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DRAFT

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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Malcolm Macleod, Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland.

The Rev Malcolm Macleod (Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, it is an honour for me to lead the time for reflection for today.

Having served in the pastoral ministry for more than 24 years, I have discovered that the key to effective service is to acknowledge our own insufficiency for the task and to reach beyond ourselves for the help that enables effective, life-changing service.

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States of America, when he left his hometown of Springfield, Illinois, to take up office, said,

“I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail.”

Abraham Lincoln recognised his need for help from the living God, and he proved in his time to be a political genius and an effective leader.

Solomon succeeded David as King over God’s covenant people in the Old Testament. Recognising the huge task ahead of him, he made the following request to God:

“And now, O Lord my God ... your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people ... for who is able to govern this your great people?”

God gave King Solomon the wisdom that he requested: he was famous as the king who established righteousness and justice in the land.

The apostle Paul, the servant of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, wrote to the church in Corinth in AD55. Corinth was a busy commercial city, divided in its allegiance to leadership, disoriented in its morality and diverse in its understanding of the source of wisdom. Paul offered a single unified answer: Jesus Christ is

“the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Paul had previously depended on his own resources but he now wanted to share with them what he had discovered for himself, saying that Jesus

“became wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption”.

In the midst of the complex issues that you seek to address as a Parliament, I commend to you the wisdom from God that made Abraham Lincoln, King Solomon and the apostle Paul life-changing servants of the people in their own times.

Praying the Lord’s blessing on all your deliberation. Leis gach dùrachd agus beannachd dhuibh uile nu’r seirbheis.

Thank you. Tapadh leibh.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Avian Influenza

1. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to prevent the spread of avian influenza, following the outbreak in Kirriemuir. (S6T-02277)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I thank Carol Mochan for bringing this to the chamber's attention. The outbreak is not actually in Kirriemuir but in Kingoldrum. The protection zone's perimeter is 3km from the infected area, so Kirriemuir sits within the surveillance zone, but not within the protection zone. It is important to clarify that point.

On 10 January 2025, following confirmation of the presence of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 in poultry, the Scottish Government activated its plans and immediately declared a 3km protection zone and a 10km surveillance zone around the infected premises, placing controls on poultry, poultry products and other things that could spread disease.

Any remaining birds on an infected premises are humanely culled, disposed of safely and disinfection of the premises is carried out. The Animal and Plant Health Agency is carrying out a veterinary inquiry to assess the source and the potential spread within the area.

Carol Mochan: I thank the minister for that clarity and his response. This is the second outbreak in the area in recent years. We have been told that avian flu has been detected in two wild birds in Fife and Perth. Farmers across Scotland, particularly in my region of South Scotland, want reassurance that sufficient safeguards are in place to prevent future outbreaks, and that high winds and flooding are not weakening those safeguards. Can the minister provide some reassurance on that point?

Jim Fairlie: As the member is probably aware, the pathogen occurs in the wild and it can get into domestic poultry. The advice is very clear that poultry keepers should be carrying out as much of the biosecurity measures as we are required to ask them to do, particularly in the protection zone and the surveillance zone. However, at all times, all poultry keepers should ensure that they take the best biosecurity measures that they have to protect their flocks.

Carol Mochan: My final question is on links. Avian influenza has devastated wild bird populations across the country. We know that transmission from birds to humans is rare and that

the risk to human health is low, but several people around the world have been infected. Can the Scottish Government advise people on what biosecurity steps people and organisations can take to reduce the spread of avian influenza in Scotland?

Jim Fairlie: To my knowledge, there has never been a case of avian influenza passing to a human in Scotland. On very rare occasions, it can be transmitted to humans but, globally, there is no evidence of an occasion of human-to-human spread of the virus.

A number of recent cases in the United States have been associated with outbreaks in wild birds, poultry and dairy cattle herds, but the majority of them have been mild clinical cases. There was one death in Louisiana of an individual who had underlying health conditions, but that was also attributable to an infection of H5N1. There is no evidence that any of the United States strains are circulating in the United Kingdom or Europe, so we do not have any evidence that we have any issues with avian influenza being transmitted to humans.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the minister set out the importance of poultry keepers remaining vigilant and ensuring high standards of biosecurity? Can he give us examples of what that looks like in practice?

Jim Fairlie: It is a legal requirement for a suspicion of avian influenza to be reported immediately. That allows the Government to carry out its contingency plans speedily and effectively, and minimises the potential for further impact on other premises and birds.

The best way in which keepers can protect their flocks is by applying the strict biosecurity measures that I mentioned that are principally aimed at avoiding direct or indirect contact between their flocks and infected wild bird species, which is the main route of infection. That can take the form of ensuring that feed and water are stored where they cannot be contaminated by wild birds, and maintaining birdhouses to prevent the ingress of wild birds, rodents or floodwater. Cleansing and disinfecting clothing and footwear before any contact with kept birds is also vital.

Safer Drug Consumption Facility (Assessment)

2. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what early assessment it has made following the opening of the safer drug consumption facility, the Thistle. (S6T-02279)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I am very pleased that the Thistle started supporting its first service users as of yesterday. Early engagement information will be reported in due course, but I understand that

uptake was good, taking into account the presence of some media near the entrance, and that this was the first day of a unique service. There was very positive feedback from the first service users.

I thank all those who were involved in getting the service up and running—the staff, those from the various engagement groups and those from the local community—for their support for the facility, and the relentless campaigners who enabled it to happen.

Douglas Ross: I will use my first question to look at the policing of the facility. I remind members that my wife is a serving officer with Police Scotland.

The Lord Advocate and the police have said that people will not be prosecuted for drug possession in the facility, but can the cabinet secretary outline what the Government expects to happen outwith the facility?

What is the cabinet secretary's view and the Government's view, for example, on someone who is in possession of drugs on their way to the facility? Should those drugs be removed if the police have good cause to stop the person and find them to be in possession? What is the cabinet secretary's response to concerns in the local community that the area could become a criminal hotspot if the police are not policing immediately outside the new facility?

Neil Gray: Douglas Ross will understand that that is an operational matter for Police Scotland and that it would not be right for me to comment on or influence decisions that it makes. However, Police Scotland has been involved in the development of the proposal from the beginning, and I am very grateful for its support. It would not have been possible to reach this point without that collaboration and partnership working.

As part of the proposal that went to the Lord Advocate, Police Scotland provided a paper, which was signed off by the chief constable and clearly set out its position. That paper makes the role of police officers clear and explains that the area surrounding the safer drug consumption facility would be policed in the same manner as it was prior to the establishment of the facility—unless otherwise required, due to any new identified risk.

Police Scotland will not alter the approach that it takes to patrolling the community as a result of the facility opening, and it will ensure that all communities in Scotland receive the same standard of service.

Douglas Ross: There is still a lot of uncertainty surrounding the policing, and I do not think that that will be addressed by the cabinet secretary's

response. He says that it is a matter for Police Scotland, and Police Scotland is saying that it is a matter for the Crown Office. Ultimately, the facility is supported by the Scottish Government, so I do not think that it is unreasonable for parliamentarians to expect a response here today.

Turning to the facility more generally, what does the cabinet secretary believe will be a success of the pilot project? Over the next three years, how will he judge it a success or otherwise? Does he accept that, as the First Minister said yesterday, it is not a silver bullet and that we need more joined-up working across this area?

For instance, if people go into the facility to inject themselves with drugs but need mental health support, they will still face lengthy waiting lists, and there is still a huge shortage of rehabilitation beds in Scotland. Is it not the case that the facility will simply make it more sustainable for people to remain on drugs, rather than getting off drugs and turning their lives around, and that backing the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill would be another element in our fight against the appalling drug deaths rate in Scotland?

Neil Gray: I accept that the facility is one tool in the box; I do not think that it is a silver bullet, as Douglas Ross described.

He asked how we would measure the success over the three years of the pilot. It is about reducing harm and deaths in Glasgow. It is also about allowing people we have been otherwise unable to reach with the treatment options that Douglas Ross speaks about to come in and access services that are available at the facility. That is the basis on which the Lord Advocate gave her statement of prosecution policy, which made it clear that this is about allowing people to access a service that they would otherwise not have been able to access. It is the first opportunity for many people to have conversations about things like mental health support and other treatment options, such as residential rehabilitation.

It is not an either/or scenario. The funding that we are putting in is additional to the funding that we have put into areas such as residential rehabilitation, where, since 2021, we have seen bed numbers rise by 20 per cent. We recognise that this is a national mission and that we have to focus on all possible forms of intervention that can save lives. I agree with Douglas Ross that we must face this appalling situation, but we must take all possible steps, including those that feel radical, such as this one, to reach all the people who can potentially benefit from the services that are available across Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is much interest in the subject, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Every death related to drug use is one too many and is utterly devastating for the loved ones who are left behind. Although the facility is not a silver bullet, I am proud of the significant step that has been taken to reduce harms and deaths in one of Scotland's most impacted cities.

Can the cabinet secretary speak to how the Scottish Government has engaged with those with lived experience and their families to ensure that the facility meets the needs and best supports service users?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with Clare Haughey that one life lost to a drug dependency is one life too many.

When the First Minister and I visited the safer drug consumption facility on Friday, I was able to speak to bereaved families who were part of the process of establishing it. I also spoke to people with lived experience who have helped to design the facility—the way that it looks and feels—and have been part of the interview panel for recruiting staff, to ensure that the cultural aspects of who is employed and how they approach their work are informed by lived experience. That is absolutely critical to the community's and service users' confidence in the facility, and it is critical to the endeavours through which we seek to address harm reduction and the number of deaths.

I am grateful to all those with lived experience, as well as service users and bereaved families, for the input that they have given to get the Thistle to this point.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I share the sentiments of members from across the chamber in welcoming the official opening of the overdose prevention pilot in Glasgow. I was fortunate enough to visit it last week with members of the joint committee on tackling drug deaths and drug harm, and it was clear to me that the facility is equipped to provide an opportunity to reach the established cohort of people in Glasgow who inject drugs in public and to provide them with the support or resources that they might need. I have always said that the facility has to be accessible and integrated with other services, particularly residential rehabilitation, given that the nearest such facility is Phoenix Futures, in Anniesland, which is some 5 miles away.

Can the cabinet secretary reassure members that the facility will be geared towards supporting people where they are at, without judgment or

setting tests that people are doomed to fail? Will he advise what assessment the Scottish Government has made of extending the opening hours of the facility from 12 hours a day, as at present? Will he provide an update on the approval of a licence for a drug-checking facility at the site?

Neil Gray: I thank Paul Sweeney for his long-standing interest and his campaigning in this field. Like him, on Friday, along with the First Minister, I was able to see for myself the facility and the approach that staff are taking, which is the stigma-free approach that Paul Sweeney says it should be.

The opening hours are a decision for the health and social care partnership to make. We have provided funding to enable the HSCP to get to this point, but it is for the HSCP to determine whether a shift in opening hours is needed or would help with the pilot.

My understanding, from what I heard on Friday, is that the location was picked deliberately to be near where community injecting has been widespread, to provide a service that is as close as possible to that particular element. We hope to avoid community injecting happening or to bring it into a safer space. As I said in response to Douglas Ross, the premise of the Lord Advocate's statement of prosecution policy is about the facility being a gateway to treatment and the road to recovery. The integration of the services within the facility—Paul Sweeney will know about the wide range of services that are available there—and with residential rehab facilities is crucial to the success of the pilot.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I know that the minister has already been asked this question, but he did not put any specifics on the record. Specifically, what metrics will be used to assess the success of the Thistle? In addition, what lessons will the Government draw from global examples such as analysis by Stanford University's Professor Humphreys to ensure that safer consumption rooms are part of a balanced and recovery-focused strategy to tackle drug deaths?

Neil Gray: As I set out in response to Douglas Ross, the success of the pilot will be based on the harm reduction and the reduction in the number of drug-related deaths in the vicinity. I am, quite rightly, regularly held accountable for the national picture. We can see localised numbers in the drug death statistics, which will clearly demonstrate over time what the pattern is and whether a new pattern is emerging as a result of the measure.

I reiterate that this is just one measure, and the second part of Ash Regan's question is instructive. This is one part of our national mission that goes

alongside the naloxone programme, the expansion of residential rehab, the community and voluntary sector funding that we provide through the Corra Foundation, and a range of other elements, including drug-checking facilities—which Paul Sweeney raised, but I did not address—on which our engagement with the Home Office continues. This is just one part of the wide suite of investments that we are making to reduce the number of drug deaths, and I look forward to seeing an improving picture, as I know Ash Regan does, too.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Douglas Ross asked specifically about the metrics for measuring success. Ash Regan asked the same question, and I will ask the question again, because I am not sure that the cabinet secretary is being anything other than vague. He is definite about the fact that one key measurement will be the reduction in drug deaths in Glasgow—we get that. He then talked about harm reduction. What metrics will be used to measure harm reduction? What does that mean?

Neil Gray: I know that Stephen Kerr will be aware of international evidence about the efficacy of drug consumption facilities in reducing wider harms. There is evidence of a reduction in the infections, such as HIV and hepatitis, that come from sharing needles and that type of behaviour. Those are some of the areas of harm reduction that I am talking about.

I would also want to be able to point to increasing engagement with some of the statutory and community services in Glasgow by people we have been unable to engage with previously. The evidence from the first day, yesterday, is that some of the people who were coming through the door were accessing those services for the first time. Those people were able to have conversations on taking a different path, and on starting a road to recovery, for the first time.

I understand that there is some vagueness to that, because the service is a preventative measure that it is hard to measure aside from through hard-nosed drug deaths statistics. However, I hope to point to the safer consumption facility making a difference in those areas.

Winter Heating Payment

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on the winter heating payment. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance regarding the statement. It appears that, once again, the content of a statement has appeared in the media before the statement has been made to Parliament—indeed, I note that the Scottish Government appeared to have an embargoed press release on its website at one minute past midnight.

I raise that because this is not the first time that issues such as the winter heating payment and broader matters have been pre-briefed to the media. If the Government contends that no detail in the statement was not already in the public domain, that begs the question of what point there is to having the statement at all. I believe the principle is that this chamber, and not the media, should be the place where statements are made, so I would appreciate your guidance on the matter, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Members are well aware of my expectation, in line with long-established guidance, that, when a ministerial statement has been scheduled, the content of that statement must first of all be shared with this Parliament. I have not had an opportunity to look into the matter that Mr O’Kane raises, but I will certainly do so.

I will pick up where I was regarding the next item of business, which is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on the winter heating payment. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:23

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am pleased to make a statement to members today, as asked for by the Scottish Conservatives, on the uptake of winter heating payment during the past five years.

Winter heating payment is the Scottish Government benefit to support people who are on low incomes with the cost of heating during the winter months. Our benefit replaced the Department for Work and Pensions cold weather payment in winter 2022-23. It provides a targeted, reliable and guaranteed annual payment of £58.75 to those who are most in need of help with their energy costs every winter, including people of

pension age, disabled adults and families who have responsibility either for a child under the age of five or for a disabled child.

The United Kingdom Government's cold weather payment previously provided £25 per cold spell, only when the average of the mean daily temperature recorded was equal to, or below, 0°C for seven consecutive days—an entire week. That UK Government benchmark is, of course, totally arbitrary, because temperatures are measured at weather stations that are often miles from people's homes, and it fails to take into account other factors, such as wind chill and driving rain, that can have a major impact on the temperature of people's homes—particularly those of people who are on low incomes.

The UK Government's reliance on an arbitrary and arcane definition of what is cold and what is not meant that, in winter 2021-22, absolutely no payments were made—not a single one—in areas of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Shetland, Orkney, Wick and Fife, for example.

Importantly, when planning our winter heating payment, we listened carefully to feedback from our public consultation and our social security experience panels, as we do with all our benefits, which we co-design with the people who will receive them. That is a marked difference between our approach and that of the UK Government.

People told us that they overwhelmingly supported removal of the cold-spell requirement. Age UK similarly supported that, and it has called on the UK Government to remove it. That is why our winter heating payment breaks the link with an arbitrarily-defined weather dependency and provides financial support no matter the weather, so that low-income households are paid automatically and know that they will be paid, rather than having the uncertainty of waiting for weather readings on seven consecutive days before they receive a payment.

Because of the cold-spell requirement, as few as 4,000 people received a payment in 2019-20 and just 11,000 got one in 2021-22. In sharp contrast, when our winter heating payment was launched in 2022-23, the total number of people who received it was 398,240. Official statistics show that more than 453,000 people got winter heating payments from the Scottish Government last winter, thanks to an investment of £25 million. This winter, we will invest even more—£26.8 million—in winter heating payments, which more than triples the £8.5 million that was provided on average by the DWP in each of the seven years before the introduction of our payment.

As of 15 December 2024, more than 218,000 winter heating payments had been made to people this winter, totalling £12.8 million, with the

remaining payments due to be completed by the end of next month. In recognition of the current pressures on household budgets, winter heating payment was uprated by 10.1 per cent for winter 2023-24, from £50 to £55.05, and by a further 6.7 per cent for this winter, to £58.75.

Eligibility for winter heating payment is linked to receipt of relevant reserved benefits, such as universal credit and pension credit. Although Scottish ministers have no formal role in the administration of reserved benefits, the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that Scottish people are supported to take up the benefits that they are entitled to. We have committed to investing more than £12 million in the provision of free income maximisation support, welfare and debt advice services in 2024-25, including support for the Citizens Advice Scotland money talk team service, which last year supported more than 9,000 older people as part of our co-ordinated benefit take-up strategy.

Of course, winter heating payment is not the only form of support that the Scottish Government provides to help people to meet their heating costs. In November, I announced that the Scottish Government would invest a further £20 million in the Scottish welfare fund's budget, to be distributed to councils in the current financial year in line with the existing distribution arrangements that have been agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. That increase will help councils to meet increased demands on the fund and will go some way towards providing vital support to people who are in crisis.

I also confirmed that we would invest an additional £20 million in the warmer homes Scotland scheme, which is our national fuel poverty scheme, taking the total investment in the scheme to £85 million in the current financial year. The scheme focuses on long-term, sustainable measures, and that additional funding will help approximately 1,500 additional households to install energy efficiency measures and more efficient heating systems, which will save households about £400 per year on average in energy bills.

Most important, I announced in November that I will bring forward regulations to introduce in winter 2025-26 a universal pension-age winter heating payment of at least £100 for every Scottish pensioner household, with those in receipt of a relevant low-income benefit receiving £200 or £300 depending on their age. That universal benefit will provide much-needed support that is not available anywhere else in the UK. It will deliver support to all Scottish pensioner households, as we always intended to do before the UK Government's decision to cut the winter fuel payment.

We are also continuing our child winter heating payment, which, last year, provided £7.8 million to support more than 33,000 children, young people and their families who had higher energy needs due to disability or a health condition. That benefit is not available elsewhere in the UK.

In total, this winter, we are forecasted to invest more than £65 million in our three winter heating benefits, which will provide vital support with energy bills to more than 630,000 people. All those programmes provide valuable support with energy bills to people across Scotland but, as I have previously highlighted in the chamber, we all recognise that households across the country acutely feel twin pressures: first, cuts to the social security budgets that have been made over many years by successive UK Governments—Conservative and now Labour—and, secondly, rising energy costs, despite Labour's promise before the election that people's energy bills would fall if it was in government; of course, those bills are set to rise again this month.

Already, this year alone, the Scottish Government has spent £134 million on mitigating the effects of UK Government welfare decisions. In doing so, we are working closely with our partners in local government across Scotland to support people who are in crisis.

Although we cannot mitigate every decision that is made by the UK Government, we are determined to provide support for the people of Scotland. Our winter heating payment is just one example of how we are using our devolved powers to make a positive difference and to support the people of Scotland with their rising energy costs. It is reliable, guaranteed, not dependent on arbitrary temperature readings, and designed in partnership with the people who are receiving it—and it provides support to more than double the number of people who previously got help under the DWP. Our winter heating payment is a very clear example of how the Scottish Government is doing more to support the people of Scotland through the long cold winter months.

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

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement, but the Scottish Government's proposed pension-age winter heating payment for winter 2025-26 is not a reinstatement of the previous UK Government's winter heating payment. That payment provided £200 to every pensioner—£300 to those over 80 years old—while the Scottish Government's policy

gives £100 as a universal payment. What criteria did the Scottish Government use to make the policy decision that, obviously, does not reinstate the previous payment?

Secondly, even if it disagreed with the previous criteria, did the Scottish Government give any consideration to whether the winter heating payment should include extra support for extreme weather situations?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am a bit confused about the principles behind where the Scottish Conservatives want to go on social security. In budget debates and in First Minister's question time, we are continually challenged to cut social security expenditure, but Liz Smith seems now to be asking me to spend more money than we are already providing to a scheme. If Liz Smith genuinely wishes to do that, budget negotiations are continuing, so she can explain to me and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government where the money would come from to deliver that.

Previously, we have gone over in great detail the details of the pension-age winter heating payment, and I am very pleased that the Scottish Government will reintroduce a universal winter heating payment for all pensioner households. That is exactly what people would expect their Government to do.

Given her questions about overall winter heating payments for those on low incomes, I take it, again, that Liz Smith thinks that we should be doing more than we are already doing and therefore spending more on social security. In my statement, I went through why I think that the principles behind our policy, based on co-design, have provided extra support and financial certainty for people at important times. If Liz Smith wishes us to spend more money on social security, I am happy to have those discussions with her, but we must be honest about the intent behind those questions and about whether she genuinely wishes me to deliver that. If she did, that would involve taking part in budget discussions; to date, that has not happened.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of the statement. The cabinet secretary and colleagues have said much in recent weeks about the impact of winter pressures and cold temperatures, but today's statement appears to be old numbers put together in a new way to suggest that the Scottish Government is taking action on those issues; perhaps that is why it was pre-briefed to the media.

I want to ask the cabinet secretary about this, because we have had this conversation in the chamber before. Scottish Labour has been calling

for a package of measures to support people this winter from that £41 million consequential that the Scottish Government received from the household support fund, which the cabinet secretary said did not exist. Instead, the cabinet secretary seems to have announced simply the plugging of gaps that were created by real-terms cuts in the previous budget. We have had no detail since that statement on the practical measures to deploy the funding. Will the cabinet secretary therefore outline how much of that funding is already out of the door and how many people it is supporting?

Finally, the cabinet secretary is aware that we have called for those consequentials to be used to reinstate the fuel insecurity fund as an alternative mechanism to target those who are most in need. Freedom of information responses have shown that, when the Government made the decision to cut that fund, fuel insecurity partners expressed great concern that they could no longer

“deliver innovative measures that were taking people out of crisis situations”.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that that move was regrettable? Will she confirm whether the Scottish Government has looked at the option to revive that fund in line with calls from this side of the chamber and campaigners?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The reason that the figures in today’s statement are already in the public domain is because we regularly produce and publish statements. I am here today because I was asked whether the Government could give this statement, and here I am, delivering it. I genuinely do not get why Paul O’Kane is surprised that the figures are already in the public domain; he usually complains that we do not publish enough information.

In relation to the £41 million, again, we are going over old ground, but let us go over it again, one more time. Until there is certainty about the totality of in-year consequentials, then I am sorry but I do not think that it is sensible for the Government to start talking and putting money out the door. That is the difference between being responsible about the public finances in Scotland, and what Mr O’Kane is asking me to do.

I go back to the point that I made to Liz Smith and note that the budget for next year has not yet passed. If Mr O’Kane wishes to see money going into the fuel insecurity fund, perhaps that—as well as mitigation for the two-child cap and the introduction of universal payments—might tempt him off the fence and away from abstaining and cause him to actually vote for the budget.

The best way to support people who are having difficulty with energy costs, however, is the social tariff. The Scottish Government, along with energy providers, is getting on with that work—to the

benefit of the UK Government, which should be doing that work. We will get on and do that work; however, once we have that working group and its recommendations, the UK Government better get on with delivering that.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I welcome the universal £100 winter fuel payment for 2025-26 for all pensioners who are not able to access the Labour Government’s means-tested UK winter fuel payment—which was not, of course, in its pre-election manifesto, and suddenly left many pensioners literally out in the cold.

However, many pensioners, such as me, were fortunate enough not to require the previous £300, and we paid it over to local charities. Although that option—that is, to remit to local charities—would still be available with the £100, would it be possible for the Scottish Government to provide a means by which pensioners such as myself could repay that money to the Scottish Government or, indeed, opt out?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Christine Grahame for that question, because that is a very important aspect as we try to look at the best way to use the finances that we have in order to support people.

Under our plans, clients will be able to opt out of our universal pension-age winter heating payment if they do not wish to receive it. In order to opt out of a payment, clients will first need to be on the Social Security Scotland systems. For that reason, for the first year of launch, clients will not be able to opt out until after Social Security Scotland has received and processed the client data from the Department for Work and Pensions. From year 2 onwards, we are working towards the introduction of a system within the agency where we will have the data available to manage client opt-outs.

I hope that that responds to the direct ask from Christine Grahame; it is an important point that we are endeavouring to build into the system in future years.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): According to the statement, as of 15 December, more than half the people entitled to the winter heating payment had not received any money, and it will be another five weeks until everybody receives the entitlement that they are due. Why is there such a delay in the payments coming through? In the year ahead, will the payments be made earlier than they were this year?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have already moved the payments forward because, in the first year of the payment—2022-23—the payments did not come through until spring.

The reason that the most recent payments are being made in February is that we take a second sweep of data from the DWP to ensure that those who are fully eligible at the time of entitlement are gathered up in the final payments. The reason why there are five weeks until the final payments are made to people is that we must wait for that DWP information to ensure that we have swept up absolutely everybody who is entitled to the payment. That is the right thing to do to ensure that we get as many people paid as possible.

I hope that that gives Mr Balfour reassurance that this is a sensible final step in the process to ensure that people get the money that they are entitled to.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Having spent the past week at home in the Highlands, I know just how harsh the cold is that many of my constituents are facing right now. I am glad that the Scottish Government continues to deliver different winter heating payments to them, despite the Labour Government's inexplicable decision to remove funding from pensioners across the Highlands and Islands this winter.

Can the cabinet secretary share what the uptake has been like for the different Scottish winter heating payments in the Highlands and Islands region?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The best way to respond to that is perhaps to repeat what I said to Mr Balfour: within five weeks, once the final payment session is through, I will be able to give Emma Roddick the full picture of what is happening in the Highlands and Islands region.

She points at a very important example, which I alluded to in my statement, which is that many communities, particularly those in islands authorities, did not receive any payments in previous years. That is the difference that we have made. For example, communities in Orkney and Shetland are receiving the benefit that they would not have received under the previous scheme.

However, I will respond to the member in writing once this year's payments are fully completed to give her that information and, I hope, reassurance about how we are delivering across the Highlands and Islands.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary referred to funding for the warmer homes Scotland scheme. What discussions has she had with her colleagues on the Government's consistent failure to spend the budget that it sets aside for area-based energy efficiency projects? Does she not agree that the failure to spend £62 million of the £192 million allocated in the past three years is appalling, as is the fact that research by the Chartered Institute of Building shows that fewer than 40 per cent of older

people are even aware of the Government's energy efficiency schemes?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Colin Smyth makes an important point about raising awareness of the schemes that are available. That becomes even more pressing in the cases of people who are no longer entitled to other forms of support. If the member will forgive me, I will get back to him in writing—or perhaps one of my colleagues will, as the specific aspects of that policy are within the net zero portfolio. I will ensure that he is provided with a response in writing.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): When Labour ditched the universal winter heating payment, it abandoned many vulnerable older people—not least those who qualify for but do not claim pension credit, who can be particularly vulnerable. Pension credit uptake might be a UK Government responsibility, but will the cabinet secretary give details of what the Scottish Government will do to maximise uptake among Scottish pensioners and boost their income so that, unlike the UK Government, we continue to do the right thing by them?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Bob Doris raises an important point about the need to encourage and support people to get the benefits that they are entitled to. That is why Scotland has a benefit take-up strategy in relation to our devolved benefits; it is the only part of the UK that has such a strategy.

Even where we do not have responsibility, as Mr Doris points out, we are keen to make sure that we are doing as much as possible. Work within Social Security Scotland on encouraging the take-up of pension credit is one example of that. I put on record again my thanks to councils, which have also worked exceptionally hard to attempt to increase the level of take-up of pension credit. That is an important piece of work that they have been undertaking, and I thank them for doing so.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): This payment in Scotland is undoubtedly welcome, but should we not be looking beyond mitigation at what we can do to ensure that everyone lives in comfortably warm homes, whatever the weather, whatever the season and whatever their income?

Too many homes are poorly insulated and drafty. A warmth audit of all domestic properties, perhaps starting with the properties of those in receipt of winter heating payment, might be a more transformative approach if that audit was then responded to systematically. Is that something that the cabinet secretary would consider?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Maggie Chapman for that suggestion. That points to the

ways in which statements can lead to potential solutions to the challenges that we share. I am sure that she and her colleagues in the Scottish Greens are also taking part in budgetary discussions with the Scottish Government as we move forward with our budget process. If she wishes that suggestion to be looked at as a priority by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and by my colleague Gillian Martin in her role as the Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy, we will be happy to take that under consideration in our budgetary discussions.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Although help with fuel bills is welcome, we must do more to bring down the overall cost of those bills. Area-based energy efficiency schemes have proven their worth, and more funding for those is welcome. However, too often, councils have insufficient notice of funding allocations and some councils appear unable to spend what they are given. Orkney Islands Council, in an area with the highest level of fuel poverty in the country, has consistently made full use of the area-based funding available. Like Colin Smyth, I urge the Government to review the scheme's operation to ensure that councils get more notice, or indeed multiyear funding, and that, where there are risks of underspends, reallocation of funds takes place in a timely fashion.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Liam McArthur raises an important point about certainty of funding. To focus on the request for multiyear funding, the Government takes that very seriously. The call for multiyear funding is being made in a number of different parts of different Government portfolios, and I recognise the point that he makes.

Clearly, it is challenging for the Scottish Government to move forward with further multiyear commitments when it is given only a one-year budget. That is why the work that the UK Government has been undertaking on spending reviews is exceptionally important. That will, I hope, provide some degree of certainty about what is happening in Scottish Government budgets over future years and will therefore allow us to take more decisions about where multiyear expenditure can be undertaken. We are endeavouring to do that already, both in revenue and capital, in different areas of Government—in the third sector and in culture, for example—but I take Liam McArthur's point about the need for that type of certainty in this area, too.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Labour promises a new direction, but now we see that what it means is that it will rush in brutal cuts to winter support for pensioners. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that betrayal underlines just how important it is that decisions on winter heating benefits are made here, where

our devolved Parliament can listen to vulnerable households and make the right decisions for the people of Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Marie McNair quite rightly recognises that Labour is now talking about a new direction. I take it that Labour realised that its change line was not quite working, with people realising that no change was happening.

Marie McNair raises an important point that goes to how we talk about social security. We had a near consensus—with the exception of the Scottish Conservatives, I think—on talking about social security as an investment in people and in our communities. We now have Scottish Labour—and, I see from the front pages of some of the papers today, the UK Labour Government—talking about handouts and cuts to social security. That highlights an obvious difference between this Government, which is, with the financial resources that we have, attempting to deliver for people who are still being impacted by a cost of living crisis, and a UK Government and Scottish Labour, which seem to be in step, talking about handouts and increasing stigma towards people on social security. That is a deeply disappointing new direction for Labour.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): In 2024, a number of energy suppliers restarted the process of installing prepayment meters without consent for customers who had fallen into debt. Given that those on prepayment meters are often the poorest and most vulnerable in society, and that they often pay more per unit for gas and electricity, will the cabinet secretary work with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets to identify how many pensioner households and other households are on PPMs? Will she press for an amnesty to allow existing customers to opt out of prepayment meters, and explore a ban on the future involuntary installation of such meters now and in the future?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Craig Hoy raises an important point. One challenge that we face is that a great deal of the powers in such areas lie not with the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament but down at Westminster. However, that does not prevent this Government from using its convening and facilitation powers to work with energy providers. I recently met with energy providers to discuss housing issues, for example.

Craig Hoy raises an important point about the difficulties that those on prepayment meters have, and the impact that such meters can have on people's debt levels and their ability to heat their homes. It is another area where we need to look carefully at what the Government in Scotland can do, using its convening and facilitation powers, as well as looking at the issues that we must continue to persuade the UK Government or Ofgem to take forward.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Under the previous UK cold weather payment, payments for residents of East Kilbride were conditional on the weather as it was recorded at Bishopton. Given the different winter climates in those areas, that approach disadvantaged people in East Kilbride, who often got no payout even when it was below freezing in the town. Can the cabinet secretary outline how many more people across the country are benefiting from the Scottish Government's winter heating payment, and can she assure households in East Kilbride that the injustice of the old Westminster scheme is now a thing of the past?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is fitting that we have a question about East Kilbride from Collette Stevenson on that matter, because I remember clearly that, as we debated what the new benefit would look like when it was devolved, her predecessor, Linda Fabiani, was one of the most vociferous campaigners to ensure that we got rid of the injustice of the previous arbitrary system, because it did not reflect what was happening in her local area.

I am very pleased that the Scottish Government has been able to deliver that certainty for Collette Stevenson's constituents and the constituents of members across the chamber. I will respond to her in writing—as I will respond to Emma Roddick, too—about the totality of the provision both in her constituency and throughout Scotland in order to reassure her about the difference that we have made, once again, this winter.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement.

Support for the Culture Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16092, in the name of Angus Robertson, on valuing culture: Scotland's support to the culture sector. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Angus Robertson to speak to and move the motion.

14:54

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I am delighted to open today's debate on how the Scottish Government and members across the chamber can best support Scotland's culture sector, so that it can continue to develop, innovate and, ultimately, thrive.

I have spoken to Parliament before about the intrinsic value and transformational potential of culture but, if members permit me, I will begin today by borrowing some words about the value of culture, which were crafted by our nation's new makar—the accomplished and highly regarded multilingual poet, Peter Mackay. He wrote:

"Culture and art is the space in which accidents happen for the better, where things collide into each other to form something new and unexpected, where we take all that we have learnt from the past and use it to fail again, fail better—in previously unimagined ways—and in so doing make a space in which other people too can think about the world afresh."

I thank Peter for expressing in an impactful way the unique power and vital nature of culture as a force that is essential to our development as human beings, communities and a nation on the world stage.

The Scottish Government's culture strategy for Scotland recognises how central culture is to our country's future prosperity and sets out a vision of a Scotland where everyone is able to live a cultural life of their choosing.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: Of course.

Sarah Boyack: I thank the cabinet secretary for taking my intervention, which fits into his points about the importance of culture to our communities.

Has the cabinet secretary met East Lothian Council or the Brunton Theatre Trust to discuss the future of the Brunton theatre, which is a key cultural venue in Musselburgh and East Lothian and urgently needs funding to secure its future?

Angus Robertson: I have not yet met representatives of either the council or the theatre, but I have offered and if there is a wish and a willingness to do so, I will of course be content to do just that.

We are now at a critical point in deciding how, collectively, we want to support culture in Scotland. How a nation values its many cultures and heritages, its artists, its creative people and its communities is an insight into the wider values and the priorities of that society, and I ask members to reflect on that during the debate.

As culture secretary, I am immensely proud of what is already being achieved in Scotland. The 2022 Anholt-Ipsos nation brands index ranked Scotland 11th for its cultural heritage and 12th for its contemporary culture when compared with 60 other participating nations. That is a testament to the expertise, dedication and practice of our cultural organisations, creative professionals and cultural workers, and to the vitality of community culture across the country.

In the past few years alone, I have witnessed astonishing growth in the screen sector in Scotland, with more quality productions than ever before choosing to come to Scotland, from Leith to Stornoway. Many members will have seen “The Outrun”, which used the natural beauty of the Orkney Islands to stunning effect and is just one of the recent examples of a successful Screen Scotland-supported production. Today sees the first broadcast of high-end Gaelic drama television series “An t-Eilean”—“The Island”—which can be seen on BBC Alba, BBC Four and the BBC iPlayer. I extend congratulations to MG Alba, BBC Alba, Black Camel Pictures, All3Media International and Screen Scotland.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: I would be delighted to give way to Sandesh Gulhane.

Sandesh Gulhane: Glasgow is full of culture and it is a fantastic city. However, on the point that you have just made about Screen Scotland and all the work in the film industry, multiple people who work across the creative industries—particularly in the film industry and TV—have approached me to say that jobs are increasingly hard to get. They also talk about being unemployed over the Christmas period and only sometimes picking up work. What will the Government do about that?

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

Cabinet secretary, I can give you the time back.

Angus Robertson: Sandesh Gulhane’s point is timeous, given the concerns that have been raised around the commissioning of public service

broadcasting in Scotland. If he has an interest in that area, I would be interested to hear not just his views but those of his constituents who have raised their concerns. I share some of those concerns about public service commissioning in relation to productions in Scotland. No doubt we will hear more about that in the weeks and months ahead.

I turn to the budget issue, which everybody agrees is key. I am sure that everybody is aware of the Scottish Government’s proposals for a draft budget, which, if the Scottish Parliament passes it in February, will be transformational for the culture sector. A significant uplift has been achieved despite the fiscal challenges that all portfolios face, which reflects the value that the Government places on culture in Scotland. With a £34 million boost in 2025-26, the budget brings the Scottish Government halfway to reaching its five-year commitment to provide at least £100 million more annually for the sector by 2028-29. I can also confirm that, for 2026-27, subject to the normal budget processes, our aim is to deliver a further £20 million increase for the sector.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Although the additional funding is very welcome, I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware that, right across Scotland, there is real concern about arts venues and organisations that are funded through local authorities that have been warned that their budgets for the coming year will be cut. How does the cabinet secretary square the announcement that he has just made about national funding with the impact that the budget is having at a local level?

Angus Robertson: I draw Murdo Fraser’s attention to the budget proposal, which sees funding go up for local government as well as for the culture sector. If he cares as much about that issue as he suggests in the chamber, I look forward to him voting for the Government’s budget in February.

A further £20 million in the next financial year will enable Creative Scotland to offer regular funding to the largest ever number of organisations across the country, ensuring that even more people can get involved in cultural and creative pursuits and benefit from the increased wellbeing that comes from self-expression, creativity and connecting with others through culture.

I know how important it is to ensure that that additional funding provides the maximum impact for those working across the sector. That is why the Scottish Government has committed to review how the sector is supported, including by carrying out a review of Creative Scotland. That will involve working with partners across the public, private and third sectors to find ways to grow the overall

funding pot for culture, to diversify funding streams and to support the sector to move forward on a more sustainable footing.

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

Angus Robertson: I would like to make some progress, if Mr Kerr would allow.

As part of that work, it is important that the remit and functions of Creative Scotland—one of the main distributors of public funding for culture—are reviewed to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the sector. As I announced yesterday, I am delighted that Dame Sue Bruce has agreed to be the independent chair of the Creative Scotland review. My officials are already in discussion with Dame Sue about her role, with a view to the chair publishing recommendations by the end of the summer 2025.

The Scottish Government has also launched a short survey that asks for the views of people who are working across or have an interest in the culture sector about what they value now and what their priority needs will be going forward. That marks the beginning of an on-going conversation with the culture sector about its future requirements, which will inform the scope of the sector support review. I am always particularly interested to hear the views of our cultural and creative workforce about how they can best be supported. I also encourage the political parties represented here in the chamber and MSPs of all parties to take part in the survey.

I turn to the budget. If the budget bill is passed and the additional funds for culture are secured, we will introduce a brand-new £4 million culture and heritage capacity fund from the next financial year, to provide much-needed tailored support, funding and guidance to help build capacity and resilience in the organisations that need it most.

That is also relevant when considering the opportunities and challenges for festivals. I am sure that there is not one person in the chamber today who has not attended and enjoyed one of Scotland's local, national or international festivals. There is so much on offer, and 2025 is no exception. Celtic Connections, which is one of our most successful winter festivals, is set for another internationally acclaimed showcase of talent and diversity this week. An additional £4 million is earmarked to support Scotland's festivals. That will include £3 million to significantly increase our festivals expo fund to expand its reach beyond festivals in Edinburgh and Glasgow, in recognition of the importance of festivals right across Scotland in providing opportunities for the wider culture sector.

Stephen Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angus Robertson: I have already given way a number of times to Mr Kerr's colleagues. If he does not mind, I am going to make some progress. I will see how I am doing for time at the end, and I will be happy to give way to him then or during the summing up.

I also understand that there is much more to be done to support Scotland's festivals to reach their fullest potential. That is why new funding will also support the activity of the newly established partnership for Scotland's festivals. Members of the partnership have been drawn from across the sector, and I am already impressed by the constructive, collaborative and inclusive approach that it is taking to develop priority actions that will help to bolster festivals, large and small, across the country.

I turn to our national cultural institutions. Our national collections, our centre for design and our performing companies are hubs for international exchange and cultural excellence. They contribute significant amounts to the economy and support the lifelong learning, health and wellbeing of our communities. This Government recognises the importance of our national cultural institutions, and that is why we are increasing funding to the national collections and our national performing companies, as well as to our national centre for design, the V&A Dundee.

The Government believes that culture and creative expression enliven our communities, shaping their distinct identities and making them attractive places in which to live, work and visit. Every day, culture and creativity happen in communities across Scotland without Government support. However, to facilitate even greater access to community-driven creative activity locally, we have allocated additional funding to restart the award-winning culture collective programme and to expand the creative communities programme.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: I hope that the member will forgive me for not doing so. I have already taken a number of interventions and I want to share a lot of good news with those in the chamber.

Creative people play a unique and central role in shaping the democratic, diverse, open and innovative society in which we live today, generating ideas and innovation and imagining new futures. People who create have the right to earn a fair living from artistic and cultural professional pursuits and pathways that enable people to develop creative and technical skills in their chosen creative careers, and that should be open to all.

In 2021, gross value added in the arts, culture and the creative sector was about £4.511 billion.

We know that the sector is also a significant employer, employing about 155,000 people in 2022. The Government understands that fair work first is a key driver for achieving sustainable, inclusive economic growth for the sector, which is why I established the culture fair work task force to support the sector's aspirations in that area, with the aim of developing recommendations for a fair work agreement for Scotland's culture sector by 1 June 2025.

Of course, cultural and creative participation should be nurtured from a young age, and an uplift in culture funding will enable the Scottish Government's long-standing investment in the nationwide youth music initiative and funding of the world-class Sistema Scotland programme to continue.

Nurturing a strong current and future cultural workforce is essential to fostering growth in Scotland's creative industries. The Government will increase funding for Screen Scotland's successful production growth fund by £2 million in the next financial year to attract international investment and encourage large-scale productions to choose Scotland for shooting, post-production and visual effects. That additional support for Scotland's growing film and television industries will provide even more opportunities for skills and talent to develop across a range of sectors.

Building on Scotland's wider international reputation for cultural excellence and innovation, and to support the sector in its cultural and creative ambitions overseas, we will also scope the establishment of a support service for cultural export and exchange. The service will seek to build on current successes by developing connections, providing platforms and supporting cultural and creative organisations to develop the skills and capacity that are needed to work internationally.

Over the past number of years, I have heard repeated calls from many members here today, and from the sector, for an increase in Government funding for culture. Today, I have outlined our proposals to provide just that. It is now critical that members from all parties work together to ensure that that opportunity for transformational change is realised.

I very much welcome the ideas from colleagues across the chamber about how we collectively better serve and strengthen the sector. I look forward to hearing positive contributions to that welcome debate. I want to work with all members in all parties to realise our shared ambition for culture in Scotland. I very much hope that members from all parties will support the planned increase in culture funding through the parliamentary process in the coming weeks.

I move,

That the Parliament celebrates arts and culture in Scotland in all their diverse forms, past, present and emerging; recognises the transformational impact that they can have on people's lives across Scotland; welcomes the economic contribution that the cultural and creative industries workforces make to society and the economy; acknowledges the importance of the community culture sector, and commends the innovative local organisations, in both rural and urban areas, for the work that they do to support participation in cultural pursuits; considers that a strong and successful culture sector is central to the prosperity of the nation; welcomes that, against a backdrop of cultural funding being cut by the UK Government, the draft Scottish Government Budget for 2025-26 increases frontline culture funding by £34 million, and believes that Scotland's cultural communities can be supported to continue to develop and innovate in exhibition, performance and participation in Scotland's artistic life.

15:09

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I very much welcome the fact that we are having a debate on the importance of the culture sector. On a note of consensus, I agree with a lot of what the culture secretary has said about the importance of the culture sector to Scotland. The sector has a value in itself as an expression of our national identity and in allowing people to participate in the arts, enriching their life experience and allowing both young and old to develop their talents.

We should also recognise the role of the many volunteers throughout Scotland who participate in the arts and allow others to participate. Without them, many of the arts activities, festivals and events that take place in Scotland simply would not be able to happen.

There is also an enormous economic benefit from arts and culture. The creative industries are estimated to be worth around £5.8 billion to Scotland and to support tens of thousands of jobs. From local events such as Highland games, which are run throughout the summer, to the outstanding output of our national companies such as Scottish Opera, the arts are there for everyone and help to attract visitors from around the globe to contribute to our economic growth as a nation.

The Scottish Government—we have just heard this from the culture secretary—has been crowing about the support for the culture sector in the draft Scottish budget for the coming financial year. The culture secretary has talked about a game-changing increase of £34 million in the budget to support arts and culture, much of which will be allocated to the funding body Creative Scotland. Those additional funds are welcome, as they come on the back of a very difficult period for culture funding. In the previous financial year, there was a cut of nearly £5 million in the budget allocation for arts and culture. The proposed

funding for 2025-26 not only replaces that but provides a substantial uplift.

However, although the increased funding is undoubtedly welcome, it tells only part of the story. Giving evidence to the Parliament's Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee last week, the National Galleries of Scotland warned that budget pressures might lead to it having to shut one of its buildings, which currently comprise the Scottish national gallery and the Royal Scottish Academy on the Mound, the Scottish national portrait gallery on Queen Street and the two buildings of the Scottish national gallery of modern art. The Scottish budget for 2025-26 gives NGS a 9 per cent rise in funding. However, the rise in staffing costs, which is driven partly by the United Kingdom Government's increase in employer national insurance contributions and partly by Scottish National Party policies, such as the cutting of the working week for state employees from 37 to 35 hours and the prohibition on compulsory redundancies, means that that organisation—that is just one—simply cannot balance the books.

Anne Lyden, the NGS director general, told the committee that she was having to look at restricting opening hours or even closing one of the sites entirely to save costs. In the same evidence session, Historic Environment Scotland said that it was having to look at introducing entry fees for some sites that are currently free to visit to address its budget black hole.

It is not just at the national level that we see the sort of financial pressures that I alluded to in my earlier intervention on the cabinet secretary. At the weekend, along with hundreds of other locals, I attended a rally in Perth. Representatives of communities across Perth and Kinross were there to show their support for local libraries that are under threat of closure. In order to address a funding gap, Culture Perth and Kinross, an arm's-length body that is wholly funded by SNP-run Perth and Kinross Council, has proposed shutting five local libraries. We heard time and again from speakers at the rally that those libraries are not just a resource for borrowing books but important hubs for community life. They host a number of activities, and their loss would have a devastating impact, particularly on the young, the elderly and the disadvantaged.

That pattern is repeated right across Scotland. Libraries are under threat of closure in Moray and Aberdeenshire and cultural venues face closure. Dundee Contemporary Arts, for example, is warning that its financial future is still unclear, as Dundee City Council seeks to make savings of £15 million. Museums are also under pressure. The briefing for this debate from Museums Galleries Scotland gives some examples. Alyth

museum in Perth and Kinross has been closed, and Dundee City Council is proposing to cut funding to the Dundee Heritage Trust, which runs the important Verdant Works museum and the RRS Discovery attractions. In Stirling, uncertainty over funding has led the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum to warn that it might have to sell off some of its historic artefacts to compensate for the lack of investment by the local authority.

That is happening right across Scotland. I will give another example from Stirling. The Labour administration on the council is looking to scrap music tuition in schools. That is a vital cultural resource that is an important component in helping to deliver well-rounded educational opportunities, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents might not be able to afford to pay for private tuition.

There are also pressures elsewhere. Last week, I raised in the chamber the issue of music venues that are under severe financial pressure because of rising costs, not the least of which are the national insurance increases. Music venues were given 40 per cent business rates relief in the recent budget. That is a welcome intervention, but it applies only to those with a rateable value of up to and including £51,000. According to the Music Venue Trust, that excludes one third of its members, which are being put at a competitive disadvantage when compared with similar venues south of the border, where that constraint does not apply. The likes of the Voodoo Rooms in Edinburgh, Nice N Sleazy in Glasgow and Hootananny in Inverness will get no financial benefit at a time when they are seeing substantial rising costs.

While all that goes on, Creative Scotland faces serious questions about its future. My colleague Stephen Kerr will say more about that later in the debate. Last year's decision to award the Rein project more than £80,000 in public money was nothing short of a scandal. It transpired that that money was going towards the production of what was, in effect, a pornographic film featuring live sex. Creative Scotland's explanations about what due diligence was done before the funding was awarded have been utterly unconvincing. The project should have been properly investigated before any payment of public money was made. If such an investigation was not done, the organisation was not carrying out the appropriate checks.

That is not where issues with Creative Scotland begin and end. It was also rocked by the disclosure that a member of staff had urged a shop not to stock gender-critical books, including, specifically, a publication by the Scottish poet and performer Jenny Lindsay. Although the staff member in question was disciplined, that situation

raises serious questions about the culture and operation of the very body that is supposed to encourage free speech and expression in a diverse Scotland.

It is welcome that Creative Scotland is now under review by the Scottish Government. I was interested to hear the announcement about the appointment of Dame Sue Bruce to conduct that review, and we await further details of the likely timescale and how the review will be conducted. It is not the principle of having an arm's-length arts funding body that is in question, but rather whether, given its history of errors, Creative Scotland is a body that is fit for purpose that can have the confidence of both the culture sector and the wider Scottish population.

Although the Scottish National Party might crow about the additional funding for culture in the coming budget, the serious problems that the sector faces are substantial and they are not going away. Unless we start to address those problems—in particular, the potential loss of local facilities and activities across Scotland—Scotland's cultural offer to our own population and to visitors will be diminished. Those are the points covered in the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S6M-16092.3, to leave out from second “welcomes” to end and insert:

“recognises the important contribution that volunteers make to the vitality of Scotland's culture sector; acknowledges that the culture sector has been subjected to repeated budgetary mismanagement by the Scottish Government and that the draft Budget 2025-26 still leaves the sector in a precarious position; notes that large music venues are not supported by the provisions on business rates relief in the draft Budget; recognises that key cultural areas, such as libraries and music tuition, still face cuts due to the constraints facing local authority budgets; notes that Creative Scotland remains under review by the Scottish Government, and trusts that public funds will not in future be used to support pornographic material, and urges the Scottish Government to foster innovation and participation in Scotland's culture sector to ensure that it remains vibrant for generations to come.”

15:15

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour welcomes the debate on valuing and supporting Scotland's culture sector, because Scottish Labour has consistently supported the sector's efforts to receive proper funding. We recognise the funding crisis that has engulfed cultural organisations and workers for far too long; indeed, we have used our debating time in Parliament to lead calls for supporting the culture sector and for the Scottish Government to do the right thing and to keep its funding promises.

Scotland's cultural organisations have faced a perfect storm of crises and a constant cycle of promises followed by cuts. People are right to

question why we are now having a debate in Government time about support for the culture sector. I presume that it is because, after years of uncertainty and standstill funding since 2018—as Creative Scotland reminded us last week—the cabinet secretary believes that the Government finally has something positive to say or, in other words, it has stopped adding to the financial problems that the sector has been facing.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Neil Bibby: I give way to Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: The reality is that that debate is happening now. If self-congratulation were an Olympic sport, Angus Robertson would win the gold at every Olympics.

Neil Bibby: I will come on to that. I would certainly not disagree with Mr Kerr about that.

Of course we welcome the intention to increase the culture budget for the next financial year, as has been announced in the draft budget: it would be churlish not to. We welcomed the Government's statement of intent, back in 2023, to increase funding. We demanded that the cabinet secretary set out a timeline for delivery, and I have been holding the Government to account so that it keeps its funding promises ahead of the draft budget.

I wish to make two important points. First, the welcome uplift in funding for Scotland's arts and culture budget is a direct result of the new United Kingdom Labour Government's record funding settlement to the Scottish Government. With £5.2 billion more coming to Scotland over the next two years, the cabinet secretary simply cannot argue that that is a coincidence.

Secondly, I do not think that anyone in the culture sector is going to be eternally grateful to the Scottish National Party Government just for keeping a promise to provide restorative funding.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I, too, celebrate the increase in funding from the Scottish Government. Will Neil Bibby reflect on the continued, sustained and disproportionate impact of Brexit across our entire arts and culture sector? As I hear time and again in my capacity as convener of the cross-party group on music, it is really hurting. Is Neil Bibby prepared to come out in favour of arts organisations, given the damage of Brexit?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back, Mr Bibby.

Neil Bibby: I was not going to mention Brexit in this speech, but Ms Thomson has raised it, and there are issues relating to Brexit that the

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee is considering in trying to improve the Brexit deal that we have—ensuring that there are more visas for touring artists, for example.

I return to the budget. Anne Lyden, who is the director general of National Galleries of Scotland, warned Parliament last week that

“it is very welcome that additional funding is coming to culture, but it is quite simply too little, too late. That is why we still find ourselves in a state of precarity.”

We often hear that the crisis facing the sector is a result of the pandemic. Ms Lyden was also right when she said:

“I do not think that we are still recovering from Covid; we are recovering from before Covid. Year on year, adequate funding has not been coming in.”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 9 January 2025; c 8.]

There is no need for the Scottish Government or the cabinet secretary to pat themselves on the back and say, “Everything is hunky-dory.” Those are not the only concerns that exist—there are many more.

Keith Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Neil Bibby: I am sorry—I will not take one just now.

The Musicians Union, in its briefing for today’s debate, rightly raised the issue of how money is allocated, saying that

“Increased funding must also drive the delivery of fair work for the creative industries, with funding for the arts providing a key mechanism to achieve this through more robust funding conditionality.”

Given the cabinet secretary’s earlier remarks, I hope that we make progress towards that point.

As Murdo Fraser said, the Music Venue Trust has raised concerns about the lack of support for larger music venues, such as the Voodoo Rooms, which is in the cabinet secretary’s constituency. As Murdo Fraser also highlighted, reassurances are needed regarding stronger safeguards after the scandal of public funds being wrongly awarded by Creative Scotland to the sexually explicit film project, *Rein*.

In yesterday’s *The Scotsman*, an article by Brian Ferguson summarised significant concern that Creative Scotland

“will be forced to spread the jam really thinly”

when funding decisions are made, because the cabinet secretary has wished for

“the maximum number of artistic organisations to receive the funding.”

Clearly, everyone wants more organisations to be supported, but the Government and Creative

Scotland need to provide clarity on how the additional budget will affect organisations that have been on standstill funding.

For example, the highly successful Beacon Arts Centre in Greenock, which raised 70 per cent of its own income, is just one organisation that is looking for clarity and says that an uplift in its funding will be

“crucial to ensuring the survival of the Beacon for future generations and delivering their ambitions.”

That includes creating new posts, expanding its programme and supporting the work of emerging artists. My colleagues Foysol Choudhury, Colin Smyth, Michael Marra and Paul Sweeney will all raise issues relating to their local areas in their speeches this afternoon.

The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee has recognised that “confidence remains low” in the sector because of that uncertainty, and trust still needs to be rebuilt because of the SNP Government’s actions. The sector has faced a constant cycle of promises followed by cuts. Despite the planned funding increase, cultural organisations cannot be fully certain that they will receive it, because promised funding has failed to materialise promptly in previous financial years, including the current one.

In December 2022, John Swinney announced a £6.6 million cut to Creative Scotland’s budget. In February 2023, after pressure, he reinstated it, but the very same cut was reimposed in September 2023. We heard more promises one month later, but in August 2024, Creative Scotland closed the open fund due to uncertainty over its funding from the Scottish Government. There were more than two years of the Scottish Government causing anxiety by doing the hokey cokey on culture funding, so no wonder that confidence remains low.

Indeed, it has not just been two years—there have been 18 years of overpromising and underdelivering by the SNP. We have a culture sector that is in crisis: festivals have gone, theatres have shut their doors, nearly 100 libraries have closed, historic buildings such as the former territorial army building in Paisley are being demolished, and children and young people are not getting the opportunities that they deserve.

To sum it all up, this week, just 11 days before Burns night, we were told by the Scottish Qualifications Authority that interest in our national bard, Robert Burns, is on the wane in our schools. The move to downgrade Burns from higher English is a slight on Scottish culture.

This does not look like a Government that values culture. People who care about Scotland’s culture sector should not have had to campaign so

vociferously and fight to get the funding that was pledged to them, but they had to do that. When they do not have to do so, the Scottish Government can say that it values and supports Scotland's culture sector.

I move amendment S6M-16092.2, to leave out from second "welcomes" to end and insert:

"acknowledges the scale of the crisis that the culture sector has been suffering over a number of years; notes that the Scottish Government has not held a debate on support for the culture sector in the current parliamentary session until now; welcomes the intention to increase the culture budget by £34 million in 2025-26, following the record budget settlement of £47.7 billion to the Scottish Government from the UK Labour administration; notes the observation by the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee that the culture sector's 'confidence remains low due to the lack of clarity from the Scottish Government regarding its priorities for the additional investment', and believes that Scotland's cultural communities must be supported to continue to develop and innovate in exhibition, performance and participation in Scotland's artistic life."

15:26

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am pleased to open the debate for the Scottish Greens. My dad, who is a professional musician, instilled in his two daughters not just a deep love for a wide range of music, but a profound appreciation for the power of creativity and artistic expression, and how it shapes us as individuals and enriches our communities. I grew up playing lots of different instruments, including some indigenous Zimbabwean ones—not always very well, I have to say. I am sorry that, now, I do not get to make music as often as I would like to or probably should.

Culture is not a luxury and it should never be an afterthought. It is the beating heart of who we are, the rhythm of our communities, the melody of our shared stories and the brushstroke of our identities. Art, music, dance, theatre, storytelling and heritage are not ornaments on the edges of our lives, but are woven into the fabric of what it means to be human. Culture is how we make sense of the world around us, how we connect with one another and how we dare to dream of better futures. Hamish Henderson said that it is the "carrying stream", connecting us to the past and the future.

It is through culture that we express sorrow, joy, resistance and hope, and it is how we remember our histories and imagine our tomorrows. Our rich cultural heritage in Scotland—rooted in the songs of the north-east, the tales of the Borders and the murals of our cities—shows us just how deeply culture runs through our veins.

Culture exposes the dynamics of power, class and production. It offers us a means to counter the

pervasive nature of capitalist realism and to envision alternatives to the oppressive pressure of the productivist economy.

Culture must never—as it is considered by some of us—be the preserve of just the privileged and the elite: it belongs to us all. It thrives in the local ceilidh as much as it does in the grand concert hall. It is alive in the grass-roots theatre productions, the community choirs and the graffiti art on our city walls.

Take Sistema Scotland's Big Noise programme, for example. Its incredible projects are transforming lives in communities such as Torry in Aberdeen and Douglas in Dundee—communities that often feel forgotten and neglected. The Big Noise Torry project brings children together through music, and gives them not just instruments to play but opportunities to grow in confidence, find their voice and build friendships. Similarly, Big Noise Douglas empowers young people through the joy of creating music and shows them that they can shape their own futures. Those projects are shining examples of how culture can heal, uplift and inspire, and they do so across Scotland for just over £2.5 million a year of Scottish Government money.

The Belmont cinema in Aberdeen is another powerful example of community-driven culture. For years, it was a gathering place to share experience of the magic of film, to connect with stories from around the world and from people's own streets, to meet friends and strangers, and to escape the everyday and find alternative realities. Its doors are currently closed and I commend the passion and work of Belmont Community Cinema Ltd, which is a group of ordinary folk with steely determination to bring the Belmont back to life not only as a building and cinema, but as a space for the community, by the community—one where people can come together, share ideas, learn different skills and celebrate the power of storytelling. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for his engagement with the Belmont and hope that we will continue to see positive progress on that.

Liam Kerr: I entirely associate myself with Maggie Chapman's comments about the Belmont. Is she as concerned as I am that Aberdeen Performing Arts last week reported a £900,000 drop in revenue last year, alongside rising costs? Does she share my desire for the cabinet secretary to take proactive steps to inform himself about that and to help Aberdeen Performing Arts, as we hope he will help the Belmont tomorrow?

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

Maggie Chapman: I am absolutely concerned about that, too. It points to the broader issue of

how culture is often seen only as an add-on and not as something that we must all take seriously as being intrinsic to who we are as human beings.

Dundee Contemporary Arts—DCA—is a beacon of creativity and innovation for Scotland. It provides not just a platform for world-class exhibitions but a space where people of all ages can explore their creativity through printmaking, film and digital art. It is a hub of learning, inspiration and connection that reminds us of the vital role that cultural institutions play in enriching our lives and strengthening our communities.

That is why the Scottish Greens are committed to championing culture not as an optional extra, but—as I said—as an essential part of a fairer and greener society. Culture creates jobs and enriches our economy. We believe that the culture sector and creative industries can be the backbone of a wellbeing economy, but culture's value is far deeper than its monetary worth. Culture nurtures wellbeing, fosters understanding and builds resilience. In a world where divisions are growing and crises abound, culture reminds us of our shared humanity and our capacity for empathy and compassion.

However, culture is too often underfunded, undervalued, and overlooked. Artists struggle to make a living, museums and galleries fight for survival and working-class, young or diverse voices are too often drowned out or ignored.

We welcome the Scottish Government's additional investment in culture, but multiyear funding is essential and really cannot wait. I hope that the cabinet secretary will address that in his closing remarks. Sustained investment now would lead to long-term benefits for our communities, our economy and our climate. Such investment is not an act of charity but an act of justice. When we fund culture, we fund creativity, connection, and community. When we champion heritage, we honour those who came before us and inspire those who come after us. When we celebrate art and music, we celebrate the infinite potential of the human spirit.

Let us recognise culture for what it truly is—a lifeline, a compass and a mirror. Let us protect it, nurture it and share it widely, because culture is not just what we do: it is who we are.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a little time in hand but any interventions must be brief.

15:33

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I very much welcome the motion before us today, which affords us a rare opportunity to debate something that seldom captures our

attention in this chamber and far less captures Government time.

The subject comes before us on an auspicious day for the Scottish culture sector, given the assurances that can now be made about the future of the old Royal high school building a few hundred yards from here, which has moved a step closer to becoming a new national centre for music, thanks to a £5 million grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Once considered a possible home for our reconvened Parliament, the building is now set to be filled with music, sound and activity—a far cry from the discordant clamour that we would have graced its walls with in the past 25 years if we had taken occupancy.

On a previous occasion when we debated a motion on culture, I spoke about how important the arts and the culture sector can be in supporting and unifying us during fractious and turbulent times—a theme that was captured very well in an eloquent speech by Maggie Chapman. Arts and culture provide a form of refuge, allowing us to shut out the outside world for a little while. They can also deliver a powerful message about the society that we live in or the society that we seek to be, making us think about different perspectives on issues. Theatres, museums and music venues can become a vital part of any community—a hub, and the beating heart of the community, be it urban or rural—and they can play an important role in our daily lives.

Despite how often we talk about the sector's importance, however, it often plays second fiddle to other pressing concerns. Many aspects of public life do not get the time or the attention that they deserve in the debates that take place in the chamber, but it is important that we afford time to consider culture. Given the sector's contribution to our country, our society and its economy, we simply do not give it the airtime that it needs.

As an MSP for Edinburgh, I have previously talked in the chamber about the Edinburgh international festival, the fringe and the other festivals that make our capital one of the most vibrant cities on the planet in the month of August. Millions of visitors descend on the capital each year, generating vital economic benefit, and many businesses depend on that vibrancy and the cultural injection that we get each year. The festivals are often seen as the jewel in the crown of Scotland's cultural offering, with many renowned theatre groups, musical acts, dance troupes and comedians coming from all over the world to take part.

However, the beauty of the festivals has always been the lesser-known talents and the smaller groups that make up such a large part of the programme and the careers that it has launched—not least that of the renowned comedian Tony

Slattery, who very sadly died today. As the executive director of the international festival, Francesca Hegyi, told me, the survival of the festivals is not inevitable, and it is often the smaller arts groups that sustain them, so we must sustain those groups. In recent years, they, like many others in the sector, have had to fight not just for attention but for funding. I was by no means alone in the Parliament in supporting the open letter that was sent to the Scottish Government last summer that appealed for the open fund to be reinstated.

Although I agree with much of the Government's motion, I find it slightly galling that it does not acknowledge the Government's role in the wider uncertainty that the sector has had to contend with over the past few years. There is a spectre of revisionism within its lines. Culture and the arts sector have undoubtedly been dealt a bad hand by factors beyond anyone's control, but also, through the sin of omission, by the SNP Government. First, there was the pandemic, during which too many found themselves excluded from Government support programmes. That was followed by the cost of living crisis and the energy crisis, and the sector then had to put up with the Scottish Government messing it around. Money was repeatedly promised and then taken away, leaving people feeling uncertain and betrayed and unable to plan. We saw companies and artists having to change their plans to make time for lengthy, last-minute funding applications. It is hard for companies to pay the rent and hire the people they need for the productions that they wish to stage if there is a shadow hanging over the key funding programmes that represent the lifeblood of our cultural offering and our culture sector in Scotland. I hope that the Scottish Government will reflect on its actions and that the cabinet secretary will address that in his closing remarks.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will happily take an intervention from Stephen Kerr.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Does Alex Cole-Hamilton agree that our culture is also threatened by its lack of presence in our schools? Neil Bibby mentioned the news about the place of Burns in the curriculum, and we have also heard about Shakespeare and the lack of drama and music. Those things are now called extracurricular, but they are actually core to the curriculum of learning. Does the member agree that that seedbed of culture is under threat because of this Government's neglect?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Stephen Kerr's point is exceptionally well made. Within each of us, there

is a fuse that is linked to a cultural explosion that needs to be lit at some point in our lives and, more often than not, that happens during schooling. I remember when I was first interested in theatre and the words of Shakespeare, and the war poetry that we learned in first and second year of high school. Those things stimulated in me a lifelong love affair with literature, poetry and the arts more generally.

It feels as though there has always been something of a rift between artists and the body that oversees them, which is Creative Scotland. There was a very public falling-out in 2012, and again in 2018, before the Government's recent funding choices put the body in a very difficult position. Many artists will tell you that Creative Scotland is not always an easy body to deal with. However, like it or not, it is in effect the primary incubator for new artistic talent and cultural ventures in this country. It therefore needs to be up to scratch: capable of operating in the interests of the sector that it serves and open to making changes—adaptive and reasoning. I therefore absolutely wish Dame Sue Bruce well with her review. The review is in good hands and I encourage organisations and freelancers to tell her about their interactions with the body and what they need in the future.

We must always strive to ensure that those organisations, festivals and events that provide so much lifeblood to our towns and cities, are properly funded. We do not debate this topic enough, but I welcome the Government's motion, which we will support, and I thank it for the time that it has afforded to the subject.

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

15:41

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and I welcome members' speeches.

Arts and culture play a vital role in the lives of people across Scotland. They enrich our communities, support our economy and provide a space for creativity and connection. I fully support the motion, which recognises the profound value of culture and its impact on wellbeing, education and social inclusion.

The Scottish Government's commitment to front-line arts and culture funding, with £34 million allocated in the draft budget for 2025-26, is a welcome and much-needed step at a time when culture investment is being cut in other parts of the UK. The Scottish Government continues to invest in its culture sector, acknowledging the role of culture in both individual wellbeing and the economic prosperity of communities. That stark

contrast highlights how much we in Scotland value culture as not a luxury but a core part of who we are.

Culture encompasses language, literature, traditions, arts and more. However, we know that access to culture is not always equitable. Research from the National Trust for Scotland highlights how existing inequalities affect cultural participation.

Ensuring access to culture can tackle social isolation, improve mental health and foster a sense of belonging. It also drives economic growth, both at the national level—through international festivals that have already been spoken about, such as the Edinburgh festival fringe, which brings millions to our economy each year—and at the local level, through smaller, community-based events. The 2020 culture strategy for Scotland recognises those benefits and emphasises the empowerment of communities through cultural participation.

That approach is evident in my constituency, where innovative organisations are making a real difference. We have already heard about Sistema Scotland, and I am happy to talk about it again. Its Big Noise programme in Raploch has transformed lives through music, by providing free, high-quality orchestral tuition to children. Big Noise fosters creativity, discipline and confidence, and brings families and communities together, building resilience and pride.

Independent evaluations show that the Big Noise programme improves educational attainment, mental health and social skills, demonstrating the lasting impact of cultural investment. As a flagship community project in Scotland, Big Noise is an excellent example of how culture can have a direct positive impact on some of our most deprived areas, giving young people an opportunity to succeed and realise their potential.

The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum continues to play a central role in preserving and showcasing local heritage. With a diverse range of exhibitions and outreach programmes, it engages people of all ages to have a deeper connection to Stirling's history and identity. To pick up on Murdo Fraser's points, I am hopeful that funding will be found from the budget of the local authority, which is run by Labour and the Tories, to help that amazing organisation.

Creative Stirling adds another layer of vibrancy by supporting local artists.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Does Evelyn Tweed agree that it would really help if Stirling Council brought in a visitor levy? If we had a visitor levy in the city, we would be able to invest in so many of the incredible

cultural organisations that we have, from the Smith to the other bodies that she mentioned.

Evelyn Tweed: That is a lever that is open to the council, and probably one that should be considered.

As I was saying, Creative Stirling is an amazing local organisation, and its work bridges the gap between grass-roots creativity and wider community engagement. That ensures that urban and rural Stirling remains a hub of cultural activity. I cannot forget the amazing work that all those organisations did during the pandemic, which really kept local people going.

Stirling Pride, which was held for the first time in September, is another example of culture bringing communities together. The event featured music, theatre and art workshops, while businesses and charities hosted inclusive activities. Feedback from the event highlighted demand for more regular LGBTQ+ events across Stirling, particularly in rural areas. Organisers have already responded by securing funding for a rural pride tour, bringing cultural activities such as ceilidhs, concerts and film screenings to smaller communities.

Rural Scotland is disadvantaged when it comes to access to arts and culture, but by addressing barriers such as cost, accessibility and transport, those events will ensure that cultural opportunities are truly inclusive. Through them, rural communities from Strathblane to Killin, and Fallin to Aberfoyle, are being connected in new and exciting ways.

We must thank volunteers whose contributions to culture in Scotland are invaluable, and ensure that funding processes are streamlined and easy to navigate to ensure take-up. Investment in arts and culture is an investment in Scotland's people and future. Scotland's approach to cultural investment sets us apart from the rest of the UK, where austerity measures have resulted in cuts to culture. As we look ahead—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Evelyn Tweed: —we must build on our proud legacy of cultural investment, ensuring that Scotland remains a leader in cultural accessibility, inclusion and creativity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that we have exhausted any time that we had, so members will now have to stick to their speaking time allocation.

15:48

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the Scottish Government for bringing a debate on this important sector to the chamber. Culture is an

integral part of Scotland and extends to dance, music, film, sport, language, Scottish traditions and much more. Scotland has many diverse festivals, such as the fantastic Edinburgh fringe festival, which attracts millions of people from around the world, and let us not forget our 550 golf courses, many of which are world famous and attract a lot of people from around the world, as well as bringing the world's best players, and tourism.

Scotland's culture sector plays a vital role in Scotland's economy. The sector supports 70,000 jobs across more than 15,000 businesses, while the total contribution to the Scottish economy is £5 billion. Data from the most recent Scottish household survey found that 76 per cent of adults visited a cultural place in 2023. However, we must not forget that our volunteers and third sector organisations are equally important in promoting culture.

It is very important that I use this debate to highlight some of the great cultural organisations that I have visited in my region of West Scotland. The men's sheds in Milngavie and Bearsden and in Kirkintilloch do a fantastic job in helping to combat mental illness and loneliness, while Creative Spark Theatre Arts in Kirkintilloch helps neurodivergent children to enjoy theatre.

We must not forget the contribution that Asian cultures bring to Scotland, and there are many organisations that help to deliver such contributions in my region. Unfortunately, I do not have the time today to mention all of them, but I will mention a couple. The Scottish Asian Ekta group, which is run by Mrs Kullher, helps widows and single women through advocacy, support and upskilling. I have been to a lot of the events that that group has held, and it is great to see those women singing, dancing, reciting poems and coming together. Let us be honest: if there was no funding, those women could not come together and they would be in their homes. The Scottish Indian Mahila cultural centre, which has been operating for 34 years, is a Hindu women's group that empowers women through employment and volunteering.

Such organisations are crucial to our economy—not just socially but culturally. They are local groups that bring diversity to every area. As everybody knows, we have amazing festivals in Scotland that a lot of those organisations deliver, such as Eid, Vaisakhi, Diwali and many more. I want to make sure that the cabinet secretary speaks about that and understands the importance of Asian cultures and the contributions they bring.

However, the SNP Government has not always been a friend of culture. Although I welcome the recent funding increases that have been

announced in the most recent draft budget, more must be done.

National Galleries of Scotland has said that the proposed £20 million of funding is not enough and that it would require at least £40 million to meet its needs.

I must mention libraries—my colleague Murdo Fraser mentioned them earlier—as they bring people together to learn all about different cultures. We have seen many libraries across the country shut down, with the most affected areas being rural local authorities. Speaking of local authorities, councils are instrumental in promoting culture. However, concerns remain about the funding of local government.

As was mentioned earlier, Scottish culture attracts visitors from across the world. However, last week I met with the Scottish Hospitality Group and the Scottish Tourism Alliance, which expressed concerns about measures that are being taken by this Government, such as the failure to pass rates relief to hospitality businesses and the introduction of visitor levies. Such measures make Scotland an expensive destination and could lead potential tourists to choose other destinations instead. Some representatives even said that businesses have moved from a seven-day working week to three days, as it is unaffordable for them to operate every day.

The Scottish National Party Government is not the only body that is to blame. The sector has criticised the increases in national insurance that the Labour UK Government has imposed. The theatre industry has warned that that increase amounts to nothing less than a huge cut in theatre budgets. When it comes to Scotland's third sector, that increase is estimated to cost £75 million.

I reiterate what my colleague Murdo Fraser said about Creative Scotland: taxpayers' money should never be given towards the production of pornographic films. I hope that, the next time such an issue arises, Creative Scotland does its homework and uses its platform in a better way.

I was also disappointed to hear that a Creative Scotland staff member tried to prevent a shop from selling books by gender-critical poet Jenny Lindsay. Scottish PEN has warned that the SNP Government has jeopardised Scotland's worldwide reputation by limiting freedom of speech and expression. I therefore hope that measures will be put in place to protect free speech and that Creative Scotland will offer a platform for everybody.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Ms Gosal, you need to conclude.

Pam Gosal: In closing—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Gosal, you are already over your time. Please bring your remarks to a close.

Pam Gosal: The culture sector plays a key role in making Scotland a vibrant place. I look forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's response to the concerns that I have raised.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Gosal. We have no time in hand, as I have already made quite clear.

15:54

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I always welcome the opportunity to discuss our arts and culture sector in the chamber. The benefits of arts and culture to Scotland are numerous, including employment; economic growth and tourism; and, most important, wellbeing.

In recent years, the Scottish Government has failed to recognise the importance of culture and, while facing a perfect storm of crises, the sector has been forced to mount campaign after campaign due to the actions of the Scottish Government. John Swinney announced cuts that were later only partially reversed; there was the closure and then the reopening of the open fund for artists; and organisations were left in the dark over long-term funding settlements.

Therefore, although I welcome the uplift in funding for the culture sector, which has been made possible by the UK Labour Government's record funding settlement for the Scottish Government, the SNP should not be patting itself on the back for no longer adding to the problem. One budget will not reverse years of mistrust and mismanagement.

This is not just about money; to thrive, culture needs the necessary infrastructure, such as grass-roots music venues, without which many of our greatest artists would never have succeeded. However, unlike the UK Government, the Scottish Government will not pass on full rates relief to venues with a capacity of under 1,500. It is limiting the relief to properties with a rateable value of under £51,000, which means that venues in high-value areas, even those with a small capacity, will miss out. That means that, for many, 2025 remains incredibly challenging.

The situation in our local authorities, which have been forced to cut culture spending due to Scottish Government underfunding, also remains challenging. If we want to close the 25 per cent gap in attendance at cultural events between the most and least deprived areas, councils must be given the tools to ensure access to culture for all.

Local authority venues Motherwell concert hall and the Brunton theatre in Musselburgh, which

play a massive role in increasing local access to culture, were marked for demolition last year due to the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. Sarah Boyack and I met the chair of the Brunton Theatre Trust last week, and he told us how important the theatre is to the community, hosting shows, school groups and weddings. The importance of such venues to our communities should not be understated. The Scottish Government should step up to protect local culture.

The SNP cannot congratulate itself merely on stemming the bleeding in our culture sector. The sector needs to move on from fighting for its survival. It needs to see growth and it needs support to thrive. It cannot afford another perfect storm that is made worse by the SNP Government.

15:58

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am pleased with the continued commitment from the Scottish Government and I am pleased that the will of the cabinet secretary has prevailed—despite, I am sure, many competing pressures. It has already been stated, but it is worth stating again that the Scottish Government is halfway to reaching its five-year commitment to that recurring £100 million increase. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, but facts need to be put on the table.

The SNP Government's draft budget is a clear statement of intent for Scotland's arts and culture sector. There is £34 million of additional funding for culture, with £22 million of that for maintenance projects, uplifts for Screen Scotland, Sistema Scotland, the youth music initiative and the festivals expo, and the reinstatement of the culture collective. The cabinet secretary described it as a foundational change, and I agree with him—it is really important.

I declare more than an interest in the arts, in particular in music, as I arguably owe to my degree from what is now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland every single subsequent element of my career. Before the value of so-called meta skills became commonly appreciated, I was, even at that early stage, aware of the fact that I was learning so much more than just competence in my chosen instruments. I learned how to perform, which stands me in good stead in this place; I can see many other members in the chamber today who have learned the basic skills of drama.

Making my living as a jobbing pianist brought the importance of running a small business to the fore—understanding cash flow and legal contracts, and my unique selling points. I also learned about sales, which—ironically—led me into a future career in business. I learned about self-discipline,

and willingly gave up hours of every single day to practise, even through my teenage years when other areas—as members can imagine—held considerable appeal.

Nevertheless, whatever I do, I remain fast to my love of music. At this point, I make another shameless plug to new members of our Scottish Parliament. I started a choir so that we could sing with a thousand voices, not just in debates, so if any member ever wants to join the choir, they can speak to me later.

More seriously, the wider economic environment is critical to ensuring the success of the entire sector, and I make no apology for bringing up Brexit again. At every meeting, and in every interaction, that I have with artists or organisations, they tell me about the on-going and sustained impact on their fundamental ability to take their excellence—the excellence that represents Scotland—to a global stage.

UK Music's annual economic report, "This Is Music 2024", which was delivered just at the end of last year, said that

"Brexit has been a catastrophe"

for the sector, with artists still seeing

"fewer invites to perform in the EU"

and swathes of "red tape" when playing on the continent. A much more ambitious plan is needed to ensure that the UK keeps pace with the intensifying global competition.

The current UK Government states that it is "going for growth", but at the same time, it is continuing to fail to recognise the damage that is done by Brexit. We have to recognise that the UK economy is deeply in trouble when we look at the issues around bond yields and Government gilts. It continues to be a very difficult environment for artists.

I will highlight another area that is not mentioned in the motion, but which we need to keep alive to: the potential impact of generative artificial intelligence on musicians. That is a concern that I am hearing more and more; we see different legislatures around the world attempting to contain it but with very limited effect, given the scale of movement in the area.

Finally, I will make some remarks in respect of my constituency of Falkirk East. Kinneil house is a magnificent, and truly historic, building located in Bo'ness. Once the seat of the Hamilton family, it has been saved from demolition, in particular in 1936, and is now under the care of Historic Environment Scotland. The grounds in which the house is located are a valuable asset for both locals and visitors, and the Kinneil museum, which is ably promoted by the Friends of Kinneil, serves

as both a comfort station and a valuable resource for learning more about the cultural contribution of Kinneil house.

That brings me to my main observation. It is vital that the site overall continues to be supported, which needs to involve a multitude of key stakeholders such as Historic Environment Scotland and Falkirk Council. Given the site's strategic importance and the fact that it represents a totality that is bigger than any one body, pulling in its heritage significance, scale, potential, local socioeconomic benefit and community value requires a pooling of thoughts and minds. Traditionally, with buildings like Kinneil, we have seen that individual bodies—for example, the local council—do not have the necessary totality of sight. I am interested, therefore, in hearing the cabinet secretary's reflections on my suggestion that the house may be an ideal candidate for the culture and heritage fund.

16:04

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): First, I compliment Michelle Thomson on the superb job that she does in filling our lobbies and spaces in the Parliament with music. She was also right about at least one other thing in her speech, which is that Labour is responsible for crashing our economy, and we are all going to be worse off for that. While we are in the spirit of agreeing with one another, let us also agree that Murdo Fraser was right when he said that the creative arts and our historical assets define us.

Although the cabinet secretary showers himself with praise for restoring the culture budget, he must face up to the bitter irony that libraries, local theatres and our greatest galleries and historic sites face the real threat of closure. The SNP in government is guilty of cultural neglect.

Keith Brown: Will Mr Kerr take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I will if it is very brief, because I have no extra time.

Keith Brown: With regard to cultural neglect, will Mr Kerr acknowledge that, according to Equity, between 2018 and 2023, the culture budget reduced by 11 per cent in England, where his party was in control, and increased in Scotland? In his area, the cuts at the local government level are the responsibility of Stirling Council, which is run by Labour and the Conservatives.

Stephen Kerr: Sadly, I do not represent Stirling in this Parliament. I represent another part of Scotland, and I am very proud to do so. I wish that we had more time to engage in a proper debate, because Keith Brown raises points that are worthy of proper debate.

If Keith Brown will forgive me, with the time that I have, I will move on to talk about the culture review that was announced as part of the programme for government. The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee specifically asked that that review include the governance and transparency of Creative Scotland. If I heard the cabinet secretary correctly earlier, he said that Creative Scotland and its processes are part of the review. Let me tell him what Creative Scotland told us last week. Anne Langley said:

“the Scottish Government has helpfully been clear that it is a review of purpose, not process.”

As far as I am concerned, governance and transparency are an essential part of a review of process. Therefore, I would like the cabinet secretary to clarify the position.

Robert Wilson, who is the chair of the board of Creative Scotland, said:

“We have had many discussions with the cabinet secretary and Government officials. That is our understanding based on ... those discussions.”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 9 January 2025; c 26, 31.]

The cabinet secretary should clarify in his summing up whether the understanding that Creative Scotland revealed to the committee last week is right or wrong. I think that it is wrong, and I would like to hear him say so.

The cabinet secretary should also clarify that he has not changed the remit of the review of Creative Scotland, which receives £80 million of taxpayers' money. It is important that we review its work, and why that should be the case has been clearly spelled out. I include the now infamous case of the porn movie that was funded to the tune of £85,000 but which did not happen—thankfully—because of other interventions. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could intervene now. I will give him 15 seconds to confirm that the review will include all aspects of Creative Scotland's workings. Does he want to say yes?

Angus Robertson: I have said clearly, and I will happily repeat, that I will not tell Dame Sue Bruce where she should concentrate her efforts. I encourage Mr Kerr and other colleagues to take part in the review. I ask them to take the opportunity to share their views in relation to the review that Sue Bruce will undertake, to help steer her in any directions that they feel are appropriate.

Stephen Kerr: That was a very vague answer, but it is important for us to get a clear answer about the comprehensive nature of the review.

I turn to NGS, which was referenced earlier. Anne Lyden talked about a “staffing cost trap”. SNP members should recognise that the imposition of the shorter working week policy is

costing NGS alone almost £800,000 and is threatening its galleries' ability to open for the hours that they currently open. There is also the increase in national insurance contributions, but what was interesting in the evidence that we received last week was that the witnesses kept coming back to the imposition of the shorter working week and other aspects of pay policy that are mandated by the Scottish Government. In fact, Anne Lyden told us that the shorter working week and national insurance contribution increases add up to more than £1 million of additional cost. She also mentioned the restrictions that are placed on NGS because of a no-compulsory redundancy policy. She said:

“we cannot be as agile or as flexible as we want to be, because all the money that we receive goes towards keeping our existing staff profile.”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 9 January 2025; c12.]

Because of the restriction on time, I will just mention Historic Environment Scotland, whose new chief executive gave evidence to the committee. Given the very patchy history of the 300-plus properties that HES looks after and the fact that it has not been able to open all of them—it has been opening and closing them—she was not able to tell us how much it would cost to bring all those valuable assets up to an acceptable standard of safety and accessibility. A number of us on the committee have been told by a source in HES that doing so will cost £800 million. Can the cabinet secretary confirm to us that he is in talks with HES about those works? Can he confirm that he has an estimate of at least £800 million to restore those historic sites, which are vital to our visitor economy?

I will also mention the issue of school music tuition. I remember that when the SNP was in power in Stirling and I was the MP, we had to campaign to save music tuition there. Let us acknowledge the importance of music tuition in the education of our young people. This is not the first time that there has been a threat to that, and not just in Stirling—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you need to conclude.

Stephen Kerr: I will conclude.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please do so now.

Stephen Kerr: I conclude by saying that the deliberate underfunding of local councils so that ministers such as Angus Robertson can come here and congratulate themselves on spending money is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, thank you. We move on to our next speaker. I call Colin Smyth.

16:11

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the debate and the fact that, as a result of the record funding settlement from the UK Government to this Parliament of an extra £5.2 billion over the next two years, there is an opportunity to reset the damaged relationship between the Scottish Government and the sector. The proposed uplift in the Scottish Government's budget this year can be a first step, but there remains uncertainty over the approach to how that funding will be allocated by Creative Scotland.

Many organisations that currently are not regularly funded access funding for their on-going work through annual applications to the open fund. It is unclear whether that route will be available in the future, as Creative Scotland seems to be hinting that multiyear funding may become the only route to support regular or on-going work. Maybe in the cabinet secretary's closing comments he can provide some clarity on that issue, because Creative Scotland has not, and it remains a concern for any organisation that might be unsuccessful in what is an oversubscribed bidding process for multiyear funding.

Looking to the longer term, I appreciate that the Government has announced a review of Creative Scotland and cultural funding. That is welcome, but it is often referred to as a review of Creative Scotland. Although that is an important aspect of the review, it is also important that it looks at the Government's approach and decisions. The Government needs to take a far more strategic view on what public funds should deliver, what a sustainable level of cultural funding is and how we provide on-going certainty and confidence to a sector that feels that it has been badly let down by decisions in recent years. The review also needs to ensure that we better recognise the role of culture in delivering creative place making in our communities.

In November, I had the privilege of co-hosting an event in Parliament that was organised by the Stove Network in Dumfries. It has been working with South of Scotland Enterprise on creative place making using the arts and culture as the foundation of community engagement and involvement because of the positive impact that that has on health, employment, wellbeing and regeneration. The current silo model of cultural funding, with its emphasis and focus on performance—often professional—does not properly recognise participation. In contrast, for example, Ireland—

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I do not think that I have any extra time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no extra time. It is up to the member whether to take interventions or not.

Colin Smyth: I would love to take the intervention, but unfortunately I do not have extra time. However, I appreciate that Emma Harper also co-hosted that event. She will have heard the speaker from Ireland who talked about the fact that Ireland has a specific additional funding stream for participation in community-based practice. To be fair, we have that for sport in Scotland, but we do not have it for culture and arts.

We also need to better recognise the wider role of culture in delivering the wellbeing economy—preventing social isolation, improving mental health and regenerating communities—by better ring-fencing funding streams for that participation.

There must also be more regional equity in the allocation of funding. Festivals and events play a hugely important part in my region of Dumfries and Galloway, but in recent years we have lost many major festivals, including the Wickerman festival, the Electric Fields festival and the Doonhame festival. Next week, the Big Burns Supper will return, but it will do so in a much reduced format, having been cancelled last year as a direct result of the Scottish Government's decision to axe the winter festival funding. When new festivals emerge, such as Music at the Multiverse, in a bid to replace those that have been lost, they really struggle to get support from Government agencies.

The cultural offering in Scotland is about more than big international festivals. That needs to be reflected when it comes to Government support for a sector that makes a significant difference to communities in every part of Scotland and, in particular, helps people to participate and make a big difference to the area in which they live.

16:15

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am just old enough to have seen the release of Bill Forsyth's film "That Sinking Feeling" in 1979. I well remember being struck by the Glasgow humour and the Scottish attitude in it. In the final few frames, one of the protagonists is standing there, trying to flog off some sinks, which are piled in front of him, and someone from the Arts Council walks up and offers him a grant. That is much in Bill Forsyth's usual style, and he was poking fun at the controversy at the time with the then Arts Council of Great Britain.

I bring that up by way of demonstrating that arts funding, and who gets funding and who does not get funding, has always been a controversial and difficult thing. However, we can move forward with

confidence that the organisation that is delivering that on behalf of the Scottish Government is meeting the requirements of the sector.

At that time, I was also introduced for the first time to the 7:84 Theatre Company, which was named after the statistic that 7 per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the wealth. In 2003, Oxfam estimated that 1 per cent of the population owned 70 per cent of the wealth. In that intervening time, we have seen much wealth and much growth, but fewer people seeing the benefit of that. That speaks to the challenge of where we are in our arts sector. When budgets are squeezed and situations are difficult, things become even more difficult if the wealth of the nation is so inequitable.

Scotland's artists innovate and entertain us. They challenge us and they are the custodians of our culture. I am speaking as the MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, but I am also the convener of the Culture, Europe and External Affairs Committee, and I am very conscious that we are in the middle of taking our evidence on the budget and have not yet reached a conclusion. I will try to be factual about what we have learned so far.

I, too, think that we must also consider the pandemic. Some of my colleagues have mentioned that, but few of us could have imagined lockdown without reading a book, a poem, watching TV, honing or learning a new craft, listening to music or even picking up an instrument, perhaps for the first time.

An artistic endeavour is a lifeblood. Music and culture run through our communities like a vibrant thread in their representative tartans. Without those threads, it would be a much duller and more boring tartan. They inspire us, and we are inextricably bound by culture internationally and here in Scotland. There are many great inequities in the world, but culture can be a great leveller. There are many people who struggle to access it, and we must focus on equity of access and ensuring that as many people as possible can participate in our culture.

Last week, we took evidence from stakeholders, including Creative Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland, Wigtown Festival Company, the Federation of Scottish Theatre and Culture Counts. Those organisations are at the forefront of Scotland's culture and are considering the impact of the proposed Scottish budget.

Organisations across the culture sector have warmly welcomed the Scottish Government's proposed £34 million increase to front-line culture funding. The difference with funding elsewhere in the UK has also been highlighted by colleagues. Fiona Sturgeon Shay of the Federation of Scottish

Theatre and of Culture Counts spoke of developing the culture sector for the "common good". She was especially encouraged by the allocation of an additional £20 million to Creative Scotland's multiyear programme funding, which has been mentioned again as being an important development in Scotland's culture sector.

We also heard from Adrian Turpin of the Wigtown Festival Company, who echoed those sentiments but also talked about the difficulty in accessing culture in rural areas. We have to consider that in more detail.

In last week's debate on the national performance framework, we saw that, in this Parliament, we can be quite siloed ourselves.

Emma Harper: On the rural issue, a lot of members have talked about Glasgow and Edinburgh, which are in the central belt. As a keen Burnsian, does Clare Adamson welcome the fact that the Big Burns Supper is going ahead this year? Next week, we have entertainment such as Eddi Reader, Wet Wet Wet and an underwater Burns supper.

Clare Adamson: Yes, I absolutely welcome that, and I hope to get down to the area to visit to see some of the events.

It is important that we consider how siloed we can be in our thinking. If we are to really embrace the wellbeing economy, we must look at culture and its role in relation to rural issues, health issues, social security issues and housing issues, as we build communities.

Audiences are returning, but, in many cases, they are still down on pre-Covid levels. On-going cost of living issues mean that it is difficult for many people to make the choice to support the arts. Striking the balance between raising revenues, supporting artists and maintaining cultural output that is accessible across different communities is a critical challenge for the future. That becomes more acute when we look at—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adamson, you need to conclude.

Clare Adamson: I am sorry. I will conclude by saying that Labour's tax on jobs is not helping the situation for many of our cultural organisations.

16:21

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned Bill Forsyth's "That Sinking Feeling", which is one of the films that I remember watching with my mum as a kid. It was striking, because we used to sit and look at all the places that we recognised from growing up in our city. That reminded me of the late Alasdair Gray's line from "Lanark" about

Glasgow being a magnificent city. The character asks,

“Why do we hardly ever notice that?”

and the answer is,

“Because nobody imagines living here”.

So many other cities around the world are projected to a global population in imagination, through books, films and music, in a way and to a degree that perhaps Glasgow is not. Perhaps that is why we do not recognise the magnificence of the culture that surrounds us every day. So often, in Scotland, we do not fully appreciate the extent of our cultural inheritance from previous generations in particular.

That is why I have been so taken by the agenda of trying to safeguard the city of Glasgow’s built environment. I declare an interest as a trustee of the Glasgow City Heritage Trust. It feels like a constant war of attrition to safeguard our cultural inheritance in Glasgow. The museum service has had to make cuts of £7 million because it is 80 per cent dependent on council funding, which is under continued pressure every year. That has left just one curator to look after more than a million objects in the museums’ collections. That is an absurd situation. The national museums in Edinburgh are given far greater resources, yet no one could say that Kelvingrove is anything other than a museum of international standing.

Similarly, we see those pressures play out with the great Mackintosh inheritance, which is nothing short of a globally significant architectural inheritance. I mentioned to the cabinet secretary the impasse with regard to the Glasgow School of Art Mackintosh building. It is to be hoped that we will see progress this year. Nonetheless, Glasgow City Council has put Mackintosh’s Martyrs school up for sale, with its fate to be determined. Similarly, there is an impasse over the future of the Lighthouse, the former *Glasgow Herald* building, which was opened as Scotland’s centre for design and architecture in 1999 but has been closed since the pandemic.

There is an on-going threat to our built environment. Many charitable and cultural organisations are custodians of some of our amazing built heritage. The member for Edinburgh West mentioned the Royal high school in Edinburgh. There is finally progress there, which is great. We could take the example of the Govanhill baths on the south side of Glasgow. There has been a long-running community campaign to revive the building, and progress had been made with capital funding in recent years. However, as a result of the escalation in building material costs, the project has fallen into deficit and progress has been stymied. The council has also changed its policy on business rates and non-domestic rates

as a result of pressure on its funding. In the last financial year, it removed the exemption for listed buildings that had given them rates relief.

On the one hand, that could be a positive thing, because many private interests own listed buildings but do not preserve them or do anything with them, so it could create an incentive to do something with those buildings. On the other hand, many cultural organisations that are running on a shoestring are caught up in that. I therefore urge the cabinet secretary to look at the application of non-domestic rates across Scotland, particularly in relation to non-profit organisations, and how we can provide a degree of exemption.

I also urge the cabinet secretary to consider what more his office could do to preserve our built environment. I have been working in Paisley with my colleague Neil Bibby to save the territorial army drill hall, which is under imminent threat of demolition. The council feels that it cannot take on the risk of serving an urgent works notice, because that would leave the council with a financial liability. However, under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997, it has the power to recover the costs from the owner, but it is not minded to do so. The cabinet secretary could directly intervene and serve an urgent works notice. I wonder whether he could look at that case and perhaps more actively use the powers in the 1997 act to safeguard more of our built heritage.

16:25

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): First, I think that it is worth saying that there is a degree of consensus on the fact that the Scottish Government has proposed a historic £50 million increase in funding for investment in our cultural landscape. That is a significant step towards the Government’s target of raising funding by £100 million by 2028-29, and it demonstrates the Scottish Government’s commitment to supporting culture during these challenging times.

I agree with other speakers—in particular, Maggie Chapman and Evelyn Tweed—on the value of culture for us all. Maggie Chapman talked about how it reminds us of the “shared humanity” of the country in which we live, and that is a very important point.

It is also true to say that many references have been made to the past, and the Royal high school has been mentioned a couple of times. When I was a kid, we used to get the bus there on a Monday morning to go to the swimming pool, which was in the future chamber of the proposed assembly at the time. It is sad to see how that building has not been developed over the years. It

is interesting to note that it was reclaimed by the council in Edinburgh for, I think, £1, because, under a pre-emption clause, the council had the right to reclaim it after the war, when it had been taken over by the Government.

We also heard Clare Adamson, our committee convener, talk about the 7:84 Theatre Company. As someone who is a bit older than Clare Adamson, I remember the impact that “The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil” had on Scotland, the relevance that it had and the relevance that it still has to Scotland’s situation. Interestingly, I saw a revised version of that play last year at the Royal Lyceum—it was a fantastic production.

While we are looking into the past, a couple of points really have to be made. We heard from Neil Bibby, who refused to take my intervention, and others about the idea that it is revisionism on the part of the cabinet secretary to talk about the new funding that has now made been available, and that he was ignoring the past. Well, let us take a wee look at the past. Equity has produced a report that says that, between 2018 and 2023, funding for the arts and culture fell in England by 11 per cent, in Northern Ireland by 16 per cent and in Labour-run Wales by 30 per cent. Funding for culture in Wales, which is run by Labour, fell by 30 per cent, whereas in Scotland it increased. We would never have guessed that from Neil Bibby’s contributions.

The other thing that undermines any credibility that Labour would have is the fact that, whenever we see a Labour minister on TV these days, they start the interview by talking about the horrendous record that they have inherited from the Tories. I have a lot of sympathy with that, but they pretend endlessly that it had no effect in Scotland. It obviously undermined all that Labour did in Wales, including all the cuts to local government there, but it had no effect in Scotland—that was entirely down to the SNP. That gives Labour no credibility whatsoever.

It is also the case that, when Labour makes all its demands for more money, it refuses to say how much more money it is talking about and where it would come from. Will Labour, for once, have the gall to propose an amendment to the budget that advocates for more money for culture? I am guessing that it will not, as it has never done that in the years that it has been here. If Labour wants more credibility, it must acknowledge the effect of 14 years of austerity.

I also agree on the other effects, such as the pandemic and increased employee costs. All sorts of things have had an impact on the culture sector, as they have on many sectors. Michelle Thomson was right to say that Brexit has had one of the biggest impacts. The committee has heard about

the absolute demolition of the careers of many musicians who can no longer tour Europe because of the costs and restrictions involved. Many of them now go under an Irish banner because the Irish are willing to help them to do that. Let us at least acknowledge the hugely damaging impact of Brexit on the culture sector in Scotland. Politicians who do not acknowledge the effect of 14 years of austerity and Brexit have no credibility when they talk about the culture sector.

As a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, which has recently reviewed the budget, I can confirm that the committee’s discussions have highlighted the on-going recovery of cultural organisations following the pandemic—although I am not trying to minimise the challenges that they still face.

As somebody who grew up in Edinburgh and spent 30-odd years here, I would say that I am very much a supporter of all the festivals, but we have to remember that there are other parts of Scotland—and that does not just mean Glasgow; it does not just mean either Glasgow or Edinburgh, or either the Highlands or the Lowlands.

My area is Stirling and Clackmannanshire. We have to ensure that we have a cultural presence, too. Mention has not been made of the MacRobert Arts Centre in Stirling, in my constituency. It is an invaluable cultural asset, as is the Smith Art Gallery and Museum, which is in Evelyn Tweed’s constituency. If any members doubt that those are cultural assets, they should think about the oldest football in the world, which was discovered in the area. It went to Hamburg for the world cup a few years ago, and it was piped on at the very first match, even though Scotland was, unfortunately, not represented in that world cup.

There is no doubt that we all have cultural assets in our communities, and many people will be very pleased about the proposed increase in the budget that the Government has announced. They will also understand—even if some people in the chamber do not—that the UK Government’s austerity cuts have had a profound impact on funding for culture over many years. Despite that, the Scottish Government has maintained increases in culture budgets, albeit that those increases have, I acknowledge, sometimes been minimal.

There is a lot to be very pleased about in the budget, and I hope that the committee will finish its work in scrutinising the Scottish Government’s proposals. I hope that the members of other parties who profess to support culture and the arts will support the Scottish Government’s budget, which proposes such a large increase.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches.

16:31

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Green): This afternoon's debate has offered a rare opportunity to take the temperature of the culture sector in this post-Brexit, post-Covid world. I hope that the budget that is proposed by the Scottish Government marks the start of the end of the austerity that the culture sector has been suffering over a number of years.

The Scottish Greens welcome the uplift of £34 million in the draft budget this year and the commitment to a further £20 million next year. I hope that it marks the start of Creative Scotland offering meaningful multiyear funding to organisations that have been struggling for years. Those organisations have to continually reinvent themselves in order to try to secure core funding, when they should be getting on with delivering creative projects that would be successful if only they could get that money.

Alex Cole-Hamilton talked about the shadow of uncertainty that has hung over many artists and projects throughout the long years of austerity and continues to hang over them in the post-Covid funding environment. We need to restore confidence in the sector. Neil Bibby characterised the approach as a bit of a hokey cokey, whereby funding has been committed to, then withdrawn, then brought back in again. I agree that that has been unhelpful. I hope that the budget that is being proposed this year will start to build back confidence again.

I also welcome the Creative Scotland review, which will be led by Dame Sue Bruce. I hope that the review will be wide ranging and look to get culture out of the silo that it is sometimes seen as being in. As Maggie Chapman said, culture projects have the capacity and the power to heal, uplift and inspire. We are now decades on from the Christie commission, which had a whole agenda on preventative spend, but we are yet to make significant progress in areas such as mental health, education, community development and restoration of our communities.

However, there are organisations that create communities. They include Sistema Scotland, which Evelyn Tweed spoke passionately about; DCA in Dundee, which Maggie Chapman talked about; the Stove Network, which was mentioned by Colin Smyth; and Creative Stirling, which was an incredible driver of innovation throughout the pandemic. Those organisations are the driving force and beating heart of our communities, and they support and uplift the most vulnerable people. It is really important that the funding is felt by those organisations, which often survive on relatively small amounts of money but do incredible work.

I am heartened to hear that the work of the culture collective will be brought back, because there are some really innovative organisations operating under that umbrella. A real wellspring of innovation will arise from that, and we can learn a lot from such networks of community cultural organisations.

I welcome the fact that the Government has announced a 40 per cent relief for hospitality venues, which is particularly welcome when we consider the plight of grass-roots music venues. There is an issue about the £51,000 threshold, because there is a small number of city centre venues that will not benefit from that rates relief. Set against a crisis in which, across the UK, every week last year one grass-roots music venue shut down, we need to find ways to support that sector. One way would be to look at the application of a visitor levy. Another option, which the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture has spoken about with me and Patrick Harvie on a number of occasions, would be the national introduction of a ticket levy.

Paul Sweeney: Will Mark Ruskell give way?

Mark Ruskell: I do not think that I have time.

If we consider last year's Taylor Swift "Eras" tour, for example, we can see that a levy of just £1 on each ticket for the three Edinburgh concerts would have raised £200,000 for our grass-roots music venues. It is those venues that create the big stars of the future.

We have talked a bit about Stirling; the Tolbooth venue in Stirling has a wee space that hosts an audience of just 30 people. That is great for new and emerging artists who have perhaps never done a gig before. They need a small intimate venue in which to ply their trade and get confidence to go on and achieve great things.

I welcome the fact that Green councillors in Glasgow City Council have been successful in getting cross-party support for the introduction of a stadium levy for council-controlled music venues. I look forward to progress on that.

I turn briefly to the plight of councils. Murdo Fraser mentioned the protest that we both attended and spoke at on Saturday, which was about rural communities wanting to stop the cuts to their rural libraries. We have to recognise that many such libraries are co-located with arts venues. They are often the last free, warm and open facilities that are genuinely accessible in communities. Once those buildings are gone, they are gone.

The cabinet secretary needs to look at councils' reliance on arm's-length companies for the delivery of leisure and culture services. That has certainly been the case in Perth and Kinross,

where there has been overreliance on council funding through Culture Perth and Kinross. Perth and Kinross Council has not adequately funded the fair-pay policies that needed to be passed on to library staff. As a result, CPK is in a dire financial state. The council needs to properly fund CPK. It should acknowledge that it has a better funding settlement coming from the Scottish Government, and it has the opportunity to raise council tax and a visitor levy, so it should be taking rural library closures off the table.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell: I was going to go on to refer to what Paul Sweeney said about arm's-length companies and Glasgow Life, but I will leave it there.

We need to restore confidence. The budget could be the first step towards that, but there is still work to do.

16:38

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): This has been a typically wide-ranging debate. It is incredibly difficult to represent the breadth of the many streams and threads of our national culture and the many interests that members and their constituents hold.

Art, as Maggie Chapman said, offers the opportunity to imagine alternatives. That is part of its role as a provocation to us all, and there has been a little bit of that in the debate. Art also offers escapism and enjoyment through, for example, spending a Friday night watching a band, with a pint, which is just as important and just as much part of our national culture.

Clare Adamson was right to point out that funding of the arts is always—rightly—controversial and difficult. Since the advent of devolution in 1999, there have been several iterations of that challenge and the tension in the way that it is undertaken and through subsidising non-conformity.

I had some difficulty with Clare Adamson's contribution in respect of the desire—as always with SNP members—to spend the extra £5.2 billion without ever realising the means by which it is to be raised.

Stephen Kerr: Hear, hear.

Michael Marra: Stephen Kerr is saying, "Hear, hear". He said exactly the same as I just said himself. I understand that the issue of national insurance contributions is difficult for many organisations, but if you do not raise the money you do not get to spend it and that is at the core of the challenge in how all this works.

We all hope that the idea of that £5.2 billion investment will enable an end to the chaos of the cycle of broken promises that has illustrated and characterised the cabinet secretary's tenure in office, regardless of whether it has been caused by him or by the situation in which he finds himself.

Michelle Thomson: Will the member accept an intervention?

Michael Marra: I will not, at the moment. Please allow me to progress a little.

Many organisations have found it challenging to understand what on earth is happening or to find some kind of certainty when promises that are made one month are broken the next. We would like to see that certainty emerge through the Creative Scotland review, but—as Mr Kerr rightly pointed out—there is a lack of clarity about the terms of reference for that review. It would be good to hear a little more clarity about them in the cabinet secretary's closing remarks.

That disarray has significant consequences. Many members have illustrated the effects on their local organisations; I will do the same. Murdo Fraser rightly referred to the relationship between central and local government funding, both of which are absolutely critical to arts organisations. In Dundee, the DCA, the Dundee Rep and the Dundee Heritage Trust—which runs the Verdant Works museum, Discovery Point and the fabulous RRS Discovery—are all in precarious situations. That is partly because of the lack of clarity from the national Government about when money might arrive or how much it might be, given the chaos of recent years, but is also caused by a complete lack of certainty about the amount of money that might be available from local government and by the proposed cuts to budgets that are on the table at the moment.

I wrote to the cabinet secretary about that very issue and got a warm bath of a letter back. There were very nice words about investment, but absolutely no answer to my questions about when money will be confirmed and when those organisations will have clarity so that they can pay staff and can know when their doors will be open. That is absolutely critical, because it has an impact on our economy.

I believe that members are right to refer to the challenges that are being caused by Brexit: Keith Brown and Michelle Thomson made a very good case regarding the real challenges that it presents. Neil Bibby spoke about the challenges that touring artists face in making a living in that context. There is no doubt that Brexit has had a significant and negative impact on the viability of our culture sector—one has only to listen to touring bands to hear that point being clearly made.

Mr Bibby also touched on fair work and on calls by the Musicians Union to ensure that funding is cognisant of that. We all want to hear tills ringing, turnstiles clicking and footfall rising because that is absolutely critical to our towns and cities.

Keith Brown also spoke about John McGrath's play "The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil" and about the 7:84 Theatre Company. The most recent production of that play was done by Dundee Rep in 2016, although he may have seen a more recent revival. It appeared here at the Royal Lyceum as part of the first national tour of that play in more than 20 years. Mr Brown and I might disagree on some points in that fairly nationalist production, but it is a fine piece of theatre and a rightful provocation. However, the Dundee Rep company is now under direct threat. It makes brilliant and provocative theatre that not everyone agrees with, and that is its point.

That brings me to Robert Burns and the real dismay that I felt on seeing headlines about the removal from the curriculum of Burns for stand-alone assessment in our nation's schools. He is our national poet and the SNP would do well to reflect on what on earth a nationalist party is for if it is not for protecting the national poet.

Clare Adamson: Will the member accept an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Michael Marra: I am drawing to a close. Robert Burns did more than any other figure in our history to protect our national culture and language. The 1891 Kilmarnock edition of his poems was carried across the world by Scots and became our Rosetta stone, showing the fin de siècle change in our national culture from rural to urban at the end of the 19th century. His work cannot be lost to the vagaries of fashion, so what will the cabinet secretary do about that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alexander Stewart to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:44

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, and I will support the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser.

Scotland can be proud of the cultural footprint that it leaves on the world stage, and I have no doubt that members on all sides of the chamber agree about the importance of Scotland's culture sector. In the debate, we have heard about the multibillion-pound value of the sector and the tens of thousands of jobs that it supports. In reality, however, the value of the culture sector is much

greater than just the numbers. I therefore welcome the fact that Parliament has had an opportunity to debate the subject today, and I welcome the speeches that we have heard.

Scotland's culture sector should be celebrated, but we know that it is facing a number of on-going challenges. I have spoken in previous debates about the closure of many important historic sites across Scotland, and there are still sites that are at risk. Scotland's buildings tell us important stories about Scotland's culture, and it is vital that people have opportunities to see them. Their potential should not be wasted through long-term closures. I repeat my party's calls for buildings that have been closed to be reopened. To that end, I welcome the fact that Historic Environment Scotland began inspection work on Dunfermline abbey last week in order to identify potential problems and safeguard the site.

Turning to the challenges that are being faced in other parts of our culture sector, I note members' comments on libraries. They are vital links in communities, but there are difficulties and potential closures, including in Perth and Kinross and in Stirling. Innovative measures and initiatives such as the public library improvement fund are welcome, but they do not go far enough in managing the challenges.

In the debate, we have heard about the challenges that local government is facing. Councils are still being asked to do more with less, and they are having to make choices. Last week, I raised in the chamber the cuts that are being made to music tuition across Scotland. As a lifelong campaigner for music and the arts, I raise that issue again today. As we have heard, Stirling Council has proposed a cut of £250,000 to its music education budget. I have stood up for that tuition and have challenged individuals in the council on that proposal, and I will continue to do that to make sure that the cut does not happen.

We must not see the removal of that funding, because it would mean fewer opportunities for young people to sit music exams and participate in choirs, bands and youth orchestras. That is not the way forward. A petition that has been launched on the matter, which is titled "Save Our Children's Music", attracted thousands of signatures in a matter of days. One of its key supporters is the "Downton Abbey" composer John Lunn, who has talked about his life in Bridge of Allan and who credits much of his success to Stirling Council's music services. We have to listen to such individuals when they tell us what is happening on the ground.

I am a proud advocate for music tuition. In the debate, we have heard about the importance of learning skills and the vital work of the Big Noise programme in Stirling, which is in my region.

However, we cannot ignore the difficulties that we have seen over the past 18 years of this SNP Government. It has continued to support the sector, but not enough has been done over that timescale, and what has been done has been too little, too late.

The cabinet secretary talked about the value of culture. Of course it has a value, and community culture is vital, but the creative industries require to be supported. They have had a difficult time. The cabinet secretary acknowledged that, but there have been issues with trust and confidence within the sector, which have taken some dents during his time as Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture. I look forward to the conclusion of the review of Creative Scotland and to hearing what will happen next.

In his opening speech, Murdo Fraser talked about the relationship between local and national Government, which is vital to supporting the sector and giving it what it wants. We all welcome the uplift, but the budget pressures that companies are facing, given the pay awards and the Westminster Government's increasing of national insurance contributions, are having a massive impact on the sector, and arts venues, libraries and other spaces are facing cuts.

Neil Bibby said that the money was too little, too late and talked about the hokey cokey that has taken place, with the budgets going back and forward.

Alex Cole-Hamilton said that the sector deserves support, and he talked about the flagship festivals that happen in Edinburgh. He was right to acknowledge that the companies have a shadow hanging over them.

Pam Gosal talked about the creative side of life—the volunteers and the people who play roles in music, art, dance and theatre, and the impact of the Asian communities in all of that. She talked about their diversity and how they will give their support for the arts to prosper. Festivals such as Diwali and Eid are vitally important.

Once again, Stephen Kerr gave a robust speech based on his insight into what is taking place in culture. He talked about the governance and transparency of Creative Scotland, and it has to be acknowledged that there is still a problem with those.

Across the piece, we have heard about the pay awards, the reduction in the working week, the increase in national insurance contributions and the need to save music tuition.

Scotland's culture is steeped in creativity. Our art and music are a credit to us and to the nation. I hope that the Scottish Government can continue to ensure that the culture sector provides and is

provided with the support that is deserved and needed. However, as I have said, we have to acknowledge that much more needs to be done to secure the sector's future. Arts, music and culture matter. Trust and confidence also matter in that sector, and, at the moment, we still have a long way to go to achieve those.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary, Angus Robertson, to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. If you take us to decision time, cabinet secretary, that will be great.

16:51

Angus Robertson: I thank members from all parties for their engaging and thoughtful contributions. Once again, I acknowledge that we are here because we are all passionate supporters of culture—we all value the artists, the creative producers, the cultural workers, the organisations and the volunteers who help to make Scotland the society that it is and who generate so much for our local and national economies as well as our cultural life. That is clear from the vast and varied experiences of culture that we have heard about from colleagues across the chamber. I will try to reflect on as many as I can; I hope that members will forgive me if I am unable to touch on all the points that have been raised.

Murdo Fraser began really well by talking about the artistic and economic benefits—

Murdo Fraser: I agree with you.

Angus Robertson: —but he then managed to call for more culture spending while failing to confirm that he will vote against that in the budget vote later this year.

From Neil Bibby, we heard a warm welcome for increased culture spending. He called for the Scottish Government to raise spending on culture by £20 million only days before the Scottish Government announced that we intend to raise it by £34 million. He failed to confirm that he is going to abstain when it comes to the vote on increasing culture spending, and failed to acknowledge that Labour in office elsewhere in the UK is cutting revenue funding. That point was raised, correctly, by Keith Brown, when he talked about the total lack of credibility from both the Conservative and Labour parties—given that, on the one hand, colleagues make speech after speech valuing the importance of culture and calling for financial support, but, on the other hand, they vote against that or abstain.

In contrast, we heard from Maggie Chapman, who, rightly, underlined the importance of the transformative impact of the arts, through the likes of the Big Noise project. It was good to have that

put on the record. In a point that Mark Ruskell also made, she underlined the essential nature of multi-annual funding for cultural organisations.

Michael Marra needed to write to me to find out when Creative Scotland is making announcements on multi-annual funding. I point to its website, which will tell him that the announcement will be made before the end of this month. We should all look forward to that—I think that there is consensus across the parties that multi-annual funding is really important.

Michael Marra: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angus Robertson: If Michael Marra keeps it brief, I will reply as quickly as I can.

Michael Marra: I appreciate the cabinet secretary giving way. Does he not recognise that the institutions in Dundee are in significant financial distress? They await clarity on both his budget and the local government budget. As the cabinet secretary for culture, what is his response to the situation that they find themselves in?

Angus Robertson: I am sorry that Michael Marra has not caught up with the news, because I was delighted to meet the convener of Dundee City Council and local parliamentarians last week to talk about the challenges that exist in Dundee. As I have acknowledged in previous question times in the chamber, supporting important cultural organisations and making sure that they do not go to the wall has been one of the big challenges in recent years. We have worked very hard to do that, and I gave a commitment to colleagues in Dundee that I would do the same.

I invest a lot of hope in what we are about to hear in relation to the multiyear funding announcement. I have called it foundational, and I believe it to be so. If there are any parts of the cultural firmament that are not covered by multi-annual funding, it will be a priority to ensure that they are on a firm footing as well. In general, I would like to underscore what I think is the fact, which is that there is cross-party agreement on multiyear funding, and that that announcement is imminent.

Alex Cole-Hamilton talked about the importance of culture funding, as did others. To that end, I hope that he and his colleagues will follow the logic of the argument, unlike the other parties, and vote for increasing culture funding in the budget, as well as for the motion that is before us today.

We heard from Evelyn Tweed about the culture sector in Stirling, and from Pam Gosal on the importance of the Asian cultural contribution as a part of our national life. She is absolutely right—I concur with her entirely. We heard from Foysoy Choudhury, and from Michelle Thomson, who, as

she regularly does, underlined the negative impact of Brexit, which we should never forget.

We also heard from Stephen Kerr, Colin Smyth and Clare Adamson, and from Paul Sweeney—I always listen very closely to the points that he makes on the built environment. We heard from Michael Marra, who now has the answer to his question, which he did not have before. I commend to him the use of the internet to find out things that are already in the public realm. We also heard from Alexander Stewart—who, as, a member of the parliamentary choir, has a fine voice, if not the finest of arguments. I encourage him to rebel against his party line and vote for the increase in culture funding, which I think that we all agree is necessary.

It is clear that we are in agreement that, now more than ever, we have to make sure that every pound of public funding for culture is wisely invested for maximum sectoral impact. We also have to make sure that the support available from across the public, private and third sectors is enhanced where possible, so that, together, we can strengthen culture and create the conditions for culture to thrive—which is one of the central ambitions that is set out in our culture strategy for Scotland. To fully harness that potential, it is clear that we need to continue to engage closely with our culture sector and collaborate with strategic decision makers across central and local government, using all the lessons, levers and convening power that we can bring to the table in support of the culture sector. That includes demonstrating this Parliament's collective support for culture in Scotland and, as part of the parliamentary process in due course, voting in support of the Scottish Government's proposal for a significant uplift in culture funding for 2025-26.

Through this budget, we will deliver on the culture strategy's central ambition of sustaining and nurturing the conditions and skills for culture to thrive for the benefit of all. That includes providing an increase of £20 million for Creative Scotland's competitive multiyear funding programme, as well as additional increases for the national collections, the national performing companies and Screen Scotland. It also includes allocating new funding to support festivals across Scotland, improving digital access to our public libraries, restarting and extending the community-led arts and creativity programmes, and developing a culture and heritage capacity fund. We will also continue to support Scotland's flagship Sistema and youth music initiatives. We will ensure that all that additional investment has the desired positive impact across the sector, supporting the review of sector support needs, which will include the remit and functions of Creative Scotland.

The planned increase in culture funding has received cross-Cabinet approval at a time when the Scottish Government faces tough choices about the funding priorities that will ensure the delivery of the First Minister's stated priorities of eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency by investing in green energy and infrastructure, and improving Scotland's public services as an investment in Scotland's future health, equality and prosperity.

I therefore urge all members of the Scottish Parliament to support the Scottish Government's budget plans for culture in the coming weeks and make the planned increase in funding support for our vital culture sector a reality. This afternoon, we have heard a lot of powerful speeches about why we should support the culture sector. Given the funding pressures that we all acknowledge have existed, it would seem very odd indeed to be arguing, on the one hand, for increased culture funding, but then to go on to vote against that or abstain. This is the time to support the Scottish Government's approach to culture funding and its increase in culture spending, as well as the other measures that have been announced.

I commend the motion that stands in my name.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16112, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme. Any member who wishes to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved.

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

(a) Wednesday 15 January 2025—

delete

7.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.45 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 16 January 2025—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government's Response to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry Module 1 Report—
[Jamie Hepburn]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Neil Bibby will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-16092.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16092, in the name of Angus Robertson, on valuing culture: Scotland's support to the culture sector, 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.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-16092.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (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)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (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)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 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)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (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)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (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)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16092.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, is: For 29, Against 88, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-16092.2, in the name of Neil Bibby, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16092, in the name of Angus Robertson, on valuing culture: Scotland’s support to the culture sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 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)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, 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)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (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)
 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)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16092.2, in the name of Neil Bibby, is: For 24, Against 64, Abstentions 28.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-16092, in the name of Angus Robertson, on valuing culture: Scotland's support to the culture sector, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)

Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 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)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, 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)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 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)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16092, in the name of Angus Robertson, on valuing culture: Scotland’s support to the culture sector, is: For 69, Against 23, Abstentions 26.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament celebrates arts and culture in Scotland in all their diverse forms, past, present and emerging; recognises the transformational impact that they can have on people’s lives across Scotland; welcomes the economic contribution that the cultural and creative industries workforces make to society and the economy; acknowledges the importance of the community culture sector, and commends the innovative local organisations, in both rural and urban areas, for the work that they do to support participation in cultural pursuits; considers that a strong and successful culture sector is central to the prosperity of the nation; welcomes that, against a backdrop of cultural funding being cut by the UK Government, the draft Scottish Government Budget for 2025-26 increases frontline culture funding by £34 million, and believes that Scotland’s cultural communities can be supported to continue to develop and innovate in exhibition, performance and participation in Scotland’s artistic life.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

NOVA Scotland

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-15972, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, on introduction of NOVA Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the importance of having a service of support and guidance for veterans, such as those in the Central Scotland region, including those in the justice system; understands that, whilst veterans are not more likely to commit a crime than civilians, they are more likely to engage with the justice system; further understands that, in England, Op NOVA has a decade of experience working in partnership with health and justice systems to support veterans in living healthy, stable and crime-free lives, and that it provides emotional and practical support to veterans at all points of the justice system, including pre-arrest, arrest, post-arrest and those serving a custodial sentence; considers that, having been built on the foundations of Forces Employment Charity’s Project Nova, it has an evidence base and proven framework to deliver life-changing support to veterans with established partnerships in the justice sector; notes the belief, therefore, that NOVA Scotland would be crucial in enabling veterans to live stable lives by providing access to practical and emotional support across a variety of areas, and further notes the calls for the Scottish Government to look at measures to introduce NOVA Scotland.

17:12

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): For us as members, among the many highlights of being elected to represent our communities are the fantastic people whom we get to meet along the way. There are literally thousands of people in communities across the country who spend every single day helping others without expecting anything in return. I am fortunate enough to know one of those people: Scott Muir.

I first met Scott when I was a councillor in North Lanarkshire. I was aware of a veterans cafe that was being held every Friday, so one afternoon, I decided to pay a visit. When I arrived, I could not have been made more welcome. They were not used to politicians visiting, but they very quickly invited me to sit at a table with some members of our armed forces and veterans community. I was offered a bowl of soup—they told me that it was road-kill soup; to this day, I do not know whether it was or not, but it was enjoyable all the same—and we spent the next few hours chatting away. I listened to their views on the issues of the day and asked whether there was anything that the council could do to help them.

It was there that I met Scott. He is one of the driving forces behind Veterans Community

(Lanarkshire)—VCLAN—which is the group that is responsible for holding those cafes every Friday. It is a brilliant initiative to enable our armed forces and veterans community in Lanarkshire to get together, enjoy a warm meal and socialise. Scott is the definition of a community champion—I know that I am going to be in a lot of trouble for mentioning him in the chamber, as he is not someone who enjoys having the spotlight shone on him, but he certainly deserves the recognition; I suppose that he can chin me later for doing so.

The truth is that I would not be raising the matter of NOVA Scotland in the chamber today if it was not for Scott. When he shared with me the NOVA Scot proposals and how the service had the potential to transform the lives of many veterans in Scotland, I knew that I had to seek answers from the Scottish Government.

So, what exactly is NOVA Scot? To put it simply, the project champions veterans in the justice system or in times of crisis. The NOVA Scot service, were it to be introduced in full, would enable veterans to live stable lives by providing access to practical and emotional support across a range of areas including education, employment, accommodation, living skills, self-care, mental health and wellbeing, friendships and communities, drugs and alcohol and living a law-abiding life.

NOVA Scot has already established a direct referral pathway with Police Scotland and received referrals from a vulnerable persons database. Any veteran whom Police Scotland encounters who is deemed vulnerable—for example, there might be concerns relating to their mental health or to addiction or suicide—will automatically be referred to NOVA Scot.

Although the service is working well, veterans who are arrested or who go through the custody suites are not currently referred to NOVA Scot. That is because Police Scotland is able to refer those who enter the justice system only to organisations that are funded by a statutory body. As NOVA Scot is not currently funded through that model, it falls outwith the remit. Ideally, the service needs a letter of support from the Scottish Government, which would open the door to NOVA Scot being able to improve the identification of veterans in the justice system. Susie Hamilton, the Scottish veterans commissioner, has recently called for such improvements to be made in order to prevent reoffending.

There is a gap in the justice system when it comes to supporting veterans. I must stress that although veterans are no more likely than any other civilian in Scotland to commit a crime, the reasons that they fall into the justice system can often be prevented. By providing veterans with assistance early on, there is an opportunity to

prevent them from ending up in the justice system in the first place.

NOVA Scot has been modelled on the highly successful Op NOVA service, which was commissioned in England in 2023 but has been operational since 2014. The primary objective is to provide a single pathway to support veterans to prevent them from entering the justice system. Op NOVA has access to, and receives referrals from, the police, the national health service, HM Prison and Probation Service and the NHS GP connect service.

That is the main difference between Op NOVA and NOVA Scot. The system in England has access to various different areas to which Nova Scot currently does not have access. As I said, all that is needed is for the Scottish Government to give the green light to replicate that system through the creation of a bespoke service in Scotland, which could transform lives.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank the member for giving way, and I commend her for bringing the debate to the chamber. Would she agree that it is important, in the context of the work that still needs to be done, that we remember that veterans can be women and young people, and they exist right across the social and demographic spectrum?

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

Meghan Gallacher: Absolutely. That is something that I completely support and is why I am so supportive of NOVA Scot: it is not about looking at veterans in silos—for example, as only men—but about ensuring that we consider the needs of women, families and young people, who are part of the forces family as well. Everyone can be supported through the system, but it is not fully operational yet. That is why I am bringing the debate to the chamber—to try to convince the Scottish Government to give the expanded service the green light so that we can get the support to people who need it.

Importantly, Op NOVA has dedicated caseworkers who are assigned to work directly with veterans, enabling them to build a strong one-to-one relationship. It provides veterans with someone whom they trust while the best programme of help and support for them is worked out. We have that through NOVA Scot but, again, the number of referrals that the Scottish service gets will be significantly lower, because it does not have the same access that Op NOVA has to the various other sectors.

The outcomes from Op NOVA speak for themselves. Of the total referrals that were received from Op NOVA, 82 per cent of veterans

who engaged with the service noticed that their mental health improved; 76 per cent

“reported progress to a crime-free life”;

and 66 per cent noted improved relationships with family and friends. Those statistics can be replicated in Scotland if the Minister for Veterans and the Scottish Government would agree to put pen to paper.

Many veterans already feel a sense of detachment from decision making in this country, and they often feel that MSPs are not standing shoulder to shoulder with them. We can show today that, as a Parliament, we do care. NOVA Scot is about not just reducing reoffending in our veterans community, but showing that there is a tailored model of support, should any veteran fall on hard times. The best part is that it does not even need legislation. What NOVA Scot needs is the Scottish Government’s buy-in, so that it can hit the ground running by providing access to other sectors and ensuring that the project is veteran centred, with everyone pulling together to reduce veteran crime rates.

I firmly believe that adopting such a person-centred approach can positively change the lives of veterans throughout Scotland. I finish with a question to the minister. Will he approve the letter today, and will he give the green light to NOVA Scot?

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

17:20

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I will probably repeat some of the things that Meghan Gallacher covered, but I will not make much of an apology for that. I congratulate her on securing the debate on introducing NOVA Scotland. I commend the Forces Employment Charity for establishing the NOVA Scotland service and for the work that it has done in Scotland to date. I note that, again, I got a slight nudge from my office manager to speak in the debate, because—as I have previously said in the chamber—he is a veteran. He has not had any dealings with the justice system, although one could not say the same for some former Prime Ministers and Presidents—allegedly, Presiding Officer.

Before I go any further, it is important to reiterate a point that is made very early on in the text of Meghan Gallacher’s motion, which states that

“veterans are not more likely to commit a crime than civilians”.

However, as the motion also mentions,

“they are more likely to engage with the justice system”,

and that is where the work of NOVA Scotland will prove invaluable, as it has already done since the service was established last year.

The service is following in the footsteps of what has already been done in England, as Meghan Gallacher said, and I do not believe in reinventing the wheel. I have no issues with taking ideas that work well elsewhere in the world and bringing them to Scotland, especially if they are going to benefit our communities and our veterans. In this case, we did not have to look that far.

Over the past year, there has been a great deal of discussion about veterans in the justice system, much of which has been sparked by the Scottish veterans commissioner, Susie Hamilton, who investigated the subject and published her “Veterans and the Law” report. That report covers the history of what started out as project Nova in 2014 and went on to become Op NOVA in 2023, and it outlines a tale of success in supporting veterans in the justice system.

The report states that, for the 700 veterans who completed the Op NOVA journey,

“the reported outcomes were:

- 97% reported progress in at least one outcome area
- 82% reported improved mental health
- 78% reported progress with accommodation
- 76% reported progress to a crime-free life
- 76% reported progress in drug and alcohol treatment
- 74% reported progress in managing strong feelings
- 72% reported progress with parenting and caring
- 69% reported progress in living skills and self-care
- 66% reported progress in friends and community”.

If Nova Scotland can produce similar outcomes for our veterans, I will be truly delighted.

I finish by reiterating that the majority of veterans transition well to civilian life, and that veterans are less likely to commit a crime, but that is not the case for everyone. For some who have left the forces, a range of factors—poor physical or mental health, debt, homelessness, alcohol or drug misuse and family breakdown, among other things—can lead them into contact with the justice system. That is where we need to support our veterans better, and I look forward to seeing that happen through the pathway that NOVA Scotland is starting to provide.

17:24

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank Meghan Gallacher for securing the debate and giving us the chance to explore this serious issue. We all want to see our veterans

successfully adjust to life after they leave the armed forces, and many do so, but sadly some face a number of complex and challenging issues that make that transition difficult, such as homelessness, unemployment and mental health impacts. Unfortunately, a minority will also come into contact with the justice system, which can only add to the difficulties that they face in establishing stable lives for themselves. The question, then, is how we better support those veterans during their experience with the justice system so that, in the long run, they can move away from it.

We have heard from my colleague Meghan Gallacher a persuasive case for introducing Op NOVA in Scotland. I expect that the minister will have listened to that case closely, because, as I know from my role as convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community, he is a strong supporter of our veterans. With that in mind, I will highlight some specific aspects of the Op NOVA service as it operates in England.

The first aspect concerns how the service interacts with individuals. Within 48 hours of a referral, an individual is assigned a caseworker, who then draws up a support plan that is tailored to that veteran's specific needs. The caseworkers themselves all have experience of working with the justice system and have relationships with key partners such as the police, prisons, the NHS and accommodation services. I also note that the Op NOVA service delivers its support in prisons without putting additional pressure on prison staff—in fact, many of the caseworkers are key trained.

Op NOVA is not just a signposting service that takes down some details and pushes the veterans on to others—it offers a personalised approach that is unique to each veteran and is taken forward by experienced support staff. That is a powerful combination that we would do well to replicate in Scotland.

That brings me to another aspect of the service that I want to highlight: its results. In the 14 months of its operation in England, Op NOVA was active across all police and probation regions and was being rolled out to more than 100 prisons from April last year. In total, it engaged with almost 1,500 veterans. Of those, as we have heard, 76 per cent reported progress being made towards “a crime-free life”. That is an impressive result in anyone's book, and I believe that it demonstrates the validity of Op NOVA's strategy.

Let us also consider the wider impact of that approach. A staggering 97 per cent

“reported progress in at least one outcome area”;

82 per cent reported an improvement in their mental health; and 78 per cent reported an improvement with accommodation.

In Scotland, 900 homelessness applications were made in the past financial year, and for those who were assessed, the key support issue was mental health. Those figures are not confined to veterans in the justice system, but the point remains that homelessness and mental ill health are both serious issues in Scotland, and any programme that has the potential to tackle an aspect of those problems must be explored. No one is pretending that any one initiative has all the answers, but where we have evidence that something is making a real and positive difference to veterans' lives, we owe it to them to take it seriously.

17:28

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate Ms Gallacher, the member for Central Scotland, on securing the debate. It is a privilege to be able to take part in the debate, and I put on record that members on the Labour benches have a huge admiration for the work of NOVA in supporting veterans to address their challenges. I pay tribute in particular to Ms Gallacher's constituent, Scott, who is clearly doing admirable work such that it has caught the attention of the member; I hope that he continues to persevere and innovate in serving the constituents of Central Scotland in that endeavour.

As I said in December during the Government debate on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland, Labour members

“are eager to work on a cross-party basis”—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2024; c 70.]

to ensure that armed forces members and veterans are supported, whether they are in service or are transitioning to civilian life.

That transition is often very successful. As members have mentioned, veterans are some of our finest and most achieving citizens. However, the transition can also be very challenging. The physiological and emotional impacts of their service, often in very traumatic circumstances—especially in the last 20 years or so—mean that everyday life can be challenging.

From personal experience, I know that some of my friends who served in Afghanistan often found civilian life somewhat trivial when they came back and that everyday challenges—which I suppose we would colloquially describe as first-world problems—could often lead to low frustration tolerance. When we were younger, I remember going out in Glasgow after people had come back from Afghanistan, and there was an increased tendency to get into scraps because they found

arguments more frequently than might otherwise have been the case. Patience was low.

That was often countered by having what was known as “decompression,” where units would stay together after coming back from hot conflict zones and try to maintain some cohesion as they slowly transitioned back into civilian life. However, people often found that very difficult—not least those who had lost colleagues, where there was an underlying sense of guilt.

In May, it will have been 12 years since my friend Robert Hetherington was sadly killed in Afghanistan. I still very vividly recall attending his funeral just a few yards from here at the Canongate kirk. It was a harrowing experience for all of us, because that should have been his wedding, not his funeral. Seeing people in their 20s in that context is a very jarring experience. I think that a lot of us still struggle to come to terms with the fact that he is no longer with us—particularly in recent years, as the conflict in Afghanistan has come to an end. We often question what the purpose of it all was, in the end.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I thank Paul Sweeney for his very moving speech.

Would he agree that one of the challenges for our veterans who have served in a theatre of war or a conflict zone is that—I have heard this directly from them—having been trained that the response to violence is greater violence, they come back into civilian life and can genuinely struggle to adapt to it? Whatever form decompression takes needs to take account of that and those circumstances.

Paul Sweeney: I agree. It is often said that the art of soldiering is the “controlled application of violence” on behalf of the state. That is essentially the purpose of the army: to close with, make contact with and kill the enemy. At the end of the day, that is what fixing a bayonet at the end of a rifle is about. When you have been taught to do that under certain circumstances, as controlled by officers, it can be challenging to have that control mechanism taken away. That can often be difficult for people.

When I speak to veterans, they tell me that the loss of structure and purpose that the military environment offers, with clear rules and routines—as well as a cohesive identity as a group within the military—is particularly tough to lose. A lot of self-esteem is wrapped up in that: the regiment, the tradition, the ship, or whatever it might be. It is difficult to transition to life outside the armed forces.

The loss of such a tight structure can make someone feel as though they have lost their

identity and that they no longer have a clear purpose. That can often have a knock-on effect on veterans’ mental health, and anxiety, depression and substance abuse are all too often common features of people in the veterans’ community, and of younger veterans in particular. So, it is crucial that the appropriate services are in place.

Although it is welcome that priority has been given to the healthcare of veterans, the Government cannot be complacent about the quality of the services—in particular, the quality and accessibility of mental health services.

We know, for the reasons outlined by Ms Gallacher, that veterans might, unfortunately, end up in the justice system, and we must ask ourselves whether the correct support was ever available to them to avoid that outcome. Certainly, we must not diminish the seriousness of criminal offences. However, when veterans find themselves in the justice system, NOVA Scotland can be there for them at all points. Whether that is assistance in the wake of an arrest or support for those serving a custodial sentence, it is on hand and able to act as a mentor and a consistent point of contact.

It is good to know that NOVA Scotland works across Scotland with all 32 local authorities to assist vulnerable veterans so that they can rebuild their lives. As mentioned earlier, that was a key part of the recommendations made by the Scottish veterans commissioner. Those interventions could prevent offending and allow veterans to rebuild their lives in a more productive way. That would be good for the community and for everyone involved.

With its experience elsewhere in the United Kingdom over the last decade, I know that it has unrivalled experience and I look forward to seeing its work develop in Scotland. It is very encouraging to see it do that. That one-stop-shop approach and consistent point of contact is critical, and I commend its work.

17:34

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate, Presiding Officer, and I thank Meghan Gallacher for bringing the motion to the chamber.

I would like to say how much I have enjoyed all the contributions. I will comment on what Paul Sweeney talked about and what Graeme Dey mentioned in his intervention. As I was once bluntly reminded by Tom Tugendhat, no less, the stark reality is that our armed forces are—fundamentally—trained to kill the King’s enemies. That is often the stark nature of the business that they are asked to take care of. We therefore owe an enormous and on-going debt of gratitude to

every man and woman who serves in our armed forces.

Although I have no personal connection with the armed forces, other than as someone who has benefited from their service, as it were, I have always been drawn to the idea of the military covenant. It is a moral obligation that the state has to those who have served our country. It is not a new idea, but it is an idea that we need to make much more real in our veterans' lives.

Since the deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, which have been mentioned in passing, there has been progress in enshrining in law certain entitlements for our veterans. The establishment of an office for veterans affairs at the Ministry of Defence was an important step forward, and I pay tribute to Johnny Mercer, who did so much to make that happen.

Keith Brown is not in his place, which is a shame, because he would have heard me say something nice about him, but I pay tribute to him and to Graeme Dey, who I know are deeply committed to the work of supporting our veterans and have done outstanding work as ministers for veterans in their turn. I also compliment Maurice Golden and former MSP Maurice Corry on the excellent work that is done in the cross-party group for the armed forces and veterans community.

The military covenant does not yet do what it should do but, if the minister were to agree to the petition made today by Meghan Gallacher and commit to paper, as it were, the authorisation for NOVA Scot to do the good work that it does in a recognised way, that would be another step forward in making the obligations that we should all feel towards the men and women of our armed forces and security services real and tangible. The United States has set the bar through how it looks after its veterans, and we can learn much from it.

Jackie Dunbar made the point that it is important to make it clear that, in the main, our veterans leaving the armed forces manage the transition from military life to civilian life, but some do not, and those people are the focus of our debate. They give selfless service, sometimes at significant personal cost, and they are left grappling for the rest of their lives with physical injury or mental health injury, and perhaps with an inability to manage their affairs as completely as they and their families would like. They have a sense—Paul Sweeney described it well—of feeling isolated and withdrawn from the society that they belong to and to which they have given so much. That is why Op NOVA and NOVA Scot are such important services, because they are holistic, individual and customised.

In the report “Veterans and the Law”, which the Scottish veterans commissioner produced just a few months ago, Susie Hamilton identified the work that Op NOVA in England has done. I believe that we should take the fullest possible advantage of that in Scotland. The idea of an individual caseworker and the individual referral case pathway is very important.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am conscious of the time. Do I have time to give way, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes.

Paul Sweeney: The point that the member makes about the individual caseworker is really important. Anecdotally, I found that, although the different charities mean well, people who were phoning them up were being sent from pillar to post. There was a lack of consistency, and the level of frustration eventually scunnered people enough that they disengaged. That is an important point to address.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that intervention. Paul Sweeney refers to the practical support when a veteran connects with another veteran, who is able to direct and connect them to health services, mental health support and other practical support of which they stand in need.

I repeat that we have the country that we have in large measure because of the sacrifices—often unspoken and unreported—of the men and women of our armed forces and security services. We owe them our deepest gratitude. We have a long way to go in honouring them through a proper armed forces covenant, but let the debate and the simple ask that it makes of the minister be a tangible expression of our commitment to support them for as long as that support is required.

17:40

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I thank Meghan Gallacher for lodging the motion and I thank members—particularly Paul Sweeney—for their contributions.

Members will be aware that veterans and the law is a key theme in the UK-wide strategy for our veterans. In our veterans strategy action plan, the Scottish Government is committed to the outcome of veterans leaving the armed forces with the resilience and awareness to remain law-abiding civilians. We continue to work with key partners and stakeholders to support the delivery of that outcome, which has included engagement with NOVA Scotland throughout the past year.

As we heard, NOVA Scotland collaborates with Police Scotland, the Scottish Prison Service and local authority criminal justice social work teams. Its caseworkers support veterans in the criminal justice system to address their challenges and help them to rebuild their lives and move forward beyond the justice system.

The small NOVA Scotland team has been engaging with my officials as it seeks to formalise its referral partnership with Police Scotland and to determine whether it is necessary or appropriate for the Scottish Government to offer some sort of formal recognition or endorsement for the service. I point out that the service self-evidently sits predominantly in the justice space. We support NOVA Scotland's aims and ambitions and recognise the benefits that its service can offer veterans and their families, but we are working with Police Scotland and others to determine the best way forward, including considering how that support complements the services that other partners offer.

Meghan Gallacher *rose*—

Graeme Dey: Just give me a moment.

Those partners include Sacro, the Scottish Prison Service, the NHS and other public and third sector bodies.

I give way to Meghan Gallacher.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members to press their request-to-intervene buttons.

Meghan Gallacher: I apologise, Presiding Officer. I understand what the minister says about the need to interact with others and look at the full picture when considering whether to endorse NOVA Scotland fully. However, my understanding is that the police are supportive of endorsement and want to proceed. The last conversation that I am aware of was in October last year. Has there been any update since then?

Graeme Dey: As I indicated, I am the veterans minister, not a justice minister, so I am not sighted on whether there has been anything in that area. I will give Meghan Gallacher a taste of our considerations. One thing that we should consider when deciding whether NOVA Scotland should have an enhanced role, which I am happy to explore, is its ability to scale up quickly to meet the demand that would come from having such a role.

Members will be aware that the Scottish Government recently welcomed the veterans commissioner's latest thematic report, to which Stephen Kerr referred. The report noted areas of good practice across Scotland, including the services offered by NOVA Scotland. The commissioner mentioned how its referral partnership had replaced the previous arrest

referral scheme between Police Scotland and the armed services advice project. Additionally, the report made five recommendations to the Scottish Government, including one that we should establish a co-ordinated and collaborative approach across Scotland to bring together statutory and third sector providers to support veterans in the criminal justice system. It is absolutely possible that NOVA Scotland will have an enhanced role to play in supporting the delivery of that and the other recommendations.

The commissioner's reference to a joined-up, collaborative approach, as well as the additional recommendations on staff in the justice system being veteran aware and on retaining and supporting the role of veterans in custody support officers—or VICSOs, as they are known—chime with me particularly.

I visited HMP Shotts a year or so ago to meet some veterans who were in custody. I was struck by the dedication of the VICSOs and their desire to provide the best possible support to our veterans. It is clear that they are highly capable and hugely passionate about delivering their additional role as VICSOs, but they might benefit from additional awareness of other support services for veterans.

For example, during that visit, I heard of cases in which the service provided by Fares4Free might help to facilitate visits by loved ones that otherwise were not happening. My team put the VICSOs in touch with Fares4Free after the visit, and I understand that that resulted in families who had previously struggled to get to the prison being offered free transport for visits.

That sort of joined-up collaborative effort, which others have touched on, is exactly what the commissioner is asking for. NOVA Scotland could have a role to play in that too, because it is clear from that example that there is room for improvement.

More broadly, as part of our vision for justice, the Government has established a transformational change programme that brings together justice agencies to focus on work to help to embed trauma-informed practices and to ensure that our justice services can—to go back to some of the points that Paul Sweeney made—recognise the prevalence of trauma and adversity, realise when people are affected by trauma and respond in ways that reduce retraumatisation. It is right that that approach should encompass the ways in which veterans are treated in the justice system.

Scottish Government officials will highlight the commissioner's recommendations to the transformational change programme board to get a better understanding of agencies' capacity to deliver the operational changes that are required

to deliver the long-term set of outcomes that the commissioner is looking for. I intend to have further discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and justice agencies to better understand the current operational feasibility of the commissioner's recommendations. The ask from NOVA Scotland will be considered against that backdrop.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to veterans and that we will continue to provide our unwavering support to them and their families, including those who are in, have been in or are at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. I again acknowledge Meghan Gallacher for bringing the motion to the chamber and members for their valuable and, indeed, enjoyable contributions.

Meeting closed at 17:46.

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Official Report
Room T2.20
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: official.report@parliament.scot
Telephone: 0131 348 5447
Fax: 0131 348 5423

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