-24”, despite the millions of pounds of public money that have been ploughed into the organisation. Does the minister still believe that continuing to fund the organisation and the expense of consultants attached to it is the best value for the public pound, given the policy failures that have been outlined today?

We must do all that we can for care-experienced people, and we must ensure that the Scottish Government is doing everything that it can to keep the Promise. This has to be a promise made and delivered, or we have let down every care-experienced person who has put their faith in us. We have to say very clearly, in relation to that group in particular, that if we make a promise, we have to keep it.

15:56

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Children and young people across Scotland deserve the very best that there is to offer in all aspects of their lives. It is our job as members of Parliament to do everything that we can to ensure that no child is left behind.

As we know, one group in particular that can face challenges that many of us in the chamber cannot begin to imagine are children from a care-experienced background. That is why the Promise to care-experienced children and young people that they will grow up loved, safe and respected is such an important commitment that is agreed upon by all parties across the chamber.

Since that initial commitment in 2020, we have seen immense changes to the world that we live in, not least due to the Covid pandemic. In turn, those changes have had a direct impact on all our young people, but the Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to delivering on the Promise to care-experienced youngsters by 2030.

The Promise drives the Government to implement transformational change that will look to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up, and to ensure that every child feels safe, loved, respected and able to achieve their full potential. That is why I am delighted that, since 2020, the Scottish Government has spent £235 million on the Promise-related initiatives, including The Promise Scotland whole family wellbeing fund and the Scottish recommended allowance for foster and kinship carers.

Last weekend, I had the pleasure of meeting a friend of my granddaughter, and I am sure that she will reach her full potential. In fact, I would go so far as to say that she has the potential to be a future leader. Alishba Malik is 13 and probably the most focused and driven young girl that I have ever met. She has her future planned out. She told me that she will go to the University of Glasgow to study English and politics, which is a subject that she is passionate about. She even has an internship at Harvard lined up, and there are no limits as to how high she wants to fly. Alishba is care-experienced, and we talked about the Promise, Who Cares? Scotland and what they both mean to her. She is inspirational, and I am in awe of her.

I realise that not every youngster has confidence or self-belief to Alishba's level, but I tell her story to highlight that it can be done, with love and support, and that the work that is being done on the Promise is working for youngsters of all backgrounds. The independent care review told Scotland what change was required, and the Government is delivering that change. The key areas are listening to children, families and care-experienced adults, and placing them at the centre of decisions that affect them. That includes redesigning the children's hearings system, for which I volunteered 12 years ago, and transforming the way in which children and families are supported.

We know that sibling relationships and attachment are crucial, as is, where possible, keeping siblings together. I agree with Oliver Mundell's point about local authorities not having a record. That is simply not acceptable. Support for young people moving from care into adulthood is imperative, as is removing stigma and creating a positive attitude around the language that is used when talking about care-experienced people.

I welcome the continuation of care-experienced student bursaries, which have been available to students in higher education since 2017-18 and for students in further education since 2018-19. That helps to close the attainment gap. However, we cannot be complacent as we approach the midway point to 2030; much more must be done so that change can be felt more consistently in the lives of care-experienced children, young people and families.

Although I recognise that much progress has been made so far, the shifting economic context and the persistence of poverty mean that, for Scotland to achieve its collective ambition, we need to step up the pace. I acknowledge the issues raised by many members and by Who Cares? Scotland. It is crucial not to lose the overall vision for the transformational change set out by the independent care review, which outlines a smaller, more specialised care system.

The Promise will ensure that those who need it can receive person-centred support, place-based activity and universal service provision. As we heard earlier this year, "Plan 24-30" was launched to map the responsibilities and timelines. It requires the Promise to be on the road map to success for Scotland's care system and makes clear its responsibilities. That also demonstrates to organisations the flexible and dynamic approach that will be necessary to ensure that families receive appropriate support.

The Promise also aims to reduce the number of children who are in care while ensuring that those in care have more positive experiences. However, to achieve that, we will require a consistent approach that revolves around values and understanding across the workforce to ensure that the right support is available for care-experienced young people whenever they need it. Success is also dependent on our ability to shift from intervention to prevention to ensure that families receive the support that they need before reaching crisis point.

The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 and the forthcoming Promise bill will build on what has already been achieved. The Promise has the ability to change the lives of thousands of care-experienced young people across Scotland for the better, and it is a Promise that we are determined to keep for children who deserve no less.

16:02

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Four years have passed since the introduction of the Promise. Although I was not a member of the Scottish Parliament then, I was pleased to see parties united in the shared ambition that care-

experienced children and young people grow up safe, loved and respected. I join members in reaffirming my commitment to that today.

I spoke during the debate on the implementation plan for the Promise two years ago. I discussed several areas then and will come back to some of those today. I will first focus on the care workforce. The Promise highlighted that many in the workforce felt overwhelmed and anxious, and were boxed in by professional language that made it difficult to build relationships with young people and their families.

February's Who Cares? Scotland report on the Promise found that 22 local authorities have implemented destigmatising language in their practice, and that 27 have training courses for school staff on understanding care experiences. However, training levels differ and courses are not always mandatory. Although there are positive steps, improvements need to be made across the board. We cannot have a postcode lottery of support for care-experienced young people.

Members will note the impact of care experience on education prospects. The most recent outcomes data for looked-after children shows that attainment and attendance rates are down 3.5 per cent year on year. That is greatly concerning, because those are key outcomes. If the Promise is to be delivered, improvement is needed urgently.

Education and training can do a great deal in tackling prejudice and creating the conditions for care-experienced people to succeed. That extends to my next point. Project Esperanza, with which I hosted a round-table meeting earlier this year, offers training to practitioners to deliver race-sensitive and faith-sensitive services. The Promise called for shifts in the culture around care, and that should include building understanding and creating an anti-racist culture. Training on race and faith for social workers is needed, because the Promise must be fulfilled for all, including people with minority ethnicities, who are overrepresented in the care system. Supporting the workforce with training relating to stigma and the care experience is one of the themes of "Plan 24-30", and we should put that into practice over the next five years.

Third sector organisations play a vital role. The Promise oversight board's second report called for greater use of the support that is provided by third sector partners. That should be taken on board. The Scottish Government delivers funding to third sector organisations via the Promise partnership fund and other funding streams. The Corra Foundation, which administers the Promise partnership fund, found that 36 per cent of organisations in receipt of funding experience staffing issues, including burnout, and that 39 per cent stated that short funding cycles and time

constraints affect work on systems change. I recognise that those are common issues across third sector organisations, but those organisations' key role in delivering the Promise should be recognised and treated as such.

I will conclude by discussing data. The Promise oversight board noted that there is a range of data sources, which are not always shared between agencies, and it recommended that we improve the quality and completeness of the data. The blueprint on the creation and control of data was due to be released in June 2023, but it has yet to be delivered. Although care should be led by those who receive it, a strong data environment can inform future practice and allow greater transparency.

Ultimately, many of the issues that have been raised today can be resolved through legislation. Today's debate and the fact that the 2030 target date is fast approaching make it all the more clear that the proposed Promise bill is needed. Members know how serious and wide ranging the subject is and how important it is that we get this right. We cannot let the Promise be broken. We cannot let down our young people.

16:08

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP): Few, if any, issues matter more to me than this one. I know that that is true for the minister, too, and I commend her for her leadership on this mission.

The Promise is not just another Government policy; it is much more fundamental than that. It is of a "different character", as Oliver Mundell said. We all made a solemn commitment to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our country—a Promise to care-experienced children and young people that they will grow up loved and valued, with the same life chances as their non-care-experienced peers.

As the person who, when I was First Minister, metaphorically—and, in many cases, literally—looked young people in the eye and made the Promise, I feel a heavy responsibility to see it delivered in full. Indeed, some of the young people whom I met in the early stages of this work are in the public gallery today, and I want them to know that I will always stand with them and with their peers across the country.

I also pay tribute to the Promise organisation—Fiona Duncan, Fraser McKinlay and the oversight board. I believe that they are doing vital and very good work.

However, it is not just down to the Promise organisation—it is down to all of us. I feel this responsibility no less heavily today than I did when

I was in the Government. I feel it even though I no longer have Government responsibilities, and I think that that is appropriate, because the Promise will not be delivered by Government action alone. Of course, the Government must inspire, provide leadership and funding—a topic that I will return to—and hold public services to account, but delivery is down to each and every one of us. It requires a whole-system, whole-society approach.

As we approach the midway point to 2030, by when the Promise must be delivered—I say “must be delivered” deliberately—there is much to be positive about. For example, the care-experienced student bursary, ending the incarceration of young people in Polmont, progress towards the care leaver payment and the new allowance for foster and kinship carers are all important.

What is perhaps more important than any individual initiative is to challenge ourselves to make sure that those measures add up to more than the sum of their parts. It is the plethora of tactical interventions, vital though they might be, that are delivering the strategic change that we need to see and the transformation for care-experienced young people that the Promise is all about. That is a question that we must always have at the forefront of our minds.

I am optimistic. I firmly believe that, with the right strategy, leadership and funding in place, the Promise is deliverable by 2030, but—and this is a significant but—believing that it is deliverable is not the same as being convinced that it will be delivered. At this stage, that is a much more open question, which is why it is so vital in this moment that we significantly increase the scale and pace of change. I agree with many of the more challenging points that have been made across the chamber today. We must decide collectively, as one Parliament, that the breaking of the Promise is not an option that we are willing to countenance.

There are many issues that I could focus on today, but in the time that I have, I want to mention three. The first is prevention. Delivering on the Promise depends on significantly reducing the number of young people who are going into care and building on the progress that has already been made. That means supporting families to stay together, helping them to overcome the challenges that often force them apart and addressing the long-term drivers of family breakdown in a preventative way that is real, meaningful and accessible, not just as a response to crisis. Central and critical to that is the whole-family wellbeing fund.

The down payments that have been made are welcome. The money is already supporting positive change, but it is profoundly disappointing and it potentially jeopardises delivery of the

Promise that the full £500 million will not be delivered by the end of the current parliamentary session. I understand more than most the financial challenges that the Government is facing, but I very much hope that the forthcoming budget significantly increases the amount that is available in the next financial year, so that as much as possible is delivered in the current parliamentary session, and that we have a clear deadline for delivery in full. To be blunt, the commitment must be delivered in full well enough in advance of 2030 for it to have sufficient impact by 2030.

My second point is about the need to radically improve the experience of those young people for whom state care is unavoidable and to listen to their lived experience as we do so. We know what needs to be done—ending sibling separation—because, at one in four, there are still far too many separations, and ending, not redefining, the use of restraint and reducing school exclusions are some other examples.

A number of parliamentary questions that I asked recently confirmed that we still do not have clear enough data to know how much progress is or is not being made to hold public authorities to account. I agree with Oliver Mundell, Willie Rennie and others that it is simply not acceptable for any local authority not to be able to answer those questions. I believe that that particular aspect is urgent so that we can hold ourselves and others to account.

My final point is that, whatever disagreements there are in this Parliament—let us face it, there are many—or, indeed, in council chambers across the country, the mission of keeping the Promise should and must unite us all. As I know more than most, it is always easier to make a promise than it is to deliver on it. However, we will be much more likely, as a nation, to deliver on the Promise if we approach it on a genuine cross-party basis, as I believe that we have done so far. I agree with those who have said that that cannot be done in a lowest-common-denominator way or a not-rocking-the-boat way. It must be done in a way that provides the constructive challenge that will drive delivery.

The Promise has so much support outside the Parliament—indeed, it has massive support, and is the subject of massive interest, across the world. There are countless Governments that are looking to Scotland to see what we achieve. That support and commitment must be replicated here in Parliament.

To be blunt, we must not let the care community down. It would be unconscionable for us to do so. Today, let us recommit to keeping the Promise but, more importantly, let us recommit to doing whatever it takes to keep the Promise in full.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the closing speeches. I call Gillian Mackay to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens. Ms Mackay joins us remotely.

16:16

Gillian Mackay: It has been a good debate—it has been a challenging debate for us all, but it has certainly been a good one.

I absolutely agree with the minister that we need to ensure that care-experienced people feel that we are committed to change and that, as a Parliament, we are committed to making the system better for all care-experienced people. It is so important that we take a proactive approach to keeping families together, to alleviating poverty and, ultimately, to making those families feel supported and valued.

I echo the minister's thank you to all those who have given their time and effort to make things better. In my contributions today, I have referred to many stories and personal experiences that people have given me to make things better for those who come after them. The sharing of those stories is selfless. Often, we cannot change that experience, but the people who share those experiences often want to make sure that it will not happen to anyone else.

The definition of care experience is important, but there has to be a balance. It is important that we ensure that it is specific enough to have meaning and to inform, but not so specific that it excludes some people's experience. I am very glad that it is being developed with people with lived experience, to ensure that that becomes a reality.

I found Oliver Mundell's contribution very interesting; I often feel that same sense of déjà vu in health debates. I think that that links to Roz McCall's comments on the pace of change. We can never take comfort in the pace at which we are achieving change for care-experienced people. Martin Whitfield made a point about how long it takes for change to happen and what that time looks like in terms of the lives of young people.

I met the same young people as Willie Rennie met, and I think that the frustration of those young people is absolutely reflective of how long it takes for tangible change to be achieved. Some of the things that we have talked about this afternoon take time, and there is no way around that. Although it is true that we could certainly have gone quicker on some things and achieved more by now, we need to consider whether we are managing expectations and giving timelines to care-experienced children and young people as a

whole, so that they can feel in control of the whole journey, too.

Kevin Stewart mentioned the need to listen and the small issues that we can help to resolve. We should never underestimate the extent to which things that we see as relatively simple can become all-consuming for people. At the same time as focusing on the large systemic change that needs to happen, we also need to solve the practical issues.

That is especially true for those young people who are moving on from care. On one of the first occasions on which I met Who Cares? Scotland, young people told me about all the things that they had found challenging on leaving care and moving into their own place, which involved having to deal with being adults long before many of the rest of us would have had to. Advice on the little things that I took for granted, which my parents gave me when I first moved out, was often never given to those young people. That should lead us to always stop and not make assumptions about anyone else's experience. Crucially, we should listen to those who have already had to navigate that situation alone.

Clare Haughey mentioned the need to track change and progress, and no one will be surprised to hear me say how crucial data is.

It is hugely important, yet Willie Rennie highlighted how patchy data collection is in local authorities. It is simply not good enough that we do not know how, where or why some things happen. How will we know if the initiatives are having the effect that we want without effective data collection? We will not even know if something is a problem without having accurate standardised data from across the country that is collected and challenged at a national level.

Local variability also needs addressing, and tracking what is going on well—or not going well—in certain areas is vital to ensuring that we keep the Promise everywhere.

Foyso Choudhury's remarks about those from racial minorities and how people can be multiply disadvantaged are really important. We need to ensure that intersectional issues are taken into account for those young people and that we tackle all the barriers that they face.

Katy Clark talked about the arbitrary limits for support for care-experienced people. Many people do not understand why the age limits have been picked. For many of their peers, support from families does not just end at a certain date or age. We need to look at how we can support people throughout their lives. Giving them that value is hugely important to make them feel loved, as Rona Mackay and others mentioned.

Another issue that has been highlighted with me is health inequalities for care-experienced people. Again, that is about access and structural inequalities, but often stigma and cultural issues can be just as painful. I have previously spoken to care leavers who have become parents. Their perception of judgment and extra monitoring, because of their background of care experience, made difficult what should have been a positive and joyful time. They felt a level of suspicion and monitoring that others did not receive. They felt that people were concerned about how they were looking after their baby and that, as a first-time parent, they were under a huge amount of scrutiny and were concerned that it was implied that they might not know what they were doing.

That illustrates that it cannot be the responsibility of only one minister to ensure that the Promise fulfils its objectives. Many pieces cross into many other portfolios, so we must ensure that everyone is focused on this. We also must ensure that whatever systems we design are accessible for care-experienced people.

Nicola Sturgeon paid tribute to all those who have given their time, experience and lived experience. We would not be at this point without all those who have put their efforts into supporting all of us to be able to deliver on the Promise. We must live up to the expectation that they have so rightly placed on us to achieve the Promise, and the Scottish Greens look forward to continuing our work with the Government on the bill and on the issue going forward.

16:22

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to close today's debate on the Promise on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party. We have heard from colleagues today, including the minister, Rona Mackay, Foysoy Choudhury and, as Martin Whitfield has reminded us, from care-experienced young people, why this debate and, indeed, the Promise and its delivery are so important.

In that spirit, and with that delivery in mind, Scottish Labour will support cross-party collaboration to ensure effective implementation of the Promise. We welcome the Government's commitment to introduce a Promise bill in this Parliament, and we look forward to working with it to ensure that the bill is the best that it can be. The fact is that the thousands of children and young people to whom it is crucial need action—and they need action at a pace and scale that, unfortunately, the Government has not yet delivered, as colleagues including Roz McCall, in her motion, and Oliver Mundell, Nicola Sturgeon and Gillian Mackay, in their speeches, have all highlighted.

Scotland is almost halfway through the 10-year plan to implement the Promise, but I am sad to say that the first phase of implementation is not quite on track. It is not just me saying that. We on the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard the same when we met young people with experience of care, who, as Willie Rennie has told us, are angry.

For example, when we asked them whether the Promise would be kept, one told us that

"I strongly feel that the Promise won't get kept",

whereas another said:

"After 2030 it will keep getting pushed back and pushed back until they say it's unachievable."

Most sadly of all, one young person said:

"They promised too much; they should have promised half of it and then they would actually achieve it and would be able to add more in 2030."

I do not share that information to bring down the mood; I share it, because it reminds us of the importance of the Promise that we have all made. We do acknowledge some progress—all of us have; Labour does, too—but concerns about progress are impacting not just on young people every day. They now seem to be impacting on their belief in change and their aspirations, and that is something on which we must act.

For them—and, therefore, for us—there is an urgent need to deliver actions and, along with them, we ask the Government to ensure that keeping the Promise remains a non-negotiable priority, without delay or compromise, and that a relentless focus on action is its next step. Simply repeating the same words does not make something happen, and it does not keep promises. As *Who Cares?* Scotland has said, although it is encouraging to see various pieces of legislation being proposed that will benefit care-experienced people,

"it feels like Scotland is stuck in implementation purgatory. Decision makers need to ensure that they don't continue to create legislation that isn't fully implemented."

Who Cares? Scotland is right. On a lot of things, we are, I am afraid to say, in implementation purgatory, and we must move on from that, particularly for care-experienced young people. Indeed, years on from the publication of the independent care review, almost halfway through what is supposed to be the transformative period, there are many frustrations at the pace of progress. *Who Cares?* Scotland, the Promise oversight board and Barnardo's Scotland have all said that they welcome the progress but that more needs to change.

We need investment, not diversion of resource to plug gaps elsewhere. On housing and homelessness, as my colleague Katy Clark has

pointed out, there must be high-quality accommodation and support before, during and after transitions to adulthood, yet one young person told the committee that

“When you leave care, there’s no support after. I was made homeless for 3 weeks.”

As for whole-family support, the young people who spoke to the committee told us that, despite some progress being made, too often they are still separated from their siblings. We have heard about such cases today. Indeed, in some cases, that separation was for more than four years.

On education, the attainment gap across Scotland is stark. However, for young care-experienced people, less than half of young people with experience of care have even one national 5 when they leave school. They are several times less likely to be able to access higher education, and they have much poorer rates of entering positive destinations after school—and that is if the Government knows where they are. We have just heard the points about data.

Such outcomes for care-experienced young people are not inevitable. The outcomes are this way, because of a failure to make the systemic change that is needed—a failure that puts a ceiling on opportunity. We have to change that—and through deeds, not through words. We cannot tolerate cuts to local authority budgets and programmes such as MCR Pathways that literally turn lives around for young people with care experience. We cannot have a system that means that young people miss out on school to attend social work meetings, which has an impact on their education, and we cannot have a system that means that care-experienced young people are at greater risk of chronic illnesses, as Gillian Mackay just pointed out. Those outcomes are unacceptable—and they are not inevitable.

We must, as young people with care experience tell us, listen to them and their families. We must change how we collect data. We must change how we speak about care experience. We must ensure that there is a laser focus on action to recruit and support the workforce—a workforce that I would like to thank today. Crucially, we have to take action to address the systemic barriers that those young people face.

The era of repeating words has to be over; now must be the era of action and of spreading opportunity for all. I believe that all of us across the Parliament will collectively reassert our commitment to the Promise, as we should and as we must. It is now for the Government to get on with the job, because—and the final word will go to a young person from Who Cares? Scotland—

“People need to see it happening to believe it”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Duncan-Glancy. Miles Briggs will close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:28

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the organisations that have provided helpful briefings for us ahead of the debate and I welcome to the public gallery representatives from them. As the minister stated in her opening remarks, today is an opportunity for the whole Parliament to reaffirm our collective commitment to Scotland’s children, young people, adults and families with care experience. Indeed, we have all made that point.

However, we need to be honest about where we are now with not only keeping the Promise but delivering it. I think that all members have emphasised that we are now at the delivery point, and we need to accept that we all have a responsibility for that—not only Government ministers but all the members, from every party in the chamber, who have signed up to this.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to introducing the Promise bill in this session of Parliament but, with only 18 months left of this session, we all have a role to play in making sure that the bill is the best piece of legislation that it can be. Across the parties, we have a lot of questions that we want to ask about what the bill will look like and how we can shape it, but those who are trying to deliver the Promise in our councils, education institutions and the third sector will push back at all of us and say that they do not have the resources and that they are getting cuts to their budgets.

Therefore, we also need to understand that funding needs to follow the delivery of the Promise, and we need to challenge ourselves and ministers on that. There has been substantial and welcome progress in recent years, but we have a huge amount of work to do if we are to say that we have kept the Promise by 2030.

I recently met a number of organisations to discuss the Promise and to talk about the peer support that is being provided. It is something that I am passionate about and which I know is making a difference. For example, Scotland’s only national mentoring programme for care-experienced children, intandem, which works with children who are at home or in kinship care, is inspiring Scotland’s young people, matching them with trained local mentors. The organisation works with and supports 280 care-experienced young people. It is a great example of where the Promise has already started to filter down to ensure that advocacy lies at the heart of the progress that we want to see.

I hope that the minister will engage with me and others on what will be in the proposed Promise bill about advocacy for young people. We politicians stand up to make our voices heard, but in doing so, we must ensure that children make their voices heard, too, and that they are listened to and respected. A huge amount of progress still needs to be made on that. Children in the hearings system should be granted better access to independent advocacy to ensure that they are provided with impartial information about their rights and their entitlements, and they should be given enough space to ensure that their opinions and feelings are communicated, within what is often a moving process.

That might require additional resources and potential changes to legislation, but I think that it is important for those changes to be made and for the system to be turned around to ensure that children's voices are made paramount. It is also important in supporting better decision making by our young people. I hope that there is an opportunity for the minister to work with us on the bill, because I, for one, am passionate about changes to the advocacy aspect.

However, this is not just about process. What is always my concern when I stand up to make a speech and, indeed, when it comes to everything that we do in the chamber—and it is probably a concern for ministers on the front bench, too—is that process is one thing, but delivering an outcome is very much another. The policies that have changed and which are sitting with COSLA are doing just that—sitting with COSLA.

We need all institutions and organisations to move forward at pace to deliver the Promise. In 2017, I campaigned for a national kinship carer payment, but it was delivered only last year. The care leaver payment that ministers are introducing is a welcome step forward, and I hope that it can deliver, but there needs to be a different model for kinship carers, who are often grandparents. Their needs must be further taken into account.

When the Social Justice and Social Security Committee held a private round-table meeting with kinship carers, I distinctly remember speaking to a lady from Glasgow. The police arrived at her home at 3am with her half-naked grandchild and told her, "This is your responsibility. You are the next of kin." Her daughter had had an addiction and substance misuse issue; the police had intervened and had brought her granddaughter to her home—and that was it. It was a case of "Over to you."

The financial support package for kinship carers is not really there. Many kinship carers, and many grandparents in our society who are bringing up young people, are concerned that if they reach out for help, social services will get involved and the children will be taken away. There are still barriers

in our system to many of our fellow citizens, who are doing their very best by our young people and keeping families together, being able to reach out for help. We need to do something about that, because if we do not, some individuals will continue to not ask for help, and the outcomes will not improve for those young people.

A number of members have mentioned the progress that we need to make. I do not think that we have a clear route to delivering the Promise by 2030. I hope that the proposed bill can make that happen, and we can look towards that. In his excellent speech, Willie Rennie mentioned that we are starting to see the development of a postcode lottery in the delivery of the Promise. I know that we all hate using the words "postcode lottery", but some individual leaders in our councils are delivering progress, while others are not. We need collective work to take the Promise forward.

Kevin Stewart made an important contribution with regard to public and private relationships within the delivery of the Promise. How can they be taken forward, especially in relation to employers? That is an important aspect that we all need to look towards, and we must challenge the private sector to come and help to deliver the Promise along with the public organisations that we are tasking with doing that.

There is still a lot of potential with regard to what can be delivered on housing. When I visited the University of Edinburgh recently, I was pleased to hear about the work that it is doing to ensure that care-experienced young people have wraparound housing for the whole year, not just during term time, if that is what they want. We have seen some good progress on that.

Oliver Mundell and Nicola Sturgeon made similarly challenging speeches, and I welcome their contributions. There is no point in our congratulating ourselves on what we are doing: we need to be honest about the delivery and the structural reforms that are needed, which will be difficult to put in place. As Nicola Sturgeon said, achieving our aims will need strategy, leadership and funding, but we have all voted for the mission that we are undertaking, and we should all unite behind it, because we need to ensure that we deliver it.

To conclude—and I welcome the extra time that you have given me, Deputy Presiding Officer—I do not think that the delivery of the Promise requires a great deal of legislative change. As The Promise Scotland said in its briefing, we must ensure that we do not see the landscape becoming more complicated and cluttered. I hope that the proposed Promise bill is broad enough in scope to ensure that the required legislative changes are made to enable Scotland to keep the Promise everywhere, every day and to everyone.

16:36

Natalie Don-Innes: I thank all members for their considered contributions throughout the debate. I am encouraged to hear that cross-party support to keep the Promise remains strong.

I will begin with Miles Briggs's speech, the tone of which I welcome. He spoke about engagement on the proposed Promise bill, and I can say that, as with my work on Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, I am fully committed to engagement with other members on the legislation. If they have not already done so, they should receive an email inviting them to discuss it with me.

I fully appreciate the story that Miles Briggs recounted about kinship carers and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee—in fact, I think that I was sitting on the committee that day and heard those issues live. Those are issues that I hear regularly in discussions with kinship carers.

Kevin Stewart also mentioned kinship carers and the fear that they feel about asking for help. As I said, that theme has come up in conversations that I have had—most recently in my meeting yesterday with the Kinship Care Advice Service for Scotland. I assure members who have raised the issue that I am determined to ensure that kinship carers feel supported and able to ask for that help. I know that Gillian Mackay was looking for an update on that. In the interests of time, I would be happy to provide that update following the debate.

I thank all members for their contributions, which were positive and, at times, challenging, as I expected. On the issue of siblings being kept together, I know that we still have work to do, but it is important to say that we are seeing an improvement in the number of siblings who are being kept together: an increase of 3 per cent demonstrates that we are moving in the right direction. However, as I have said, I know that we have further to go.

On inconsistency in local delivery, I am aware of the issues in that regard and am committed to improving the situation. I have seen the good things that are happening, but we need to ensure that they are happening all across Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: How are we going to spread good practice across Scotland? Quite often, we hear about amazing things going on in one place but find that, in the next-door local authority, something completely different is happening. How do we ensure that we get some uniformity in place and push up the best possible practice for all?

Natalie Don-Innes: "Plan 24-30" is a good example of how that can be done. The more that develops and the more good practice is shared in

that regard, the more we will be able to deliver that level of consistency. Also, stories of change will be published, which will allow further sharing of information on progress.

I attended a conference earlier this year—although it seems like longer ago—at which a lot of key stakeholders, local authorities, third sector organisations, children and young people came together to learn about the different things that were going on across the country. Such events are really important, and we need to have more of them in the future.

I absolutely agree that the use of restraint should always be a last resort. I confirm that the Care Inspectorate is preparing to publish, this month, data on the extent of physical restraint in residential accommodation settings. However, again, I know that we have further to go, and I welcome discussions with members around what is required as we progress towards introducing the Promise bill.

I am a big supporter of the whole family wellbeing fund, which supports a huge range of activity across a comprehensive programme to enable local system change. Children's services planning partnerships can choose how to spend that money as best meets their needs. I have seen on the ground the impact that it has had on various services in local authority areas, which shows that transformational change can happen.

I agree with Ms Sturgeon and other members that the whole family wellbeing fund is absolutely fundamental to delivering the Promise. I recognise the urgency, and our ambition is to increase the scale of that investment but, of course, we have to take an evidence-based approach to funding decisions.

Mr Rennie and many other members spoke about how we can track progress best. The Promise progress framework, which uses the quantitative data that is held at the national level to inform progress, is due to be published by the end of this year.

Finally, Ms Haughey made an important point. We are in a different place now from where we were when the Promise was made. We have had a cost of living crisis and a pandemic, so delivery has been more difficult, but that does not take away from this Government's emphasis, focus and determination to keep and deliver the Promise.

As I said, I thank members for their challenges today. This is a journey to 2030 and, even with all the progress so far and the upcoming Promise bill, there is still some way to travel. We are learning every day, and best practice is being created, duplicated and shared. In spite of our having a long way to go, I am confident that we are moving in the right direction.

We all have a responsibility to raise the profile and understanding of the Promise. There can be no denial that good things are happening across local authority areas, but a lot of people still do not know what the Promise is or what it means, yet it impacts on every one of us every day.

The “Follow the Money” report, which was published as part of the Promise in 2020, showed that Scotland spends £942 million per year on the care system. The universal services that are associated with care-experienced people cost a further £198 million per year. The cost of services that care-experienced people require, as a result of the current failures in care, is estimated to be £875 million per year.

Even if we are not care-experienced or do not know anyone who is care-experienced, keeping the Promise impacts on all of us. Keeping the Promise, supporting families to stay together and moving towards prevention, rather than reaction, will have huge benefits not just for our children and young people, but for our entire country.

That is entirely in line with our tackling poverty agenda. A disproportionate number of children who live in care are in poverty. Equally, tackling poverty and supporting families to thrive will mean that fewer children will be unable to be looked after at home. The two approaches go hand in hand with one another.

In line with that, it is hugely important to tackle the stigma around care, which Gillian Mackay mentioned, and to have understanding and awareness of what care experience means.

As we move forward, we must continue to ensure that our actions have a real and lasting impact. To do that, we must continue to listen to the voices of our care-experienced community.

I feel very privileged when someone is brave enough to share their personal experience with me, in the hope that they can improve things for others. The basis of the Promise is that the voice, the individual and the group conversations are making a difference, which is why it is important to share something back.

When I became the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, I had no idea how much the role would mean to me. I got into politics because I want to change the world for the better, and I want an independent Scotland in which children grow up happy and families are free from poverty. I have previously highlighted some of my personal experiences growing up in a difficult background, but I think that it is appropriate to do so again to drive home the point.

My childhood was not easy. I was very young when my dad passed away. From far too early an age I saw the problems that drug and alcohol

abuse can cause, and I witnessed domestic abuse from an early age. Something that I had not considered prior to my first day in this role was that, during periods of my life when I was not able to be cared for at home, I sometimes spent months at a time in an informal kinship care arrangement at my grandparents’ house. I am very thankful to have had them, and they are a massive part of why I am standing here today.

I do not say this for sympathy, and I do not pretend to understand every experience that children and young people face in Scotland—not by any means—however, members can be sure that, as someone who has lived through some extremely difficult experiences growing up, and who has experienced a sense of unbelonging, fear and disconnection, I am here to fight for all the children and young people across Scotland who face similar issues.

Doing this role every day and speaking about such issues regularly—whether with colleagues, care-experienced people or the third sector—has been very difficult, I will admit, and it has raised a lot of emotions that I thought I had dealt with. However, over and above that, the trauma has driven me to work as hard as I possibly can to facilitate change for those who need it most. Keeping the Promise is a priority for this Government, but it is a personal commitment of mine to do everything in my power to improve the lives of care-experienced children and young people, to tackle poverty and to work towards our having a country that supports families to stay together and to be happy.

I look forward to working with all children and young people, care-experienced people, colleagues, third sector organisations and other stakeholders to ensure that our vision to keep the Promise remains laser focused. I give members my assurance that I will remain committed to driving forward that change.

I finish by urging members to use today’s decision time to reaffirm our commitment across the Parliament to keep the Promise. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on keeping the Promise.

Urgent Question

16:47

Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Network (Winter Resilience)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure resilience across the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network this winter, in light of the announcement that the MV Caledonian Isles will continue to be out of service until at least the end of the year.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): It is deeply frustrating and concerning that the community of Arran is facing a further delay to the return of the MV Caledonian Isles. Ministers and officials continue to push CalMac Ferries to ensure that all options to expedite repairs are being considered. CalMac is now looking at what that means in relation to deployment across the network. Three detailed options using the route prioritisation matrix have been shared with communities today, and final deployment details will be issued next week. The redeployment of vessels is particularly challenging because of the annual overhaul schedule, but CalMac is committed to maintaining lifeline connectivity to our islands.

Kenneth Gibson: New vessels that were expected before the start of winter have yet to arrive, a potential charter has turned out not to be viable, the MV Hebridean Isles is being retired in a few weeks, and the MV Caledonian Isles might not be back in service until April. This summer was profoundly difficult for islanders and visitors, and the winter will now be even more challenging. Despite Arran having the busiest route in the network, my constituents have borne the brunt of this year's disruption.

What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that Arran's service is as reliable as possible over the coming months? Will the cabinet secretary update Parliament on when the MV Glen Sannox and the MV Isle of Islay will enter service?

Fiona Hyslop: On the last point, an update on the Glen Sannox was provided to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee by the chair of Ferguson Marine in October, which still reflects the intention. The final elements of the transfer from Ferguson to Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd for use on CalMac services are being finalised.

I recognise the veracity of Mr Gibson's questions and how actively he has pursued them. I understand the frustration that his constituents feel about this. We understand the importance of provision and of planning to provide as much

resilience as possible, and the member will recognise that there has to be a balance between the importance of the route—members will recognise that it is one of the busiest on the network—and the responsibility to provide lifeline services elsewhere. That will be a difficult balancing act in what is going to be a challenging and difficult winter.

We thought that last winter would have been the period that caused the most issues, and the two new vessels—or the Glen Sannox, at least—should have been in place by now. We always knew that the MV Caledonian Isles would be an integral part of this winter. I will work with CalMac to ensure that we can provide Arran with the services that it needs, but we also recognise that there are responsibilities across the network.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the cabinet secretary for her further reply. Since the MV Caledonian Isles departed for its annual overhaul in January, the timescale for its return has gone from March to June to August to September to October to mid-November, with no return now in sight, as new faults continue to be found despite millions of pounds being spent on repairs. The vessel was also out of service in 2023 for extensive repairs. Islanders are astonished by how badly that has been managed and by how much time and money has been spent. What is the Scottish Government doing to hold CalMac to account for those failings?

Fiona Hyslop: I recognise that the repair and maintenance of ageing vessels has its challenges, but we expect the comprehensive management of that to be done at times of overhaul. Mr Gibson was correct to identify that new and additional issues have been identified recently—anybody who wants to see the detail can see it in CalMac's press release—on top of the previous issues with the gearbox.

To prevent that from happening in the future, we have to ensure that there is time for regular maintenance of all vessels as part of the new contract. That was one of the points that I made when I met ferry unions recently to identify the things that we expect to see in the forthcoming new contract.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I have to say that it takes a huge amount of brass neck to stand up in the chamber and ask the Scottish National Party Government to explain CalMac's failures in all of this. Let me tell members where the failures lie for the entire ferry scandal—they lie right there with those on the SNP front benches.

The reasons for the failures are the lack of investment and the lack of progress on new vessels. I have not heard a single solution from the minister as to what CalMac is going to do to

address the situation. It is completely out of vessels and completely out of options.

The anger in places such as Arran is palpable. I suggest that the minister should go and visit the island to talk to the businesses that are losing money hand over fist every single day as a direct result. There is no point in me asking the minister what she is going to do, because the answer is nothing. The Government has done nothing about this month after month. Why has not a single SNP minister lost their job over this fiasco?

Fiona Hyslop: I do not think that the people of Arran and Kenny Gibson's constituents would take kindly to the politicisation that has just been expressed. Attacking other members in the chamber and calling them names or using that kind of pejorative language is not acceptable. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Fiona Hyslop: The member said that we are completely out of vessels and completely out of options, which is not true. Had he listened to my answer to the first question that I was asked, he would have heard that I set out that three options are being discussed as we speak. I understand that none of them is palatable, and we want to maximise the routes that we have, but what he said is factually incorrect.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have to say that nobody is surprised that we are here again to ask the Scottish Government about mismanagement of ferries. All that has been said today is cold comfort for the residents and businesses of Arran, facing a winter of disruption as they limp on with an ageing fleet, following years of underinvestment and poor planning from the Scottish Government. Why should islanders trust the Government on anything that it announces on ferries, given the broken promises, failure to deliver and abject lack of leadership, which has never resulted in the ferry service that they deserve?

Fiona Hyslop: I welcome the member to her new brief. Whether it is on ferries, rail or road, I look forward to engaging with her in the future.

With regard to the Government's commitment and what we are doing, we are delivering six major vessels to the service, which will enhance and improve the position and tackle the issues of resilience and the ageing fleet that the member mentioned. Seven new vessels are also in procurement. The £700 million is a commitment from the Scottish Government that will relieve the pressures that are being faced. Everybody recognises those pressures and, as I said, we are commissioning six major vessels and procuring seven new ones. That is a commitment to our

islanders, that is investment and that should be supported.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned that the Glen Sannox might offer some comfort. The latest reports from the yard are that delivery will be imminent; it has been imminent since about 2018, but let us hope that it is imminent. Will she clarify, because CalMac is unable to do so, how long it will take to get the Glen Sannox in service from when it is handed over? Will it be 6.5 weeks or 13 weeks? We know that it has had a crew in place for two years, but I cannot work out how long it will take before the Government can get it into service.

Fiona Hyslop: The vessel is not currently under the management of CalMac, so in preparation for the vessel being transferred, weekly meetings of all the different players have been happening to ensure that it can be transferred. The member knows that there have also been sea trials that have, for the most part, been successful.

On the period of transfer, the member might be identifying the issue that an annual overhaul has to be booked for all vessels, in consultation with the community. The island community of Arran preferred that to be in December. That scheduling will have an impact on when the Glen Sannox can come on stream for regular passenger vessel deployment. I suspect that that is the reason for the difference that the member has identified.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The Fraser of Allander Institute estimated that each ferry journey to Arran contributes £13,200 to the Arran economy. What work has the Scottish Government done to quantify the cost to Arran and Ardrossan of repeated cancellations? Does the Scottish Government have a plan to compensate businesses and the local economy for the ongoing disruption because of the age of the fleet?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not sure whether the member supported this year's budget, but it provided support to the affected communities, and particularly the islands, through hospitality rates relief. Some 1,200 businesses were covered by that provision. The economic impact has been identified in lots of different ways—not least is that I had a conversation in a meeting in the past few weeks with Highlands and Islands Enterprise about how, through working with island communities, we can help recovery in the area.

A lot of this is about confidence. There is a lot of concern about the headlines that people see and how they experience those. Headlines can be important in raising the issue, but they also have a knock-on detrimental effect on customer confidence. We want to rebuild that confidence. I am in active discussions with colleagues about how we can help islanders to build that,

particularly by supporting tourism and tourism businesses on Arran and elsewhere.

Business Motion

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-15227, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 12 November 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scotland's Planning System – Supporting Investment and Economic Growth and Delivering Quality Homes

followed by Scottish Government Debate: The Women's Health Plan 2021- 2024 – Progress and Next Steps

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 13 November 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 14 November 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Constitution, Europe, External Affairs

and Culture Committee Debate: UK-EU
Trade and Cooperation Agreement

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 19 November 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 20 November 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
Economy and Gaelic;
Finance and Local Government

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 November 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 11 November 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-15228, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Development (Continuation of Operation) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I call Tim Eagle, who has up to three minutes.

16:59

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Thank you, Presiding Officer. I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests as a farmer and former land agent.

The Scottish Conservatives share the concerns of many in the farming industry with regard to the proposals that are in the regulations before us.

There is no doubt that the proposed regulations are important—I want to clarify that. They seek to extend the operation of rural development support schemes such as the Scottish rural development programme and the less-favoured area support scheme, which are a lifeline for many farmers, beyond the current expiry date of 31 December 2024. However, the regulations suggest a new end date of 31 December 2030. A consultation by the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee raised concerns that that is an unnecessarily lengthy extension, especially considering that the Government's "Agricultural Reform Route Map" suggests that 2027 at the latest would be more appropriate. Equally, many stakeholders have raised concerns that LFASS continues on a 2018 payment rate and is in need of rebasing to ensure that it reflects changes to agricultural businesses.

My concern is that, in the round, this Scottish statutory instrument simply sends the wrong message to the industry about its future. Sadly, we are not allowed to amend an SSI, but the Scottish Conservatives have continuously asked the Scottish Government to rewrite the regulations in response to the concerns that have been raised. The Government has chosen not to do so. Although I stress that we want payments and the schemes to continue, we cannot actively support this SSI today for the above reasons.

17:01

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I want to make three points abundantly clear. The regulations do not cut across or replace the published “Agricultural Reform Route Map”. The route map is a living document that sets out the phased transition from legacy common agricultural policy support into a new four-tier framework. It sets out in detail the changes for 2025, and we laid the regulations on that last week. The route map will be further updated in 2025 with the detail proposed for greening changes for 2026.

The route map states that legacy Scottish rural development programme schemes will continue with no change until at least 2026, with further engagement required on how that support may be delivered from 2027. We have committed to keep the route map updated, and we will continue to provide more clarity as and when it becomes available through co-development with rural partners in the agricultural reform programme.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will Jim Fairlie take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: No, I will not.

All that the regulations do is to extend until 2030 the legal basis for continued SRDP support at programme level. The regulations are simple and straightforward by design, and they do not change policy, outcomes or payments—that was never the intent and nor is it what we publicly committed to. The regulations will allow us to provide support for less-favoured areas, crofting, agri-environment measures, forestry and community-led local development, to name but a few. If the regulations are not approved, there will be no support and no phased transition—only a cliff edge.

In the previous session, the Parliament extended the legal basis for continued SRDP support until the end of 2024. It is now for the Parliament to vote to do the same thing until 2030. To be clear, that does not mean that there will be no change or that every scheme will run as is in every year until 2030. It means that, instead of constant cliff edges and annual visits to Parliament to extend schemes, we will come back when there is a change to make or when we bring forward replacement support.

The regulations are a pragmatic approach that provides continued assurance and a backstop. They enable us to focus our collective time and resource on the co-development of new support within the four-tier framework using the powers in the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. The regulations deliver on our public commitments and what we consulted on, and they are essential, as they underpin the route map and

enable the phased transition to take place. I hope that today we can provide some much-needed assurance to our farmers, crofters and land managers and show that, unlike elsewhere, the Scottish Parliament continues to value and support them.

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of eight Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask the minister, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-15229, on approval of a United Kingdom statutory instrument; motions S6M-15230 and S6M-15231, on approval of SSIs; motions S6M-15232 and S6M-15233, on committee membership; motions S6M-15234 and S6M-15235, on committee substitutes; and motion S6M-15236, on the office of the clerk.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scotland Act 1998 (Specification of Devolved Tax) (Building Safety) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Upper Tribunal for Scotland Bus Registration Appeals (Composition) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Upper Tribunal for Scotland (Transfer of Functions of the Transport Tribunal) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jackie Dunbar be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee; and

Kevin Stewart be appointed to replace Jackie Dunbar as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Daniel Johnson be appointed to replace Claire Baker as a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Meghan Gallacher be appointed to replace Pam Gosal as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Stephen Kerr be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Criminal Justice Committee;

Oliver Mundell be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Pam Gosal be appointed to replace Liz Smith as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Rachael Hamilton be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Annie Wells be appointed to replace Sue Webber as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Graham Simpson be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Sue Webber be appointed to replace Graham Simpson as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;

Brian Whittle be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and

Roz McCall be appointed to replace Miles Briggs as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Claire Baker be appointed to replace Daniel Johnson as the Scottish Labour Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Office of the Clerk be closed on Tuesday 24 (am), Friday 27, Monday 30 and Tuesday 31 December 2024.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-15205.2, in the name of Roz McCall, which seeks to amend motion S6M-15205, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, on keeping the Promise, 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.

17:04

Meeting suspended.

17:07

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-15205.2, in the name of Roz McCall, which seeks to amend motion S6M-15205, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, on keeping the Promise. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the app. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Martin. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Stewart. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my vote was recorded. It would have been a yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Clark. I assure you that we will record that vote.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)

Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (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)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, 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)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and

Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 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, 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) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (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)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-15205.2, in the name of Roz McCall, is: For 53, Against 57, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-15205.1, in the name of Martin Whitfield, which seeks to amend motion S6M-15205, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, on keeping the Promise, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15205, in the name of Natalie Don-Innes, on keeping the Promise, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament reaffirms its collective commitment to Keep The Promise by 2030, and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment that the proposed The Promise Bill will be in place before the end of the current parliamentary session, and its commitment to productive cross-party engagement on the Bill's contents.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15228, in the name of Jamie

Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes, but I could not get a connection.

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

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect. I would have abstained.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

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

Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-15228, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, is: For 83, Against 0, Abstentions 27.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Development (Continuation of Operation) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on eight Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-15229, on approval of a United Kingdom statutory instrument, S6M-15230 and S6M-15231, on approval of SSIs, S6M-15232 and S6M-15233, on committee membership, S6M-15234 and S6M-15235, on committee substitutes, and S6M-15236, on the office of the clerk, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scotland Act 1998 (Specification of Devolved Tax) (Building Safety) Order 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Upper Tribunal for Scotland Bus Registration Appeals (Composition) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Upper Tribunal for Scotland (Transfer of Functions of the Transport Tribunal) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jackie Dunbar be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee; and

Kevin Stewart be appointed to replace Jackie Dunbar as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Daniel Johnson be appointed to replace Claire Baker as a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Meghan Gallacher be appointed to replace Pam Gosal as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Stephen Kerr be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Criminal Justice Committee;

Oliver Mundell be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Pam Gosal be appointed to replace Liz Smith as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Rachael Hamilton be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Annie Wells be appointed to replace Sue Webber as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Graham Simpson be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Sue Webber be appointed to replace Graham Simpson as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;

Brian Whittle be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and

Roz McCall be appointed to replace Miles Briggs as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Claire Baker be appointed to replace Daniel Johnson as the Scottish Labour Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Office of the Clerk be closed on Tuesday 24 (am), Friday 27, Monday 30 and Tuesday 31 December 2024.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Sibling Sexual Abuse

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12918, in the name of Fulton MacGregor, on tackling sibling sexual abuse in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends the recent paper, *Tackling Sibling Sexual Abuse in Scotland*, published by the Cross Party Group on Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse; notes with concern the lack of Scotland-specific data regarding sibling sexual abuse (SSA); understands that SSA is the most common form of intra-familial child sexual abuse; acknowledges research that suggests that it is estimated that at least twice as many children are sexually abused by a child sibling than by a parent; recognises that many survivors who talk of their experiences of rape or sexual assault perpetrated by a sibling find that their abuse can be met by disbelief or minimisation by adults and professionals as "sexual experimentation" or "natural curiosity"; understands that SSA is less likely to be disclosed than other forms of sexual abuse, due to shame, fears of punishment or blame, or not being believed; further understands that the consequences of SSA may include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance and alcohol misuse, eating disorders and relationship difficulties throughout life; believes that there is credible evidence that SSA often goes unrecognised or is minimised by professionals, which it considers is adverse to the needs of survivors and their families; acknowledges what it considers the complex issue of SSA whereby perpetrators are often underage themselves and may be in need of additional support; notes the support for any measures to highlight the prevalence of sibling sexual abuse, its impact and what parents can do if they are concerned about sexual behaviour between siblings; further notes the belief that it is valuable to launch a reference group bringing together key agencies and those with lived experience to consolidate learning, identify best practices and steer future policy and practice so that scalable, proportionate and trauma-informed responses are available to address this issue, and notes the belief that it is beneficial to establish dedicated training courses for social workers and other safeguarding professionals, including those in the Coatbridge and Chryston constituency, specifically on disclosure and communicating with children when there are concerns about SSA.

17:15

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): First, I thank all the members who supported my motion. I understand that such matters are incredibly sensitive and, although it might be difficult for us here to debate the subject of the motion, it is important that such difficult issues are discussed in the Parliament, so that we can advocate for all those who have had these distressing experiences.

Indeed, as a survivor told me last night at a round-table meeting that I hosted on mandatory reporting, speaking about the issue and raising awareness in the comfort of our Parliament is

much less difficult than the experience of those who were subject to such horrendous injustices against them. I therefore thank everyone who has stayed to support the debate and those who have chosen to contribute.

In my speech, I will outline the characteristics and impact of sibling sexual abuse, explain the complexity of the issue and look at ways in which we can move forward in addressing it in Scotland today.

The genesis of the debate came from a meeting that I hosted in Holyrood in January 2023 as convener of the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. At that meeting, survivors with lived experience of sibling sexual abuse, along with experts, candidly outlined the nature of the abuse, sharing first-hand accounts, along with the latest research available. Following that meeting, a sub-group was established and, in late 2023, the group published its paper, "Tackling Sibling Sexual Abuse in Scotland". I recommend that paper to any member who has not yet had the chance to read it.

There are too many people to acknowledge when looking at the work that has been done on the subject, but I must thank the cross-party group's secretary, Anne MacDonald, who has worked tirelessly to ensure that those who need their voices listened to are heard. She joins us in the public gallery this evening. Likewise, I must thank Stuart Allardyce, director of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, whose extensive research skills have made this debate possible. Stuart could not be here in the gallery this evening, but he will be watching the debate on the broadcasting service.

Most importantly, I thank the survivors who contributed so powerfully to the discussion and to bringing us to this point. I pay particular tribute to Ellie Forgan and Ashley Scotland, who are in the chamber tonight.

Many believe that, when a child is abused, it is down to a stranger, but that is not the reality. Most child sexual abuse is committed by someone known to the child—quite often, someone in the same household—and, of that cohort, studies suggest that at least twice as many children are sexually abused by a child sibling as by a parent.

Although the most common form of sibling sexual abuse concerns occasions in which an older brother abuses a younger sister, all combinations of sibling sexual abuse have been recorded, including a younger sibling abusing an older sibling, a sister abusing a brother, same-sex abuse and even abuse involving multiple siblings. There are also occasions when disability is a factor for the victim or for the sibling perpetrating the behaviour.

Like other forms of sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse can lead to multiple negative outcomes and health concerns, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance misuse, eating disorders, relationship difficulties and many other harmful impacts that can affect survivors long after the abuse takes place.

Sibling sexual abuse also has unique and profound effects on the family unit. Parents and carers are put in a position of addressing an awful situation in their own families. Shame, conflict, denial and disbelief are commonly reported responses in families if cases of such abuse come to light. We heard that some parents described the situation as like a bomb going off in their family, such was the impact.

I emphasise the word “if” when talking about cases coming to light, as sibling sexual abuse is thought to be a type of abuse that is seriously underreported. According to a study in which 41 survivors of such abuse were interviewed, it is much less likely to be disclosed than any other forms of abuse. That comes down to reasons such as someone’s fear of being punished, being blamed or not being believed because they are afraid of the sibling, not understanding that what was happening was abuse, not wanting their sibling to get into trouble or not wanting to upset their parents.

Another concern is what happens when the abuse is reported. Responses are often unhelpful and can range from uncertainty about what to do to attitudes such as “That’s just curiosity,” or claims that it is exploration, play or part of growing up—a “doctors and nurses” sort of attitude. Those responses have come not just from adults close to the child but from agencies. From my time as a social worker in child protection, I know how difficult and complex such situations are, and there are no easy answers, as much as we might want there to be.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am grateful to Fulton MacGregor for bringing this important issue to the chamber. I have now signed the motion.

I am glad that he mentioned his expertise in social work, as I am keen to understand what additional training he believes would be important and how that could be taken forward in Scotland.

Fulton MacGregor: I thank the member for that intervention, and I will come to address that.

This is probably a good point to move on, however, to say that, if there are child protection procedures under way, or if any children need to be placed in care, before or after sibling sexual abuse comes to the fore and people become aware of it, that can have a huge impact on decisions on whether children can be safely

placed in care together—noting all the competing factors with those types of decisions. That is important to mention, with the issue having been explored thoroughly in today’s earlier debate on keeping the Promise. When children are not placed together, there are sometimes other reasons in the background. I suggest that sibling sexual abuse could be one of those reasons, although I agree with the premise of the earlier debate: we need to do a lot more to ensure that siblings can be placed together where possible.

That leads me to an important point that we must remember when talking about sibling sexual abuse: we are often talking about two children, the one committing abuse being a child themselves. They might have experienced abuse and trauma themselves and, due to the complex nature of those situations, there might be occasions when various children in the same household are victims and abusers. It can sometimes be easier for adults and agencies to get their heads around a situation if the abusing sibling is an adult. Sometimes, they are, but that is not always the case.

It is no wonder, then, that our protection services are not always equipped to deal with such situations as they arise. As an ex-social worker, I would say that there is no blame here. The whole purpose of this debate is to raise awareness and to try to find better solutions. Further to that, although there is a great body of research on the effects of sibling sexual abuse and the forms that it can take, there is no unified consensus on any single explanation as to why it occurs. There are strong links between sibling sexual abuse and family factors, such as marital discord, domestic violence, physical discipline and poor sexual boundaries. When examining the issue, given the clear link between sibling sexual abuse and family factors, we must consider the problem as one of, and for, the family, not just a problem with the sibling who abuses. As I said, they themselves can often be a child who has experienced trauma.

The paper from the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse asserts that what, until now, have been traditional responses to sibling sexual abuse could often involve siloing the issue and treating the abuser in a vacuum, without providing ample support to the family unit, who might need the tools to make sense of the trauma.

I have talked at length about what sibling sexual abuse is, what its impacts are and the importance of treating it not just as an individual’s issue but as a whole-family issue, but we must now focus on looking forward and opening a discussion on what steps can be taken to ensure that the Parliament supports actions, not just words.

A number of ways forward have been discussed through work with the cross-party group, and I

would be interested in hearing the minister's thoughts on them when she sums up. The first is simply to have better data collection. Although data exists from studies that have been conducted across the United Kingdom, there are no Scotland-specific studies. Case reviews and, indeed, subsequent literature reviews would be invaluable in mapping child protection pathways and how they operate in Scotland today.

Secondly, a reference group that pulled together the expertise of Social Work Scotland, Police Scotland, various charities and those with lived experience would be best placed to advise on policy while identifying best practice.

Thirdly, awareness campaigns or even conference events would greatly promote signposting to key resources for families who are concerned about sibling sexual abuse, as well as keeping relevant bodies informed on the various gaps in service provision.

Finally, I underline the need to establish a dedicated course for social workers and any other safeguarding professionals who might encounter cases of sibling sexual abuse. As I stated, the issue is underdisclosed, and we must ensure that those who are on the front line are properly trained to identify the signs of sibling sexual abuse and to act accordingly. Tied to the concept of improved training would, ultimately, be further funding for a dedicated national service that would support not only survivors of sibling sexual abuse but their families, who are affected by it, too.

Sibling sexual abuse is an incredibly sensitive issue, and I once again thank all those who signed my motion to allow it to be discussed in the Parliament. In order to combat the issue, we need more data collection to enable us to understand its prevalence, we need relevant bodies to work together to identify best practice and to raise awareness in society so that the issue can be identified, and we need funding to ensure that the best support networks are in place.

17:25

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing this important topic to the chamber for debate, and I look forward to working with him and with all MSPs who are in the chamber tonight to make a positive impact.

Sibling sexual abuse is probably one of the most complex and sensitive issues to have been debated in the chamber. In many ways, it is the ultimate taboo—a topic that people simply do not want to talk about. Nonetheless, we must talk about it, otherwise we are badly failing the victims of such abuse and their families, who are often left in ruins as a result.

We have heard some of the devastating statistics in relation to the matter. Mr MacGregor is right to point out in his motion that, in Scotland, we have no robust mechanism for gathering data on the subject. As with every problem, without statistical evidence, we cannot properly establish the extent of it or where it is most likely to occur. Various global studies are helpful in educating us about patterns and vulnerabilities, and many of those naturally relate to well-known problem indicators such as deprivation, instability at home and wider sexual and domestic abuse. However, without raw data of our own, we cannot know for sure all the detail that we need.

I think that we can all agree that setting up a mechanism for gathering and recording that data for Scotland is an essential opening step. Of course, that in itself will not tackle the problem, which is clearly extremely challenging, for a number of reasons.

Even though sibling sexual abuse is the type of abuse that is most likely to happen in a family, it appears to be the one that people least want to talk about. Those with lived experience have spoken about the fact that, when such abuse is reported, people just do not want to know. They either do not want to think that it is happening or simply cannot believe it. Worryingly, that is the reaction not just among the general public but from support services.

We must take into account the difficulty that victims have in raising the issue. As with so many kinds of sexual abuse, it is more complicated than simply picking up the phone to the police; wider implications, sensitivities and confused feelings are involved. It is likely that a child who is being abused by a sibling will be scared of them and worried that no one will believe them. That abusive sibling will have power over them.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I was a secondary school teacher long, long ago. Is there a role for teachers in that regard? They often identify changes in the behaviour of children in their classes. Is there a role for primary and secondary school teachers, simply by being aware that the issue might be one factor that they might not otherwise think about? They might think of other types of abuse, but perhaps not that one.

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

Sharon Dowey: I thank the member for the intervention. At the end of his speech, Fulton MacGregor listed a lot of things that we can do. We need to discuss what other things that we can do to raise awareness among, and provide training for, teachers. Teachers get a lot of training on identifying a lot of issues that might arise among

children in their class, so that they are aware of such issues. We definitely need to look at and progress the idea that the member raised.

To return to the complicated issues, I note that the abusive sibling will have power over the child, which might be hard for most of us to understand. In addition, when a child brings up the issue with the most obvious source of confidence—their parents—they are often met with denial and disbelief. The shock of the situation will be completely overwhelming for the family, as parents are receiving devastating news about not just one child but two.

Experts have also pointed to the long-term impacts. Families can be wrecked and never recover from such instances, and victims, even when they have broken away from their family, can live in fear for the rest of their lives that they will come back into contact with their abuser at gatherings such as weddings and funerals. That is on top of the increased likelihood of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and substance misuse.

We all agree that sibling sexual abuse is a difficult and complex phenomenon. It is hard to talk about and hard to understand, but I hope that, through MSPs discussing it today, we can make a start on tackling it and supporting families who have endured it. We must do so on a productive and cross-party basis.

17:30

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank my colleague Fulton MacGregor for once again bravely bringing to the chamber a subject that is profoundly painful but critically important to address: in this case, the trauma and family turmoil caused by sibling sexual abuse. I also thank the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse for its determined work on the subject and for the comprehensive paper that the motion highlights.

Sibling sexual abuse is a form of family-based trauma that, as we have heard, often goes unspoken. The complexity and devastation that it causes ripples through the affected family, leaving behind emotional scars that can, and do, last a lifetime. We know that sexual abuse by a sibling is often underreported and often misunderstood. When we think of sexual abuse, we might instinctively think of strangers or adults, but the reality is that sexual abuse can occur in the home and between siblings, and sibling sexual abuse is estimated to occur at double the rate of abuse by adults.

Many survivors find it difficult to speak about the topic because of the deep feelings of shame, guilt and confusion that often accompany such

experiences. One of the most difficult aspects of sibling sexual abuse is the loss of trust that it represents. Families are meant to be the sanctuary where we feel safe and protected. When abuse occurs between siblings, it shatters that sense of security.

Every family member will be affected in some way. The child who is abused will feel violated, and the child who abuses might be grappling with their own trauma, confusion and hurt. Too often, those complexities remain hidden, leaving no room for healing and recovery. As we heard, there are often other issues at play within the family.

The trauma resulting from sibling sexual abuse is not limited to the victim alone—family members including parents, and even extended family members, will experience confusion, anger, guilt and isolation. Parents in particular are often left wondering how they could have missed the signs or prevented the abuse from occurring, and they will naturally feel torn between their responsibilities to both children—I think that we can all imagine just how horrific that would be. The emotional weight can be unbearable and lead to rifts in the family, misunderstanding and a breakdown in communication. Many families struggle to know how to move forward and will become fractured.

There are also profound emotional consequences for the survivors. Mental health services in Scotland are increasingly recognising the need for specialist support for those who are affected by sexual abuse, but those services are not universally available, and they are often stretched very thin. Survivors of abuse might experience depression, anxiety and PTSD. They might have difficulty forming healthy relationships later in life or struggle with issues relating to their self-esteem or their sense of identity, and they might even turn to substances in order to cope. I have seen that through my work with survivors in Women's Aid and homelessness services. Support must be all-encompassing—we can have no silos in this area.

As the CPG's report states, there is so much that we need to do in this area, including creating spaces where survivors feel safe to speak out and where they are believed and their experiences are not minimised or trivialised.

Silence surrounding sibling sexual abuse only perpetuates the trauma and allows it to continue. We need to break the stigma and raise awareness in our communities, and we must ensure that all children in the family have access to appropriate therapeutic support. Sibling sexual abuse, like all forms of sexual violence, requires a multifaceted response that includes not only child and family services but mental health care, social support and family therapy.

Education is also key. We must teach children from a young age about boundaries, consent and healthy relationships. I used to do such work by going into schools and speaking about what a healthy relationship is in the context of domestic abuse. We need to create an environment in which young people can feel empowered to speak up if they are hurt, and in which parents and guardians know the signs of abuse and are quick to respond. We must also ensure that all our safeguarding professionals, be they teachers, police or registered childminders—everybody who comes into contact with children and has those duties—are trained to respond to disclosures and have the support to do so.

In addition, there is much that we need to do on research into sibling sexual abuse. We need to better understand its prevalence, its long-term effects and what type of interventions are most effective. By conducting more research and gathering the necessary data, we can better develop policies and resources for supporting both the victims and the families who are affected by that traumatic experience. We owe that to all of them.

17:35

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow Elena Whitham and to hear about some of her first-hand experiences in her employment prior to becoming an MSP. I also congratulate Fulton MacGregor on securing the debate.

I recognise the work that has been done by the cross-party group on adult survivors of child sexual abuse on the subject of tackling sibling sexual abuse in Scotland. As Sharon Dowe said, it is important that this debate is happening in the chamber today.

As Fulton MacGregor said, there is a common misconception when it comes to child sexual abuse. Many people believe that it is a problem of stranger danger. It is therefore surprising for many to learn that most child sexual abuse is committed by people who are known to the child and, very often, by family members. Sibling sexual abuse is the most common form of family sexual abuse, given that it is estimated that at least twice as many children are sexually abused by a sibling—a brother or sister—as are abused by a parent.

In 2021, the cross-party group started looking at the issue. It stated that it wanted to look at and prioritise exploring whether the right supports were in place for adult survivors affected by the issue and whether enough was being done in our child protection processes in Scotland to identify and support families in which sibling sexual abuse was an issue. Members of the cross-party group have

continued to gather important evidence on the nature and scale of the issue, and the paper that they have worked on lays out the work of the group on the subject to date. Members should commend them on that work and I very much hope that it feeds in to debates in the chamber and the Scottish Government's thinking in this area.

To discover that their child has been sexually abused by another child must be one of the most distressing experiences that a parent can face, perhaps even more so when they learn that it was one of their other children. For a sibling to be sexually abused by what is often, but not always, an older sibling or siblings who have a position of authority over them, the abuse that is experienced must be seen by many to be an ultimate betrayal of trust and it will often impact adversely on their mental and physical health over a lifetime.

Sibling sexual abuse is less likely to be disclosed than other forms of sexual abuse, perhaps because of shame and fear of imprisonment, blame or whether they will be believed, but also perhaps because they might be worried that the sibling might face punishment. The person might also be afraid of the sibling. They do not understand what is happening as abuse, they do not want their sibling to get into trouble and they do not want to upset parents or the wider family.

We must do more as a society to support survivors of sibling sexual abuse in a trauma-informed way. We need to learn more about it to understand how we can better address the issue. There are many ways in which we can better support people, and the paper produced by the cross-party group contains many recommendations, which I believe is a good start. The funding of a dedicated national service that can suggest evidence-based ways to support children, adult survivors and family members affected by the issue could significantly improve outcomes.

I am happy to support the motion. I am pleased that Fulton MacGregor has brought the issue to the chamber. I hope that the debate will lead to more work being done in the area to ensure that the recommendations of this important report become a reality.

17:39

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I, too, commend Fulton MacGregor and congratulate him on bringing the debate and on his commitment to what is a complex, difficult and—often—hidden issue. I also commend the cross-party group on adult survivors

of childhood sexual abuse for its broader work and for putting the report together.

As other members have referenced, the motion sets out a significant amount of detail and lays bare the extent to which sibling sexual abuse is believed to be underreported in Scotland and the challenges that survivors continue to face in their experience being minimised, not believed, or seen in the context of curiosity or experimentation. The paper that the cross-party group produced recognises and sets out the significant and lasting impact of sibling sexual abuse—the shame, the fear of blame and not being believed—and the physical impacts on survivors, including depression, substance abuse and relationship difficulties, which can be enduring and can last well into adulthood.

I am pleased that the motion makes reference to the complexities of how to respond to sibling sexual abuse. As others have spoken about, it outlines some of the ideas and views on how to respond and how to draw further focus on the issue, bringing together stakeholders, good practice and those with lived experience.

It is worth noting that this debate follows immediately on the debate that the minister led about the Promise, which seeks to create a care system that places love and relationships at the centre for every child and family who need support. I have no doubt of the commitment across Scotland to giving children the best start in life.

In the short time that is left, I will reflect a little on my experience of working in policing, on the progress that has been made over the years on the investigation of childhood sexual abuse more broadly and on the emerging challenges that make tackling the issue even more challenging.

Many members know about my background. It is safe to say that a good part of my service was immersed in complex public protection investigations into child sexual abuse, domestic abuse and, latterly, adult harm. I also spent many years in the development of policy and practice in that space. In 2024, we have moved to a point at which there is a plethora of guidance, legislation and organisations that aim to support the response to sexual harm, including that which is perpetrated on siblings. That is to be commended and recognised. I am pleased that, within that, there is focused guidance and material that is relevant to sibling sexual abuse, which I hope will underpin the response, particularly at a local level, when a disclosure is made. On a point that Monica Lennon made, training is absolutely at the centre of how robust and effective that response has to be.

The cross-party group's report makes reference to the need for better care pathways for survivors and for joined-up policies. I completely agree with that. In my experience, that is key, but it can take time for organisations to come together and agree roles and responsibilities, information-sharing protocols and so on. Earlier today, in the Criminal Justice Committee, we spoke about the challenges that are faced by individual organisations that work within a whole system such as justice. That brings me to my second point, which is about trusted professional relationships absolutely underpinning work on tackling public protection and, closer to home in the debate, sibling sexual abuse.

I am conscious of time, so I will finish on a couple of points.

Members will be familiar with the bairns' hoose, which involves a child-centred, trauma-informed approach to enable children to give their best evidence, where that is necessary, in a single space that brings together police, health and recovery services.

Finally, I want to raise concerns about the escalating incidence of online child sexual abuse, which we need to monitor, specifically with regard to sibling sexual abuse.

I again commend my colleague Fulton MacGregor and the cross-party group.

17:45

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I start by thanking Fulton MacGregor and the cross-party group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse for bringing this important debate to the chamber and for their continued focus on this important issue.

Keeping children and young people safe from sexual abuse and exploitation is of paramount importance for the Scottish Government. Today's debate has made it clear that cases of sibling sexual abuse are often extremely complex and their impact can have lifelong consequences for both victims and their families.

I acknowledge the calls that have been made today for further focus and action on sibling sexual abuse. The overall scale and complexity of child sexual abuse and exploitation is increasing globally, and a whole-system approach is required to tackle this horrendous form of abuse.

In response, the Government has established a new national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which will first meet on 18 November. The group will bring together practitioners, service providers, the third sector, academics and other experts, including members

of the CPG for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, to consider the range of current action and where further activity is needed. Although it will be for the group to determine its priorities, I expect that it will consider many of the issues that have been raised today, which are shared across all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. Those issues include the challenges of improving data and training and developing evidence-based services for victims.

Fulton MacGregor raised some important issues in relation to data. I cannot speak for the new national strategic group, but I expect that it will consider those issues. I also thank Elena Whitham for her contribution and for relaying her experience in her previous role.

On the involvement of teachers, professionals who work with children and young people are absolutely essential in identifying harmful sexual behaviour. Our delivery group on harmful sexual behaviour published guidance this spring to support professionals such as teachers to identify harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people, including sibling sexual abuse, and to intervene and to prevent that behaviour.

Fulton MacGregor: Does the minister agree with the premise of my speech? Our agencies have done a lot of good work on identifying sexual abuse and sexual harm—I take my hat off to the people on the front line in that sphere of work—but does she agree that there are specific issues in relation to this particular type of abuse that are still a major taboo and that are surrounded by a range of difficulties, even when they are presented to professionals such as social workers or teachers?

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

Natalie Don-Innes: I absolutely agree. I will go on to reflect on the support for training for teachers and other professionals. However, we are all in agreement that this is a complex area and that we need to come together to think of solutions and ways to improve the situation.

Through the implementation of national policies, including getting it right for every child, we put the experience and the rights of children at the heart of the work that is carried out by everyone who engages with young people and families. That is embedded in our national guidance for child protection, which outlines the responsibilities of and expectations on those who work with young people to protect them from all forms of harm. That resource includes detailed professional guidance on how to respond to cases of sexual abuse between siblings and emphasises the need for a holistic approach to intervention and the provision of support.

In addition, this year, we published a national framework for child protection learning and development, which supports multi-agency child protection learning and training. That clarifies where training is required to support local leads. A national child protection hub has also been established to support practitioners to share learning and best practice.

In response to the recommendations of the expert group on preventing sexual offending involving children and young people, the Scottish Government has established a delivery group on harmful sexual behaviour. Monica Lennon and others asked about what further training is needed for our social work workforce. The group has developed and published guidance to support professionals to identify children and young people who may cause harm through their sexual behaviour, and to intervene and prevent them from doing so. Professionals are further supported through learning and development resources and a practitioner forum that was established by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice.

What happens to us all as children shapes who we are and can have a huge impact on us throughout our lives, especially if those experiences are adverse ones that involve exploitation or abuse. I am unwavering in my commitment to ensuring that all victims of sexual abuse can access the services that help them to disclose their abuse, while recognising and responding to the impact of their experience.

Audrey Nicoll mentioned the bairns' hoose. That model supports children who have experienced trauma, including child sexual abuse, through a child-centred approach to delivering justice, care and recovery. That approach also promotes the Scottish child interview model for joint investigative interviews. It is now operational in all policing divisions in 30 local authorities and, alongside bairns' hoose developments, provides an approach that supports disclosure and minimises the risk of further traumatisation.

As was highlighted in the debate, victims of sibling sexual abuse and their families frequently require on-going mental health support. Since 2021, we have provided local authorities with £15 million per annum to deliver community-based mental health and wellbeing support and services for five to 24-year-olds and their families.

Before I finish, I will touch briefly on mandatory reporting. Mandatory reporting is one way of ensuring that action is taken when someone discloses abuse. I understand that the cross-party group on adult survivors has had a particular focus on that, and I will continue to engage with the group on that very important issue.

With that, I draw my remarks to a close. I appreciate and thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing the issue to the chamber. It is important that we come together to recognise the difficulties and complexities that are involved and talk about the ways in which we can move forward.

Meeting closed at 17:53.

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