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Thursday 27 September 2018

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Scottish Parliament

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

General Question Time

River Clyde and Adjacent Communities (Industrial Strategy)

1. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to develop an industrial strategy for the River Clyde and its adjacent communities. (S5O-02409)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): We will work with the many public and private partners to help to realise and connect key opportunities along the River Clyde.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that fairly brief answer. Does he agree that Hunterston in my constituency must play a key role in any River Clyde industrial strategy, given its unique assets and geographical location? Can he advise Parliament what support the Scottish Government and its agencies will provide to stimulate investment and job creation at Hunterston?

Derek Mackay: The Presiding Officer has given us a clear instruction to get to the point, which is what I was trying to do.

There are so many opportunities right along the River Clyde that it would take too long to list them all. The point is that we want to create the right economic environment in which all those economic opportunities along the Clyde can flourish.

With specific reference to Mr Gibson's constituency interest in Hunterston, of course it has strategic importance because of its location and the opportunity that it provides. The Government's economic agencies are considering work there to stimulate investment in job creation. There are immense opportunities there.

What support will the Government provide? Through our economic agencies, we will look seriously at the requests that come forward. We will also be very proactive in infrastructure spend and the work that we do on innovation and the energy policy.

There are further opportunities to work in partnership with local authorities, including on the Glasgow city region deal, to see what further

resources can go to Ayrshire. There are many ways in which we can help to stimulate investment opportunities and support job creation. Of course, we must be mindful of environmental concerns, but fundamentally we need to support the opportunities in that area and right along the River Clyde. The many strategies that we have, including the industrial strategy and our strategy on tourism, seek to maximise the opportunities that exist. I will certainly ensure that Mr Gibson is informed of the work that we are undertaking, in that regard.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware that the Hunterston nuclear power station site in North Ayrshire is one of the largest employers in the area. Will the Scottish Government's current moratorium on new nuclear development in Scotland help or hinder the economy of North Ayrshire?

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): That question is only slightly adjacent to the topic at hand, but I will allow the minister to make a brief comment.

Derek Mackay: I am happy to refer the matter to the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands, who can get back to Mr Greene on the specifics of the energy policy as it relates to Hunterston. The point is that there are other economic opportunities that the Government is aware of, and we are looking at that case at the moment.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I add my support to the call for an industrial strategy for the River Clyde. In particular, I want to raise the opportunity to service the Scottish Government's ferry fleet on the Clyde. The ferries used to be serviced at Greenock, but I understand that they are now serviced in Liverpool. Will the cabinet secretary return that work to Scotland as part of a River Clyde strategy?

Derek Mackay: I have a great deal of sympathy with the aspiration to be able simply to select where work is carried out, but when it comes to procurement, we must operate within the law. I am very attracted to ensuring that as much work as possible comes to the Clyde.

With regard to the idea of keeping as much of the industrial supply chain and as many maintenance and servicing opportunities as possible in Scotland without encroaching unfairly into the procurement processes of other organisations, I will look closely at the opportunities to see what else we can do to achieve the outcome that Jackie Baillie seeks.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the petition by the campaign to save Inchgreen dry dock. What discussions have he and the Scottish

Government had with Inverclyde Council about the Glasgow city region deal project at Inchgreen in Greenock?

Derek Mackay: We are trying to ensure that the city region deal process and the benefits of the deals cover every part of Scotland, which includes opportunities in Inverclyde. Again, I am happy to refer the matter to the lead on city region deals, Michael Matheson, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, who can get back to Mr McMillan with a more detailed answer. The point of the city region deals is to maximise economic opportunities in partnership with key local stakeholders, including the private sector, which is important.

I am well aware of the coverage of the dry dock and the cross-party approach to the matter. I am interested in ensuring that industrial opportunities are delivered right along the Clyde, so we will do everything that we can do to support that.

The Presiding Officer: Question number 2 has not been lodged.

National Missing Persons Framework (Implementation Plan)

3. Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the implementation plan in the national missing persons framework for Scotland. (S5O-02411)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Denham): The national missing persons framework, which is the first of its kind in Scotland, was launched in May 2017, and we reported on progress earlier this year. The framework has been backed by investment of £60,000 to develop and deliver return-discussion training, which is central to ensuring that people do not fall into the pattern of repeatedly going missing. Additionally, we have committed £142,000 to the Missing People charity to enhance awareness and use of its 24-hour helpline and TextSafe facilities in Scotland. I have also recently written to all local authority chief executives asking them to continue to support actively implementation of the framework.

Jenny Gilruth: Allan Bryant was last seen outside Styx nightclub on Caskieberran Road in Glenrothes just after 2 am on 3 November 2013. Five years on, his family are no closer to finding out what happened to their son. Although I welcome the minister's missing persons framework in principle, will she outline what support is available for families of long-term missing people, and will she commit to looking again at how the strategy is implemented in practice to assist family members like the Bryants

who live with the daily torture of a loved one being missing?

Ash Denham: I thank Jenny Gilruth for raising that point, and I join her in extending my thoughts to Allan Bryant's family and to all families who are missing loved ones. I reassure her that Police Scotland does not close missing persons cases and that Mr Bryant's case remains open; Police Scotland will continue to investigate any new information that it receives.

The national missing persons framework recognises the need to support the families of missing people. I believe that we are moving in the right direction, but there is more work to do. I am happy to meet Jenny Gilruth to discuss this important issue further, if she would like that.

Victims Commissioner

4. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider establishing a victims commissioner, and, if not, how it plans to learn from the experiences of victims and witnesses in the shaping of public policy. (S5O-02412)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): The issue was considered during the passage of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014. We remain of the view that funding for victim support organisations is a more effective use of resources, and are providing £17.9 million in 2018-19. Those organisations represent the interests of victims and provide robust input to Government consultation and the development of policy.

For example, the development of the new homicide service, which will be operational by spring next year, will be directly informed by the views of victims organisations and the experiences of victims' families. In addition, we are funding research to understand better the experiences of rape and sexual assault victim-survivors, which will help to ensure that the interests of victims are at the heart of our criminal justice system.

In my new role, I have met a number of families of victims of homicide and other crimes. They have directly influenced my thinking and, certainly, the programme for government commitments in relation to the victims package. We are learning from their experiences in order better to inform and design support services, and to ensure that their voices will be heard.

Kezia Dugdale: The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland describes his job this way:

"We help you know your rights ... we help protect your rights"

and

“we help influence change”.

My constituent Kevin Woodburn lost his son in a violent attack on new year's day 2017. He did not know his rights. No one gave him a copy of the victims code and he feels let down at every turn by a justice system that he believes is stacked in favour of the accused. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet Kevin and me to hear first hand why we believe that a victims commissioner is long overdue?

Humza Yousaf: I recognise the work that Kezia Dugdale has done on the matter, and I record the Scottish Government's condolences for the loss of Shaun Woodburn. I know that the First Minister has met his family.

Of course I would be willing to meet Kezia Dugdale and the Woodburn family. I have corresponded with Shaun's grandfather Oliver Woodburn. Kezia Dugdale will be aware of the variety of measures in the programme for government.

Having met a number of families of victims of homicide, I think that it is fair to say that we recognise that throughout the family's journey—from the time that the terrible tragedy happens, right the way through the process—there are gaps that we are keen to ensure that we fill, through the victims package that we announced. I would certainly welcome a meeting with the family to help to inform the development of the policy better, as we move forward.

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): I know that the cabinet secretary is aware of the case of my constituent Kirsty Maxwell, who died 17 months ago in Benidorm in circumstances that remain unclear, and of the plight of her family. Will the commitment in the programme for government to improve services for victims specifically include better support for families who have lost loved ones abroad, given that there is a role for Police Scotland and victim support services as well as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Angela Constance for raising that issue and, once again, express my sympathies to the Maxwell family. I acknowledge how much Angela Constance has been advocating on their behalf.

Angela Constance is right that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office takes the lead in the process, but that support services could also be put in place for families here in Scotland. We are still thinking about how to develop further some of the commitments in the programme for government through the victims package, which I am happy to discuss with Angela Constance. I will reflect on what support we can put in place for families in Scotland through the measures that

were announced in the programme for government.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In England and Wales, certain prisoners contribute a portion of any salary that they earn from paid work outwith the prison gates to a fund for victims of crime, which is a good way to compensate the people who suffer most, and can help to deliver meaningful rehabilitation. Will the cabinet secretary consider introducing such a scheme in Scotland?

Humza Yousaf: We are currently waiting for conversations with Westminster to progress in relation to our victims surcharge, which we are keen to take forward. I will keep Liam Kerr updated on that conversation. Where we can learn from best practice in the United Kingdom, Europe or anywhere else, I am open-minded about doing that. Liam Kerr will know about our plans for a victims surcharge.

Colleges and Industry Partnership Working

5. Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports partnership working between colleges and industry. (S5O-02413)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Partnership working with industry must, of course, be at the heart of what our colleges do. Our colleges play a key role in delivering educational opportunities that support individuals into the workplace and on to higher learning. We continue to ensure that every college in Scotland is in a strong position to meet the needs of both learners and employers.

Tom Arthur: I thank Richard Lochhead for that answer and welcome him to his new position.

Last week, I had the pleasure of joining my colleagues Derek Mackay and Stuart McMillan at the launch of the A C Whyte skills academy at West College Scotland in Greenock, which is a partnership between West College Scotland and Barrhead-based A C Whyte and Co Ltd, a business that is one of the main contractors for the refurbishment of homes across the United Kingdom and which specialises in external wall insulation. Having identified a skills shortage in the sector, its managing director, Jennifer Phin, and her team worked collaboratively with West College Scotland to develop a course that offers a guaranteed job at the end of it. Does the minister agree that that is a fantastic example of partnership working and that West College Scotland and A C Whyte should be commended for their endeavours? Will he join me in wishing all the students on the course the very best for the coming year?

Richard Lochhead: I thank the member for his question and his kind words. He is quite right that the skills academy partnership between West College Scotland and A C Whyte is a perfect example of colleges and employers working together and sets a fine example for the rest of the country to follow. I certainly intend to take the issue seriously and to seek to ensure that we foster such relationships between our colleges and employers in order to address skills gaps. I join Tom Arthur in wishing all the students, and indeed the employer, A C Whyte, all the best.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, welcome the minister to his new position.

It is important that courses are linked to the needs of industry and the wider labour market. Is any assessment made of whether college leavers enter employment that is relevant to their qualifications and for how long do such assessments continue after leavers have entered the workplace?

Richard Lochhead: That is another issue that I am keen to pursue. Many tracking assessments are made of the destinations of students from colleges and universities. I am more than happy to look into that specific issue for the member and to drop him a note on that. It is important that we track the final workplace destinations of our students.

Aberfoyle Medical Centre (General Practitioner Services)

6. Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with NHS Forth Valley regarding funding for general practitioner services at the Aberfoyle medical centre. (S5O-02414)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The Scottish Government is engaging with NHS Forth Valley and its constituent integration joint boards on their primary care improvement plans. I understand that NHS Forth Valley provided discretionary funding to Aberfoyle and Buchlyvie medical practice under the historical associate GP scheme. That funding was tied to a particular postholder, who has since retired. The health board is committed to retaining the funding to support all practices in the west Stirlingshire area, including the Aberfoyle and Buchlyvie practice.

Dean Lockhart: The Aberfoyle and Buchlyvie medical practice, which is in my region, is faced with diminished GP capacity, due to the decision to withdraw funding for a GP. That has resulted in GP availability falling below the level needed to maintain an acceptable service to the local community and is putting the GP service at risk.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that a higher level of GP availability is essential in rural locations? Will she commit to reviewing the national guidance on GP provision to reflect the particular needs of individual rural GP practices?

Jeane Freeman: I disagree with the premise of Mr Lockhart's supplementary question: funding was not withdrawn; as the practice was informed in 2004, it was no longer appropriate, given the new—at that time—GP contract. Although the funding was continued by NHS Forth Valley, it made it clear to the practice—and the practice knew—that the funding was linked to a particular individual and so would end when that individual retired, as has now happened.

Nonetheless, NHS Forth Valley has committed to retaining the funding as a whole and to ensuring that it is more equitably distributed across all the medical practices in the area. That new investment will be made in wider multidisciplinary teams to support the new GP contract, which, as members know, we negotiated with the full support of the British Medical Association, which secured the support of the majority of its members.

The Scottish Government has announced an increase in respect of the GP contract, as well as a 3 per cent increase for independent contractor GPs this year, along with an additional increase in their expenses. As I am sure Dean Lockhart knows, the rural short life working group, chaired by Sir Lewis Ritchie, is considering particular issues that might apply to rural practices and I look forward to receiving his recommendations.

Finally, no GP practice in Scotland will lose funding as a consequence of the new, well-supported and much-welcomed GP contract.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the most appropriate way to represent the good folk of the wider Aberfoyle and Buchlyvie area is to engage in serious discussion with local people, local GPs and the local health board and for members to attend public meetings in their constituency areas?

Jeane Freeman: I agree with Mr Crawford. Local engagement is fundamental to how we reform and improve our primary healthcare services. Elected members of the Scottish Parliament have an important role to play as well as a responsibility to ensure that engagement is genuine and reaches all parts of the communities that they represent and that they participate in that engagement. In that way, members can bring to Parliament and to the attention of the Government issues that have genuinely been raised locally.

**Science, Technology, Engineering and
Mathematics Apprentices (North and South
Lanarkshire)**

7. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many science, technology, engineering and maths apprentices there are, and how many of these are in North and South Lanarkshire. (S5O-02415)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): Currently, there are 21,050 STEM apprentices in Scotland—that figure is based on the published modern apprenticeship data for quarter 1 of 2018-19. Of those apprentices, 1,725 are in North Lanarkshire and 1,395 are in South Lanarkshire.

Graham Simpson: According to Equate Scotland, only 16 per cent of higher education students in engineering and technology are women, and only 27 per cent of women with a science, technology, engineering and maths university qualification remain in the sector. What is the Scottish Government doing to encourage women to go on STEM courses and into STEM careers?

Jamie Hepburn: I recognise the issues that Graham Simpson lays out. They are why, through Skills Development Scotland's equality action plan, we are ensuring that much more is done to ensure that more women take part in the various STEM frameworks in modern apprenticeships and why we laid out a STEM strategy to encourage more young women to study STEM subjects at school. That activity is under way and will continue.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Flu Vaccinations

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): Harold Laing is 72 and he lives in Perth. This week, he went to his general practitioner and was told that the enhanced flu vaccination that has been recommended for use this winter by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is not available to him. He has taken matters into his own hands by going to his local chemist to purchase it. Mr Laing asked us, "If Boots can get enough supplies, why can't NHS Scotland?" Can the First Minister answer him?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As I am sure Ruth Davidson is aware, the new adjuvanted trivalent flu vaccine is manufactured by one supplier, which had to significantly ramp up production for the whole of the United Kingdom very quickly. That is why it was unable to guarantee sufficient supplies for everyone over the age of 65 in time for the start of this year's vaccination programme. That does not just affect Scotland; it is an issue right across the UK.

We are advised on vaccination policy by the independent expert Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, whose recommendation led to this situation. However, I stress that the vaccine that is being offered to 65 to 74-year-olds this winter still provides full flu protection. That is an important point of assurance to make for all people across the country.

The vaccination campaign for this flu season will get under way on 1 October, and that will offer free flu vaccinations to more than 2 million people across the country.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister has just repeated the explanation of events that we heard from the Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing on Tuesday, when he claimed that it has not been possible to buy enough of the new enhanced aTIV in time, so it is not possible to offer people such as Mr Laing a guarantee.

As the First Minister knows, following last year's winter flu outbreak, this is an issue of enormous concern for people, especially elderly people and people who have chronic conditions. However, we are being told that only people who are over the age of 75 will get the recommended new vaccine. That means that 0.5 million Scots aged between 65 and 75 will not. Is the First Minister personally satisfied with that?

The First Minister: The reason the vaccine is going to the over-75s is that the recommendation

and advice say that that is the group that the additional vaccine is clinically appropriate for. For that group of people, the expert advice says that the vaccine that was being used previously might not offer the protection that we want it to offer. That is why we have prioritised the over-75s.

However, I will repeat it again because this is an important point to reassure the public. The vaccine that is being offered to 65 to 74-year-olds this winter provides flu protection. People who have underlying health conditions, pregnant women and healthcare workers will also be offered a new vaccine that provides protection against four different strains of flu. We already offer a vaccine to all primary school children, unlike in England, so they also benefit from additional herd immunity. That vaccine contains an additional flu B strain that is more likely to affect the working-age population, and provides these groups with further protection against flu during this winter.

The supply issues have come up because of the change in the advice that came from the JCVI and they do not just affect Scotland; they affect other parts of the UK. An article that appeared last week in the GP magazine *Pulse* reported on concerns in England about shortages of flu vaccines for GP practices. We will take all appropriate steps to make sure that people across Scotland have the protection from flu that they need.

It is incumbent on us all in the chamber to encourage all those who are eligible for the vaccine to take up the offer so that we can combat flu as much as possible.

Ruth Davidson: The reason that it matters is that there has been a dramatic rise in flu deaths in this country, from 71 two years ago to more than 300 last year. The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing said on Tuesday—the First Minister just repeated it—that the reason for the shortage of the new vaccine this year is because the manufacturer

“was unable to guarantee NHS Scotland sufficient supply”.—[*Official Report*, 25 September 2018; c 9.]

It is true that concerns about provision have been aired. However, just last week, the manufacturer of the new drug confirmed the sufficient supply of flu vaccine for this season, and it stated that the only customers who were missing out were those who ordered late. Why are 0.5 million Scottish pensioners being told that they cannot have the vaccine?

The First Minister: Ruth Davidson is mischaracterising the position. She keeps saying that I am repeating what the public health minister said, but I am repeating that because it is the accurate information. As Ruth Davidson and all members know, I was health secretary for a period of five years, and we follow a well-tried and well-

established process for procuring the flu vaccine. Unlike in England, we procure the flu vaccine nationally; in England, different GP practices are left to do that on their own. As I have said, concerns have been expressed there, too.

I will repeat the information, because it is important. The group for which the advice says the protection from the additional vaccine would be greatest is the over-75s, which is the group that is being prioritised. Other groups get flu protection from the vaccine that will be available for them.

There is a need for all of us to be responsible in the public messaging on this issue. It is in nobody's interest to scaremonger among the population and it is absolutely vital that we encourage people to take up the offer of the vaccine. We will do that once the campaign for this winter begins, which, as I said earlier, will be on 1 October.

Ruth Davidson: It is not scaremongering to read out what the manufacturer, Seqirus, has written in the *Community Pharmacy News*. It expressly says that the only people who are affected are those who ordered late.

People just want this to be sorted, and it is quite clear that something in the system has not worked this year. The Scottish National Party Government began procuring vaccines for this winter in early autumn 2017, in the full knowledge that the vaccine advisory body would meet later in 2017; it met in November. The body advised that the new enhanced aTIV vaccine is the one that should be used for people over the age of 65. However, by that point, NHS Scotland had already placed its order for a different product.

Will the First Minister make sure that that will not happen again? Will she continue to work with the manufacturer this year to see whether more people under the age of 75—in particular, more vulnerable groups—should get the enhanced vaccine? Will she ensure that we have a system in place so that people such as Mr Laing are not told no by their local GP and left to fend for themselves?

The First Minister: Let me give some clear assurances. The Scottish Government will continue to follow—as it always has done—the recommendations and advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. That is the responsible thing to do.

Secondly, we will continue to have a proper procurement policy in place for the flu vaccine and other drugs, as appropriate. The procurement policy that we have in place in Scotland is a centralised national policy, which is considerably better than the localised arrangements that are in place in other parts of the UK.

Thirdly, we give an assurance that we will ensure that different groups in the population have appropriate protection against flu.

As it is very important for public confidence and assurance, I repeat that we make it clear that those over 75, for whom the recommendation is for the aTIV vaccine, will have access to that vaccine. Another vaccine to provide flu protection is offered to other groups, which include those in the 65 to 74-year-old age group, people with underlying health conditions, pregnant women, healthcare workers and children. That is the message that it is important for the public to get. I hope that all members in the chamber join me in encouraging everybody who is in a group that is eligible for the flu vaccine to take up the offer and get themselves maximum protection against flu this winter.

Tourist Tax (Edinburgh)

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Why does the First Minister not agree with Adam McVey, the Scottish National Party leader of the City of Edinburgh Council, when it comes to a small tax for tourists?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Adam McVey is a fantastic leader of the City of Edinburgh Council—let me say that first of all. He has a very strong view on the introduction of a tourist tax, which is shared by many in different parts of the country. It is not currently Scottish Government policy to have a tourist tax, but of course we will continue to have that discussion and we will continue to consider these matters as we approach our budget this year.

I hope that we will have constructive input from Labour on that, and indeed on a whole range of issues, as we consider our draft budget, because that would make a refreshing change from when we have considered our draft budgets in previous years.

Richard Leonard: Adam McVey says that at least £11 million of revenue could be raised in Edinburgh by the introduction of a small levy on overnight stays, and Highland Council says that a charge of £1 on beds per night in the Highlands would generate £12 million of additional annual revenue.

We know that that revenue is badly needed. Adam McVey told this Parliament that the City of Edinburgh Council spent over £1 million extra during the Edinburgh festival just to keep the city clean, because of the influx of tourists, and there are other costs as well. Councillor Bill Lobban told this Parliament that, in the Highlands, because of tourism,

“Our infrastructure is deteriorating, which will lead to a negative impression that causes reputational damage.”—

[*Official Report, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee*, 13 September 2018; c 4.]

The First Minister talks of protecting Scotland's tourism industry. Why will she not act to protect Scotland's local services—those very services that our tourism industry relies on?

The First Minister: First, partly thanks to the actions of this Government, Scotland has a booming tourism industry right now, with tourist numbers and spend increasing year on year.

I am trying to be constructive and perhaps even build some consensus around this. I think there is a serious issue for debate and discussion here. I do not think it is any surprise that council leaders such as Adam McVey and others see the revenue-raising potential of a tourist tax, but equally it is no surprise that there are voices of concern within the tourism sector, the hospitality sector and the catering sector. Just this week, I have seen a letter, which I think was addressed to me and the tourism minister, that sets out some of those concerns.

Where does that take us? It takes us to a position where a responsible Government should responsibly consider the matter and listen to all the arguments before we come to a decision, and that is what we will do. We will do that in the run-up to the publication of our draft budget and perhaps beyond it, and we will make sure that our decision making is properly informed by evidence. I am not sure what in that Richard Leonard could find to disagree with. Perhaps, as I said, Richard Leonard, on this and on other things, will for a change ensure that the Labour Party here actually makes a constructive and positive contribution to the budget process this year.

Richard Leonard: We are just asking the First Minister to make her mind up on the question.

This week, we have seen reports that the City of Edinburgh Council faces £28 million-worth of cuts in the next financial year. That will mean cuts to schools, but it will also lead to cuts to tourism-critical services such as roads maintenance, rubbish collections, road sweeping and even public toilets. Today is world tourism day. Tourism in Scotland is now worth £11.2 billion. [*Interruption.*] It has increased by 17 per cent. In the light of that, does the First Minister seriously believe that increasing the cost of a hotel room by a couple of pounds a night is too high a price to pay for better-funded local services?

The First Minister: First, Richard Leonard should maybe listen to the answers before he reads out the next scripted question. I thank him for paying such warm tribute to the success of the Scottish Government in boosting tourism in Scotland. It is down to things such as the road-equivalent tariff helping our island communities

and our infrastructure tourism fund helping communities to cope with the additional demands of tourism. It is down to Scottish Government investment in tourist attractions such as the new V and A in Dundee. I thank him for paying tribute to all of that and more.

Richard Leonard asked me to reach a decision. We will do that, but we will do so in a proper, considered way, in which we listen to views on both sides of the debate and come to an informed decision based on the evidence. I say to him that if we were to do anything other than that—if we were to rush a decision—I am pretty sure that he would be the first person to stand up and criticise us for not listening to all the voices that are being raised. Perhaps he would also recognise the fact that, this year, we are protecting local government budgets in real terms, and protecting the people of Scotland from the austerity of Tory Governments that he and his party are only too happy to see continue governing Scotland.

NHS Highland (Bullying)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): The First Minister will be aware of allegations that have been raised by Highland doctors about a culture of bullying in NHS Highland, which they have described as being endemic and systemic. Shortly after her appointment, I met the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to raise that and other matters. Does the First Minister agree that we need a full, independent inquiry into those serious allegations? I can tell her that there would be no confidence in any internal investigation by NHS Highland.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The health secretary spoke to the chair of NHS Highland, David Alston, this week, and made crystal clear her expectation that the issue will be addressed thoroughly. We understand that the chair hopes to meet the signatories to the doctors' letter as soon as possible to discuss their concerns, and he has encouraged other staff to come forward if they have any concerns that they wish to report.

Let me make it absolutely clear that the welfare of staff in our national health service is paramount. Everything must be done to eradicate any bullying in the workplace, and we have made it clear to health boards that bullying and harassment are unacceptable and that we expect them to ensure that any reported incidences are taken seriously and fully investigated. We are introducing legislation to establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for NHS Scotland, with the position due to go live by the end of September next year.

Sheku Bayoh

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

On Sunday morning, the family of Sheku Bayoh woke up to a leaked story in a national newspaper that alleged that the Lord Advocate would not bring any criminal charges in relation to his death in police custody. Does the First Minister agree that, given that the family has waited for three years for answers and is not due to meet the Lord Advocate until next month, such a leak is unacceptable and is no way to treat a grieving family? Will she carry out a full investigation into how the leak came about, and will she also apologise to Sheku's family for the distress that they have suffered as a result of the weekend's press story?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am not always sure about the truth or otherwise of information that appears in the public domain, but I definitely deprecate information about such matters being made public before families have had the opportunity to be informed. My thoughts remain very firmly with the family and friends of Sheku Bayoh at this difficult time for them.

Of course, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific circumstances of the case until such time as a decision has been made by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and communicated to the family. In 2015, the previous Lord Advocate made it clear that, regardless of the outcome of the investigation as far as potential prosecution is concerned, a fatal accident inquiry would be held to provide public scrutiny of the circumstances of the incident. When I met Mr Bayoh's family, I made it clear to them that, as a Government, we are not ruling out anything with regard to a wider inquiry at an appropriate point in the future. That definitely remains an option, but it is a decision that we can take only at the appropriate time.

Public Procurement (Printing Services)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The Scottish Government is about to change procurement rules for printing services, which will effectively remove the opportunity for small local firms to get work from Scotland's public bodies. Iain Robertson, the director and vice-president of Print Scotland, said that the Government's strategy flies in the face of ministers' claims of wanting small and medium-sized entities to be involved in public procurement. He said:

"Put bluntly, the Scottish print industry is in the process of being offshored."

Does the First Minister agree with his comments? Will she intervene to stop that? When will she instruct a review of public procurement so that small businesses in Scotland can benefit?

The First Minister: I am aware of the concerns that have been expressed by the print industry, and I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work has already agreed to meet Print Scotland to discuss them. We have two frameworks in place to provide print services. We recently conducted a procurement exercise for the single supplier publishing, print design and associated services framework. The award was made in August to APS Group, which is a Scottish-registered company based in Leith, here in Edinburgh.

We have also commenced a procurement exercise to relet the print and associated services framework. Currently, 10 of the 12 framework suppliers are Scottish printing small or medium-sized enterprises. We will use recent stakeholder analysis to inform our decision on the number of suppliers to be appointed to the new print framework, and we expect to issue an invitation to tender for those services in the autumn of this year. APS will continue to use its extensive supply chain, which currently includes, as I understand it, 114 SMEs, 89 of which are Scottish, including printers across the country.

In terms of procurement more widely, we passed the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, which recognises the importance of SMEs, third-sector organisations and supported businesses to the Scottish economy and includes a range of measures designed to assist them. I met the Federation of Small Businesses yesterday. Procurement was one of the things that we discussed, and I look forward to taking a dialogue forward with that organisation to consider how we can further benefit small businesses in our economy.

Climate Change

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** Public and scientific concerns about climate change are rising ever higher and the Scottish Government's latest report card presents a mixed picture. Scotland is doing better than the United Kingdom, but that is damning with faint praise and is certainly not the benchmark that we should be aiming for. The report makes clear that the end of coal-fired power generation, which the Scottish minister with responsibility for energy at the time wanted to delay, is masking a lack of progress in other areas, and it says that the strategy must now move on decisively. To take one specific issue, why does the First Minister believe that transport emissions have kept on rising every year for the past three years, when they should be going down?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is important to look at what the Committee on Climate Change actually said in its report this

week. It said that Scotland continues to lead the way in the UK on tackling climate change. Indeed, we continue to lead the world. We met our 2016 target, which is the third annual target to be met. Emissions are 49 per cent below the 1990 levels, which already exceeds our original target of a 42 per cent reduction by 2020. The report says that we are on track not just to meet but to outperform the new target of 56 per cent by 2020. It praised the proposals in the climate change plan and said that they were

“stretching, credible, and well-balanced”.

I think that that is a good report card for Scotland's performance in cutting emissions and tackling climate change, and we should be proud of it.

Of course, we know that we need to replicate the success in areas around electricity and waste in other sectors of the economy, and that is what the plan does. We also need to up our ambition in terms of the targets, which is why the new Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill sets a 90 per cent target for the reduction of all greenhouse gases, which would ensure that we would be carbon neutral by the time that we meet that target.

One of the areas that the Committee on Climate Change looked at was transport, and it had lots of good things to say about the Government's work on the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure.

There is a lot to be positive about, but we know that, in common with other countries across the world, we have a lot more work still to do. However, we should take comfort from the fact that we are ahead of the game in terms of other countries' performance. That is something that we should be proud of but determined to build on.

Patrick Harvie: That is one of the problems with the whole debate. Any Government can list a few of the good things that it is doing or a few of the positive steps that it is taking, but if those steps are outweighed by the harm that is being done elsewhere, the problem still grows. While public transport is expensive—and in many places unavailable—urban space is dominated by cars and the aviation industry is given a free pass, transport emissions will keep going up. The same contradictions are evident in energy as well. Scotland is doing well on renewables, but this week the Greens were the only political party not jumping for joy at the discovery of even more fossil fuel reserves.

When will the Scottish Government understand that, if it keeps telling Total, BP and the rest of the lethal fossil fuel industry to keep on drilling, Scotland's reputation as a climate change leader will be a sham?

The First Minister: Scotland's reputation as a climate change leader is well earned and thoroughly justified, actually, and is recognised internationally by the United Nations and many others.

I will unpack some of Patrick Harvie's question. He talked about aviation getting a "free pass". Unlike other countries, Scotland includes emissions from aviation and shipping in the calculation of our targets. That does not amount to a free pass.

Patrick Harvie talked about transport. The report from the Committee on Climate Change says:

"Since the draft Plan, the Scottish Government has made commitments to continue to invest in the ChargePlace Scotland network until at least August 2019 and provide further loan funding for electric vehicles until 2020. The Energy Strategy commits to additional policy measures including expanding electric charging infrastructure ... and ... further ... funding for charging points".

The committee itself pointed to the real progress that Scotland is making in terms of our responsibility to reduce emissions from transport.

On oil and energy more generally, our energy strategy commits us to some of the most stretching targets anywhere in the world. Of course, in terms of electricity generated, we meet well over half our electricity demand from renewable sources. In the past year alone, we saw renewable power generation go up by 27 per cent.

It is right that a Green party should continue to push the Government to do more but I would think that, once in a while, it would also want to take some pride in the fact that it is in a country that is recognised internationally as a world leader. It would be a change if, occasionally, Patrick Harvie did that.

Autism (School Exclusions)

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): A report that was published this week by Children in Scotland, the National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism shows that many autistic young people regularly face unlawful exclusion from school. That is a disgraceful situation. What action will the Scottish Government take to correct it?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I agree with Iain Gray that it is unacceptable for autistic children to be unlawfully excluded from school. To use his terminology, it is disgraceful. If that happens to a child, that child is being let down.

As Iain Gray knows, given that he is Labour's education spokesperson, we have a range of policies around inclusion in education and the provision of support to enable children to be taught in mainstream education. We are taking a range of actions around direct funding that allows schools

themselves to put in place particular measures to support the children who need support. I am sure that the education secretary would be happy to correspond with or meet Iain Gray to discuss the range of additional measures that we can take to address something that all of us agree we do not want to happen in our schools.

Police (Pay)

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Our police officers represent the very best of Scotland, working tirelessly all year round to keep us safe. Does the First Minister agree that, given their hard work and dedication, Scotland's police officers deserve a significant pay rise? Does she therefore welcome yesterday's announcement of the best pay deal for officers in the past 20 years?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I warmly welcome the fact that we have, this week, been able to agree a pay rise for our police officers that the Scottish Police Federation has described as the best pay rise for 20 years. That is something that should be welcomed across the chamber. The pay rise is 6.5 per cent over a 31-month period. That is in addition to the pay deal that we have agreed with national health service staff of 9 per cent over the next three years. That underlines how much we value the contribution of our public sector workers, and I am pleased that we are in a position to agree the pay rise this week.

Of course, the situation stands in marked contrast to the position elsewhere in the United Kingdom, with the head of the Metropolitan Police Service in London describing the UK Government's pay offer to police officers as a "punch on the nose".

I am delighted that we value our police officers, and the pay deal recognises that.

ScotRail (Performance)

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Last week, we learned that ScotRail's performance was at a record low on punctuality—the worst since 2005. This week, ScotRail's figures show that performance has deteriorated so badly that it would be in breach of its franchise agreement had the transport secretary not secretly reduced its target without telling Parliament.

Does the First Minister agree that the way to make our trains run on time and ensure that they are not overcrowded and that commuters are not being ripped off is not to fiddle the performance figures to cover up failing performance but to have a railway system that starts to put passengers ahead of profits?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): With regard to the performance benchmark, that is

allowed under the terms of the franchise agreement. The Railways Act 2005 allows ministers to exercise discretion where there are particular issues—in this case, the cause was severe hot weather in the early summer.

On ScotRail's performance, nearly 90 out of 100 trains arrive within the recognised punctuality measure; the latest figures show that ScotRail's public performance measure is better than the British average. The key point is that we are heavily investing to improve our railways to make sure that there is more capacity, with more modern trains, on our railways. However, if we look at the period in the latest Office of Road and Rail report, we see that more than half of all cancellations are caused by issues that are the responsibility not of ScotRail but of Network Rail. Why do I mention that? It is because this Parliament is not responsible for Network Rail. We are arguing for it to be devolved, but Labour is still standing in the way of that. It comes back to the age-old issue for Labour members: for performance, if they want to will the end, they have to help us get the means. I look forward to support from Labour for the devolution of Network Rail as soon as possible.

Protection of Food Supplies

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It emerged yesterday that the United Kingdom Government has quietly appointed a minister for the protection of food supplies, which is the first time that that has happened since world war two. Does the First Minister agree that, when we are contemplating rationing, it is time to stop this Brexit madness?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): This news would have made most people across the UK stop in their tracks. The Tories' stewardship of Brexit and the UK as a whole is proving so catastrophic that they have had to appoint a minister for food supplies, which is the first time that such a post has been held since world war two.

How has it come to this situation? It is shameful, and it should be a source of shame for a long time to come for every member of the Conservative Party. I certainly hope that it will not come to food rationing in this country. I agree with Rona Mackay that things are becoming so shambolic that it is time to draw a halt to this Brexit catastrophe. If there ever comes a day when there is food rationing in this country because of a Tory Brexit, perhaps the first people who should bear the burden of that are Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg, David Davis and Michael Gove—all people who perpetrated a dishonesty on the people of this country. We will see how they enjoy their Brexit bonanza.

Recycling (Rates and Quality)

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to improve recycling rates and the quality of recycling. (S5F-02649)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Statistics were published earlier this week showing that, for the first time, Scotland now recycles a greater proportion of our household waste than we send to landfill—that is a fantastic achievement—and figures earlier this year highlighted that we now recycle more than 60 per cent of waste from all sources. Although those are significant milestones, there is more to do on household recycling in particular. Zero Waste Scotland works closely with local authorities to support them in improving their recycling services, including encouraging them to adopt the Scottish household recycling charter. We also believe that our commitment to establish a deposit return scheme for Scotland will not only increase the amount that we recycle but improve the quality of recycling.

Stuart McMillan: Recent figures released by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency show that, in 2017, 57.2 per cent of Inverclyde's household waste was recycled—that is up 3.8 per cent from 2016. This week is recycle week 2018. Does the First Minister agree that, although that is an excellent achievement, the decision by Inverclyde Council to remove its kerbside glass collection service this year could result in reduced recycling rates locally and damage the good work that it has been doing?

The First Minister: I agree that Inverclyde's progress is an excellent achievement, but I also agree that it is vital to sustain that progress nationally and locally. A range of measures is needed, including effective collection services. I mentioned the Scottish household recycling charter. The charter, which is agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, includes glass collection. We are encouraging all councils to adopt and implement it, and I hope that Inverclyde Council will do so.

We have a range of initiatives at national level to reduce waste and boost recycling. As I have said, those include proposals for a deposit return scheme; they also include action to reduce food waste and support for circular economy projects.

I encourage Inverclyde Council and all other local authorities to ensure that they have the necessary measures in place to build on and accelerate progress on this important issue.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest in respect of my work on the circular economy.

In 2010, the Scottish National Party said that Scotland would be recycling 50 per cent of household waste by 2013. It is now five years later and that target has not been met. When will it be?

The First Minister: We now recycle more than 60 per cent of waste from all sources. As I have said, for the first time ever, we are recycling a greater proportion of our household waste than we send to landfill. That is good progress. All of us should be encouraging not just councils but individuals across the country to make sure that we continue that progress.

Whatever way they are looked at, the figures that are out this week are good news and demonstrate the progress that is being made with the range of investments that the Scottish Government is making.

Women's Health (Obesity)

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the report that obesity is set to overtake smoking as the biggest cause of preventable cancers in women. (S5F-02635)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Cancer Research UK has done fantastic work to raise awareness of the links between obesity and cancer. As our recent diet and healthy weight delivery plan pointed out, obesity

"is linked to around 2,200 cases of cancer a year in Scotland."

We all recognise that there is no simple single solution, which is why our healthy weight plan sets out more than 60 actions and our recent active Scotland plan sets out 90 actions to help wellbeing. One of the actions in the healthy weight delivery plan is that we will consult shortly on steps

"to restrict the promotion and marketing of"

junk food where it is sold to the public, such as multibuys in supermarkets.

Brian Whittle: As the First Minister says, obesity has so many repercussions for the preventative health agenda that go beyond preventing cancers, such as the need to address type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions, heart disease and stroke, not to mention the effect on mental health, which is why I was encouraged by the Scottish Government's announcement last year to deliver a good food nation bill. That would have given us the opportunity to look at the obesogenic environment around schools; to consider delivering a Scotland Excel procurement contract that supports our farmers by procuring high-quality local produce for our school meals instead of the high levels of cheaper imported

processed food; and to properly make the link between education and health. Why has the Scottish Government missed this opportunity by scrapping the bill? What will the Government put in its place to help to deliver a healthier Scotland?

The First Minister: That issue was debated in Parliament the week before last. The Government made clear then, and I will make clear again today, that we are committed to legislating around our good food nation agenda, and we will set out plans for that in due course. The other thing that we are determined to do, of course, is to take forward those areas that do not require legislation. Some of what Brian Whittle has talked about would not require waiting for Parliament to legislate.

The strategies that I have talked about, particularly around our diet and healthy weight delivery plan, will help us to take forward the agenda. It is an area where there will undoubtedly be issues on which there is disagreement among parties and members, but there will be a great deal of consensus as well, so I look forward to taking forward the agenda, which will have legislation as part of it, over the remainder of this session of Parliament. I think that that will benefit people across the country, particularly the younger generation. As we saw in this week's Scottish household survey, we are already seeing very welcome signs of improvement around obesity, drinking among younger people and, of course, the consumption of healthy foods. There is a lot to be positive about and to build on.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that there are many causes of obesity, including those that Brian Whittle outlined, and there are many ways to prevent it, including increasing breastfeeding rates, which has not been mentioned. Is she aware that a major cause of obesity for a significant number of Scottish women is undiagnosed and untreated—or poorly treated—thyroid disorders? Does she agree that it is unacceptable for any Scottish national health service board to refuse patients, particularly those under the care of an endocrinologist, their prescriptions for liothyronine medication, as currently happens? Will she ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to intervene to ensure that my constituents and other thyroid sufferers are not stopped by their health boards from receiving life-saving medication, which also has an important impact on reducing obesity for a great many women?

The Presiding Officer: That was only tangential to the question.

The First Minister: First, I agree with the general thrust of Elaine Smith's question. I recognise the link that often exists between

obesity and thyroid problems, which are sometimes undiagnosed, and I agree that people should have access to the medication and treatment that they need. I get the sense that a constituency case lies behind Elaine Smith's question. I do not know the detail of the case, and I do not think that the health secretary does either, so if Elaine Smith wants to provide us with the detail, I will certainly ask the health secretary to look into it and get back to her with further details as soon as possible.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

6. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister, in light of the Committee on Climate Change's recent report, what new action the Scottish Government plans to reduce CO₂ emissions. (S5F-02650)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The committee's report shows that Scotland met its last three annual targets and continues to outperform the United Kingdom in reducing emissions. The committee also found that our climate change plan provides an "ambitious" and "credible" package of measures for continuing to meet the targets that have been set by this Parliament's Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. The Parliament is now considering whether those targets should be increased, through the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill. We have proposed that the targets be set to the maximum level of ambition that is credible at this stage. We will look again at the climate change plan as soon as the bill has been finalised, and we will consider the committee's recommendations carefully in the meantime.

Claudia Beamish: We have previously heard the First Minister place a great deal of weight on the advice of the Committee on Climate Change. The committee's report highlights a lack of action in agriculture and transport. What will the Scottish Government do to support people who work in those industries to contribute to emissions reduction in a fair and sustainable way?

We also heard the First Minister say, in her speech at the United Nations climate change conference in Bonn last year, that all countries, including Scotland, should "contribute fair shares". Does she agree with Scottish and now UK Labour that Scotland should have a target of net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest and more robust interim targets to lead us there, so that we continue to be a global leader?

The First Minister: Claudia Beamish asked about transport. I talked about transport in answer to Patrick Harvie, so I will not repeat all that. The progress and further plans that the Scottish Government has on transport are recognised in the report of the Committee on Climate Change.

Claudia Beamish also asked about agriculture. Emissions in agriculture are down 14 per cent since the 1990 baseline. Scottish farmers do a lot to contribute to emissions reduction in the context of electricity generation, land use and forestry. The climate change plan includes a range of measures to further encourage farmers on the benefits of low-carbon farming. We intend to explore fully the potential for voluntary measures before we consider any change in approach.

On targets, it is interesting that Claudia Beamish cites UK Labour. I listened carefully to Jeremy Corbyn yesterday—

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Good. Did you learn anything?

The First Minister: They say that imitation is the finest form of flattery, and in Jeremy Corbyn's speech there was certainly plenty that the Scottish Government has already done; I am glad to see Labour following in our wake.

Climate change is an interesting example in that regard. Jeremy Corbyn yesterday committed Labour to support a 60 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030. That sounds good, except that we have proposals in the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill, which is before this Parliament, that commit to a 66 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030. We are ahead of other countries and we are proposing the most stringent and ambitious statutory climate change targets anywhere in the world. I look forward to having Claudia Beamish's support for that.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): In light of the rise in transport emissions every year since 2010, the Committee on Climate Change has confirmed that transport is Scotland's biggest sectoral challenge. In particular, aviation emissions have doubled since 1990. Airports are recording record passenger numbers. How can the First Minister justify a £250 million tax break to the aviation industry as a result of the scrapping of air passenger duty?

The First Minister: We need good connectivity—including to our Highland communities, I have to say—and that often involves air transport. We have to ensure two things. We must ensure that proper account is taken of aviation emissions, which is why it is so important that we include aviation emissions in the calculations for our targets—something that not all countries do. It is also important that we have a balanced transport system and, as the Committee on Climate Change recognises, we are investing in and have ambitious plans for the electrification of the transport network.

We will continue to take forward those plans to ensure that there are good connections across

Scotland and between Scotland and other countries while also fulfilling our international obligations—our moral obligations—to reduce emissions and tackle climate change and continuing to be a world leader in doing so.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. We will shortly move to a members' business debate, but we will first have a short suspension to allow members of the public to leave the public gallery and new members of the public to arrive.

12:45

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

Paternity Leave and Tackling Inequality

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-11590, in the name of Fulton MacGregor, on paternity leave and tackling inequality. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that dads, partners of adopters and intended parents having babies through surrogacy are entitled to one or two weeks' statutory paternity leave; believes that challenging the presumption that women are primarily responsible for raising children is key to tackling wider societal inequality, including the gender pay gap; notes international research showing a link between increased paternity leave and a range of positive outcomes, including greater maternal wellbeing and reduced incidence of postnatal depression; understands that some employers offer enhanced leave or pay, including the Scottish Government, which offers staff four weeks' paternity leave on full pay, and notes the view that families across Scotland, including in the Coatbridge and Chryston constituency, would benefit from such practices being adopted by other employers.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank all members who supported my motion to bring this important topic to the chamber. I also thank Fathers Network Scotland and Bliss for their briefings. I know that my colleague Gillian Martin will refer to the impact of paternity leave for families of children who are born prematurely.

I think that it is fair to say that this Scottish National Party Government has made some massive steps recently on gender equality, from providing funding to gender equality organisations and its bold and radical plans to increase childcare provision, allowing more parents flexibility, to the passing of recent legislation such as the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 and the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which for the first time recognises psychological abuse.

Everything that we do should have equality at its core and there is still much to do, which is why the motion tackles head on the issue of paternity leave. Just now, in the United Kingdom and Scotland, fathers get up to two weeks, which the dad can take from the birth of the child. Some employers, including the Scottish Government, offer a bit more—up to four weeks—but the general standard is two weeks, with one week being paid and the other week unpaid.

That lack of support and recognition for fathers, which is historical, only reflects and reinforces cultural assumptions about traditional gender roles, where the father is the breadwinner and the mother is the primary carer. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to challenge that head on. We are way behind many other countries in doing that. For example, Iceland, Slovenia, Sweden, Finland and Norway offer between 10 and 12 weeks of paternity leave. Research from those countries indicates strongly that where there is higher paternity leave, higher levels of gender equality are reported.

Statistics that were recently presented to the United Kingdom Government show that fathers are carrying out a greater proportion of childcare than ever before. In 1961, the time that fathers spent caring for pre-school children was 15 per cent of the time that mothers spent doing so. By 2017, the time was almost half. That means that, for every hour that a mother devoted to caring for a young child, a father devoted roughly 30 minutes. That is still not equality—far from it—but it is progress. However, how can true equality and progress be reached if the structures that are in place do not allow that—indeed, if the structures that are in place are there just to reinforce assumptions about gender roles?

The shared paternity scheme has its benefits and works for some families. In that regard, it is to be welcomed. However, I agree with Fathers Network Scotland and a recent North Lanarkshire Council committee paper that the scheme is fundamentally flawed. That is because, in essence, it pits ordinary working-class people against each another—in this case, parents who have to work out how to split the same period of leave. Many who use the scheme do so on financial grounds, and it sends a message that any time that is taken from the mother to spend attaching with her child is her responsibility. That perpetuates cultural assumptions and does not take into account possible power imbalances. There should be a separate paternity leave policy for fathers.

It is clear that modern fathers want to play more of a role. Various studies and reports, such as “The Modern Families Index 2017”, suggest that. I speak to members as a dad of two young children. My eldest child is four and my youngest is one. I love being fully involved in their care, play and learning. Fathers want to spend more time with their children, but that is not reflected in current legislation on paternity leave, which continues to focus on mum being responsible for the childcare and the housework.

It is a fact that increased paternity leave benefits everyone and society as a whole. It allows fathers to spend more valuable time with their children,

lowers rates of male postnatal depression, and helps us men to reflect and challenge implicit attitudes about mothers being the primary care givers. For mothers, it can allow for a quicker return to work, which is important if that is what they want. It can lower their rates of postnatal depression and allow them more time to recuperate physically and emotionally after pregnancy. For children, increased paternity leave can lead to more time spent with dad. That might seem simple, but it is true. Studies show that children with highly involved fathers tend to perform better in cognitive test scores, be more sociable and have fewer behavioural problems.

I lodged the motion in April, and I am pleased that the resolution that I laid was passed resoundingly at the Scottish National Party conference in June and that it is now party policy. I have, of course, also written to various public bodies and met private companies about the issue.

In May, I wrote to every local authority in Scotland. I am pleased that, since then, my local authority—North Lanarkshire Council—has adopted the policy after it was proposed by the SNP group at its most recent council meeting. From next week, new fathers who work for North Lanarkshire Council will be entitled to four weeks fully paid paternity leave. Yesterday, I learned that North Lanarkshire Council officers have agreed to backdate the policy to 21 June, when it was agreed by councillors.

Of the other councils that I have heard from, I understand that Inverclyde Council and Stirling Council are making positive steps to introduce the higher level of paid leave. I also understand that progress is being made towards a fairer system in South Lanarkshire and Midlothian.

I was disappointed by some responses, particularly that from the chief executive of Aberdeen City Council, who ruled out a change without even investigating the possible benefits of making it. When I wrote to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in May, I received a response from the resources spokesperson that did not exactly fill me with confidence. It was similar to the response from Aberdeen City Council: there was a straight refusal to even discuss the idea. I wrote again to COSLA following North Lanarkshire Council’s decision. The response that I received this morning from the chief executive was again a flat refusal to put the issue on the agenda. That is extremely disappointing. I encourage the political leaders of all parties to overturn such decisions and ensure that the issue is at least discussed, and I encourage MSPs across the chamber to write to their local authorities and ask for change, just as North Lanarkshire Council has changed.

I also wrote to all the national health service boards in Scotland. Almost universally, the boards said in response that any proposed change would need to be approved by the Scottish workforce and staff governance committee. I hope that the issue will be discussed in one of its upcoming meetings.

Following the campaign publicity, I was contacted by Aviva Insurance, which I met at its offices in Bishopbriggs with my colleague Rona Mackay, who is the constituency MSP. I was very impressed to hear about the company's policy of 52 weeks' leave, 26 weeks of which is fully paid, for all parents, including new fathers. Aviva is leading the way on the issue, and I hope that other large companies throughout the UK will take notice.

I also wrote to the Department for Work and Pensions. Members might be surprised to hear that I got a response—obviously, I got it before the DWP stopped speaking to MSPs—but I was extremely disappointed with it. It completely ignored the points that I had raised and simply pointed to the shared parental leave policy. I have already spoken about how that is not the right way to do things, and I hope that the policy will be reviewed soon.

Do I think that providing four weeks' paternity leave goes far enough? No, I do not, but it is a good start. I call on all public and private sector organisations to implement fairer policies, such as those of North Lanarkshire Council and Aviva. Organisations that do so will benefit in the longer term, and it will be another small step on the way to becoming the Scotland that we want to become.

Ultimately, the issue can be sorted at a UK Government level, and I am glad to have the support of the members of Parliament Neil Gray and Angela Crawley, who have committed to raising the issue in London. My message to the UK Government is clear: please send a clear message and implement separate paternity leave for fathers of at least four, and preferably up to 12, weeks. I ask it to do that or to devolve the powers to the Scottish Parliament so that we can get on with the job of making Scotland as fair and equal a country as it can be.

12:56

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Fulton MacGregor on bringing the important topic of paternity leave to the fore. I believe that today's debate is the first occasion on which paternity leave has been debated in the chamber.

The current provision of parental leave in the UK is complex—we have statutory maternity leave, parental leave, paternity leave, shared parental

leave and the right to request flexible working, each of which has its own strict set of eligibility criteria and conditions. That means that some fathers and families might not even be aware of what they are entitled to.

Concerns about inequality of access to leave continue to intensify along with the rise in the number of insecure employment contracts, such as zero-hours contracts, and the prevalence of precarious working conditions. The growth in the gig economy and in self-employment, which now accounts for 12.1 per cent of the Scottish workforce, shows that our economy is reshaping, and family life is not immune to the impact of that. The fact that eligibility for work-life balance support such as paternal leave, which is, of course, reserved to the UK Parliament, remains dependent on strict conditions that are based on outdated definitions of work and employment inevitably leads to inequalities between workers who have access to the benefits of paid leave and flexible working and those who do not.

Last year's UK labour force survey found that 24 per cent of men in employment are not eligible for paid paternity leave, because they are self-employed or because they have not worked for their current employer for long enough. To improve access to family-friendly employment rights and entitlements, legislation must clarify the statutory definitions and protections that are linked to employment status. Moreover, any such clarification must be accompanied by a proactive public awareness campaign to make sure that workers know exactly what they are entitled to and are therefore better able to plan for a sustainable work-life balance.

Although women who do not qualify for statutory maternity pay can receive maternity allowance, new fathers, potential fathers or carers-to-be who wish to take paternity leave but do not meet the statutory paternity pay conditions have no access to a paternity allowance. The fact that such provision does not exist in UK employment law represents a clear inequality that should and must be remedied. When it comes to flexible arrangements in the workplace, fathers are much more likely than mothers to report that they have no access to arrangements such as flexitime or part-time working, or working from home. Poor access to family-friendly flexible work arrangements has also been found to be more common in male-dominated sectors. Ameliorating that will require a serious shift in the working culture of male-dominated industries, but it will be a vital step towards the provision of equal access to parental leave.

Of course, independent of Government policy, employers can take a proactive approach to improving life for new fathers in their organisation.

For example, last month Microsoft announced that it will require all its contractors to offer employees a minimum of 12 weeks' parental leave. That measure, which will have an impact on everyone, from the company's cafeteria workers and janitors to information technology support staff and engineering consultants, must be welcomed. Although it will undoubtedly increase costs for the company, bosses highlighted studies that show that better parental leave leads to increased productivity, improved morale and better retention of new parents.

The Scottish Government is working to improve the situation for new fathers with the limited powers that it has, by providing eligible employees with up to four weeks of consecutive paternity leave at full pay and encouraging other Scottish employers to work in partnership with their workforces to consider voluntarily offering a similar enhanced paternity leave. With further devolved powers, the Scottish Parliament would have the ability to make some of the improvements that I have suggested and to strengthen employment rights in a way that works for Scotland.

As the Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills has highlighted in the chamber, flexible working has a clear benefit not only for employees but for employers, as a more flexible workforce can be a more motivated workforce, thereby reducing absenteeism, achieving better retention rates and increasing productivity.

Most important, paternity leave is also hugely beneficial to children. In households where fathers take paternity leave, the overall time that children have with their parents increases, and studies have shown that children whose fathers are more involved in their upbringing tend to be happier and healthier, do better at school, have greater self-esteem and, as Fulton MacGregor pointed out, have fewer behavioural problems. Family life should be promoted and protected at every opportunity. A central part of that is the need for fathers to receive the maximum opportunity to look after their children at such a young age. I therefore support Fulton MacGregor's call for fairer access to paternity leave for workers in the private and public sectors.

13:00

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing this members' business debate to the chamber. I welcome the fact that he has raised the broader issue. We can all agree that parents should spend as much time as possible with young children. From my experience, I can say with certainty that those early times are to be especially cherished. I wish that I had known when my children were young just how quickly those times would pass. I

say to Fulton MacGregor that he will blink and, before he knows it, his children will be 20 and 22, so he should please enjoy it.

In the brief time that I have for my speech, I will try to examine what is preventing parents, especially fathers, from doing just that—spending more time with their newborn children. I feel that ingrained cultural views are the biggest hindrance. That is shown by a recent University of Edinburgh study that found that fathers in Scotland often feel too worried or embarrassed to use their paternity rights fully. Even in 2018, social culture has not progressed to the point where fathers feel comfortable taking time off work at that pivotal moment in not only their lives but their families' lives. Even when families can comfortably afford it, fathers often have a nagging doubt that employers will view their time off negatively. In some workplaces, there is a persistent overtly masculine culture that views time off to tend to a newborn baby as simply inappropriate.

Of respondents to the survey for the "Modern Families Index 2017", 41 per cent said that they had lied to their employer or bent the truth about family-related responsibilities that might be seen as interfering with work. Regrettably, many people feel that they have to do that. How sad is that? We have come a long way since the 1960s, when the amount of time that fathers spent caring for their children was barely 15 per cent of the time that mothers spent doing so. According to House of Commons library research, in 2017 the figure for fathers was almost half of that for mothers. That demonstrates that we still have a long way to go. What we need most is a widespread change of attitude. It must become the norm for both parents to take leave. The Scottish Parliament information centre has pointed to international research that demonstrates the beneficial effects when fathers are involved in childcare.

By encouraging a shift in opinion on paternity leave, we can also help to tackle the stubborn gender pay gap. In 2018, fathers continue to be seen far too often as the primary breadwinners for a family, with the mother seen as the carer. Talented women should not be exiled from the workforce because they choose to have a child. It is possible to have the best of both worlds, juggling parenthood with careers. In that respect, the UK Government's introduction of shared and flexible parental leave is most welcome. Working couples now have the opportunity to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay. The system means that eligible families can choose how to balance their work and caring commitments, giving them greater flexibility.

Fulton MacGregor: Will the member take an intervention?

Alison Harris: Let me continue for a little.

That is a correct and practical approach, which helps fathers to spend time with their children and helps mothers to continue successful careers.

I listened with interest to what Fulton MacGregor said about North Lanarkshire Council, and I think that all advances are most welcome. Prior to the debate, I, too, was contacted by Aviva, which told me that it has adopted a policy that allows parents who are employed by the company to take the same amount of paid and unpaid time off, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or how they became a parent—whether through birth, adoption or surrogacy. In short, that means that Aviva offers up to one year of leave, of which 26 weeks is at full basic pay, for each parent employed by the company within the first 12 months of a child's arrival.

Aviva believes that that is one of the most family-friendly policies of any employer and it is keen to get the message out so that others will follow. The policy that Aviva has adopted is to be highly commended. However, I accept what Kenny Gibson said: if people are self-employed, that alters things. When I had my second child, I was self-employed. That was a different scenario and I was forced to go back to work a lot quicker than I really wanted to.

In summary, I believe that before we seek further legislative changes, we should focus on changing the culture around childcare so that fathers feel comfortable taking their paternity leave.

13:05

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I apologise to Fulton MacGregor for missing the first couple of minutes of his speech, and thank the Presiding Officer for giving me prior approval for doing so.

I was really pleased to see the motion and to add my support to Fulton MacGregor's campaign, on which he has been determined and which has helped to keep issues around paternity leave and support for families high on the political agenda.

I first met Fulton MacGregor when we were both elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2016 and I got the impression quite early on that he was passionate about parenting. I remember being at a meeting one evening in Parliament from which he excused himself while he popped out to FaceTime his young son, which I thought was very cute. I hope that he was not making it up—I am sure that he was not.

It is easy for me to agree with Fulton MacGregor in this debate: it has been Labour policy for some time that leave for dads should be doubled, and it was a pledge in our manifesto. Fulton MacGregor

has already mentioned North Lanarkshire, which is in my region. What North Lanarkshire Council has done is an excellent step forward; there is cross-party work going on there. It is important that we come together when we agree on things, because that benefits all our constituents.

Families come in all shapes and sizes, but it is still the case that in the majority of families women continue to have primary responsibility for daily childcare—although my husband might not agree that that is true in our case. However, that is not always through the free choice of mums and dads. For the one in four men in the United Kingdom who are not entitled to paternity leave, it is simply not an option for the dads to share the caring responsibilities for a newborn. That is not good for mums who are left to get on with it themselves, which can be a difficult task after the physical toll of childbirth. My daughter Isabella is now 12, but when she was born I was fortunate that my mum had annual leave to take, which helped me in the early weeks.

New dads are too often expected just to get on with it and to get back to work. There can be a rollercoaster of emotions for new fathers, but very rarely are any adjustments made in the workplace for what is a life-changing event.

It is difficult for dads to take unpaid leave, especially due to the expenses that are incurred from having a baby in a neonatal unit, which include transport costs and expensive hospital food. The situation is worse still for dads who are on low pay or are on benefits. I am really proud of the work that has been done by my colleague Mark Griffin, who after his baby daughter Rosa was born prematurely successfully campaigned for the introduction of the neonatal expenses fund to help families to cover such costs and lighten the burden. In that example, Mark worked constructively with the then health secretary Shona Robison. I am delighted that baby Rosa made an appearance in the chamber last week, which I think put a smile on many faces.

We know that women are more likely to be in precarious work and low pay, and that as well as having the burden of childcare they often have to care for other members of the family, too. We need to go a long way if we are to equalise the situation.

Fulton MacGregor talked about Aviva; there is encouraging work going on in the private sector, but it is worrying that some of the responses from health boards and councils were not so positive. We want all employers to benefit from the skills that parents and carers can bring to the workplace. I hope that the work that Fulton will continue to take forward will help to change attitudes and culture across our society.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not like to say this, but I remind members to use full names when referring to other members. I know that we are all very happy and pally, but please refer to “Mr MacGregor” or “Fulton MacGregor”, but not just “Fulton”.

13:10

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I, too, thank Fulton MacGregor for securing the debate. He has been a champion for dads’ rights ever since I have known him. We need strong voices of fathers.

We have talked about the shared ambition to have greater equality of opportunity in order that both parents can spend time with their children without it impacting on their chances at work. Kenneth Gibson made some good points on that. One of the reasons why so many men feel that they cannot take parental leave is the impact that it will have on their work and the attitudes of others at their work.

For decades, women returning from maternity leave have been bearing the brunt of such negative attitudes. As I have mentioned in Parliament before, I was an example of that when I had my first child, Louis. It had been suggested that I would go into management, and I was in management training programmes, but once I decided to have a baby, all those things were dropped. When men see what happens to their female co-workers when they return from maternity leave it is understandable that they say to themselves, “I don’t want a piece of that action”. Fathers want the benefits of being with their newborn children, but the fallout at their work can be quite significant.

I would like to hear more normalisation of the phrase “parental leave”, rather than there being two separate categories. If we change the language, maybe a change in action will follow.

I was looking at some of the statistics. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs says that last year just 9,200 fathers took any paternity leave, but three quarters of a million babies were born. Those figures paint a stark picture.

No one is saying that fathers do not want to play their part: that is not what is happening. There are many reasons why fathers feel that they cannot take the leave to which they are entitled to and, as several members have mentioned, many fathers do not have such rights—they are not entitled to any paid parental leave, perhaps because they are on zero-hours contracts or are self-employed and part of the gig economy.

However, why are the fathers who have those rights not taking them up? Much of it is down to

the fact that they cannot afford to take the leave because they earn more money than their partner. The gender pay gap has been mentioned. The gender pay gap still has an impact on men, so I would like to see more men standing up and railing against the gender pay gap, because it would be good for men and for women if there were no longer that gap, and the financial reasons for mums to stay at home because dads earn more would not come into the equation.

Flexible working has also been mentioned. What North Lanarkshire Council is doing is great, but the public sector often leads the way in such things and the private sector never really catches up in any meaningful way, as I have noticed from working in the public and private sectors.

Fulton MacGregor mentioned paternity leave for parents who have premature babies. Bliss Scotland has provided a fantastic briefing note, which talks about people having a premature baby while having other children in the family who need to be looked after. If one person needs to be in the hospital the entire time, there is a question about what happens to the other children.

I will finish with a comment that was made by the mother of a baby who was receiving neonatal care.

“My husband was still going to work during the day and trying to cover the care of our other child at home. The nurses in the unit used to laugh at him because they thought that he was on shift work. He would go at midnight or one o’clock in the morning to visit the baby because that was the only way he could fit it into his day.”

That is an unacceptable situation, particularly when there are examples from around the world of countries that offer extended parental leave and maternity leave to the parents of premature babies.

13:14

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I particularly welcome the opening line of the motion, which widens out the matter beyond birth parents to cover those who have adopted or who have had a baby through surrogacy. It includes all families.

It is disappointing that the Greens and Lib Dems are not here to hear the debate today, because we need to build cross-party consensus on the issue.

Gillian Martin: I thank Jeremy Balfour for being one of the people who responded to the call for members to become involved in the cross-party group on shared parenting. I note that only the Conservatives and the SNP have members in that CPG. Will Jeremy Balfour join me in asking more members to join?

Jeremy Balfour: Absolutely. I hope to be at the cross-party group's meeting next Tuesday evening.

It is important that we have role models. Many people thought that it was quite cute that Chris Evans appeared on the radio 48 hours after his twins were born and was asked about the babies' names, but we need role models to take proper time off to show that it is okay to do that. Celebrities and other such people need to show that, so I am grateful that my party leader will be taking time off once her baby arrives safely.

There has been a change in attitude. A number of members have mentioned a certain insurance company, which I think is good. I look back to my childhood and compare it with how I tried to parent my two daughters. Fathers are certainly more involved and have a more hands-on role.

I want to develop slightly some of Gillian Martin's comments about babies who are born prematurely. My two daughters Keziah and Ellie, who have always wanted to be mentioned in the chamber—I said I would do it at some point—were born prematurely and ended up in Simpson's maternity unit in Edinburgh for three weeks. The care that they received and that we received as a family was outstanding. I was fortunate to have a boss who was very flexible about the hours that I worked, so that my wife and I could be in and out of the hospital to be with the babies.

Every year in Scotland, 6,000 babies end up in neonatal care. Some will stay for a fairly short time while others will stay for a long time. Thanks to the Bliss Scotland briefing, I understand that 65 per cent of fathers return to work before their child or children leave the maternity unit. That puts pressure on families and fathers, who must try to juggle going to work with spending time with their children.

There are models in other parts of Europe where fathers whose children end up in special care for a short or long periods get more time off. We need to look at that situation and see what support we can give.

I also welcome some of the changes that have happened. We need to look at them and see how things can go forward. Alison Harris was correct to say that this is fundamentally a societal issue: it is about how society perceives the situation. Until we change that, legislation and warm words from politicians will take us only so far down the road.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I am sure that your daughters are now delighted.

I call Jamie Hepburn to close for the Government. Minister—oh! Are you a cabinet secretary? I cannot remember.

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): Not yet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I hope that I have not blighted your chances.

Jamie Hepburn: Let us face it, Presiding Officer, it would not be the first time that you have blighted my chances in some way.

13:19

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): I join other members in thanking Fulton MacGregor for securing the debate and, as Monica Lennon said, I am pleased that we are debating the issue. It is very important that, as the national legislature of Scotland, we keep a firm focus on it, and Fulton MacGregor has provided the chance for us to do that today. The only downside of the debate thus far has been to learn that Jeremy Balfour is much more up to date with celebrity culture than I am. I was blissfully unaware even that Chris Evans was still on the radio, let alone that he is a recent father. I thank Jeremy Balfour for enlightening me in that regard.

Clearly, employment law is reserved and it is not the responsibility of this Parliament to legislate on it or the Scottish Government to administer it. We will not linger on that fact too long, because it has been a consensual debate. However, I observe that that does not mean that we, as a Government, should not act. We should lead by example, which is what we have sought to do. We have put in place a policy—for our workforce and for those of the public bodies for which we have responsibility—whereby new fathers are entitled to four weeks of consecutive paternity leave on full pay.

Others should follow that example, and it was positive to learn that North Lanarkshire Council has implemented its paternity leave policy. It is not often that Fulton MacGregor and I get the chance to congratulate North Lanarkshire Council, but it is incumbent on us to do so when we have the opportunity. The council is to be commended for what it has done. There are other public bodies out there that have done that, too, and we need more to follow suit. I echo Gillian Martin's observation that it cannot just be down to the public sector; we also need the private sector to be involved in this agenda.

Paternity leave is part of the wider fair work agenda. We have long held the view that we must get the benefit of a fair work approach and have inclusive workplace practices for employees in general and, in the context of this debate, for working parents in particular. In Scotland, we have been ahead of the curve on the fair work agenda for some time, and support for parents must be part of that. In that regard, as I said, the Scottish

Government put in place a policy for its own workforce, and we established, for example, the carer positive initiative, which encourages employers to sign up to having in place a policy to support carers, many of whom are parents, with their caring responsibility.

We talked about the benefits of flexible working, and this Government is fully signed up to that concept. We have put that in place as far as is possible for our workforce. To help advance the flexible working agenda we are part of the family friendly working Scotland partnership and, since 2014, we have provided nearly £700,000-worth of funding to that organisation to take forward its work.

Kenneth Gibson was quite correct to say that the benefits of the flexible working agenda are self-evident for employees, and that employers greatly benefit from the approach, too, in terms of reduced absenteeism, increased staff retention and increased levels of productivity. As part of a flexible working arrangement, employers should consider how they can better support fathers with their share of parental responsibility.

We are committed to working with employers to encourage and spread progressive practice. However, we know that there is an issue with regard to the uptake of parental leave for fathers. Alison Harris referred to the UK Government's Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014, which have applied from 5 April 2015 and allow families to share parental leave better than was the case previously. The regulations do not go far enough, but they are in place. We believe that they should be utilised better, as they are not utilised well enough at the moment. There are issues with the perceived complexity of the system, and there is a concern that a perception exists that taking paternity leave will have a negative impact on a father's career and that mothers lose out in terms of their entitlement to maternity leave.

Those are all aspects of the wider cultural issues. The perceived cultural norms are changing. They are probably changing too slowly, but Fulton MacGregor was correct to set out that the position is far better than it was in our grandparents' and our parents' generations. I do not think that my grandfather would even have changed a nappy, let alone be involved in the day-to-day care of his children. The position is much improved, but there is still a long way to go.

In that context, Gillian Martin was correct to say that we should perhaps start to talk about parental leave rather than maternity or paternity leave in order to imbue the sense that this is a shared responsibility. In that regard, I encourage all employers to work in partnership with their workforce. I encourage them to do that at all times, of course, but in relation to this agenda I

encourage them, as a minimum, to ensure that they are making their workforce aware of the UK Government regulations that have been put in place, but also to consider going further and voluntarily offer enhanced paternity leave. That will make family-friendly working practices more mainstream in our economy, thus helping to eliminate some of the barriers that affect the uptake of parental leave.

The benefits of the approach for both children and fathers are self-evident in terms of building relationships, and points have also been made about those children who are born prematurely. Gillian Martin mentioned that, as did Monica Lennon and, very powerfully, Jeremy Balfour in talking about his personal experience.

Gender equality is also an important part of the agenda. Fulton MacGregor—correctly—made the point that other countries that are more progressive in their practice have much greater gender equality and lower gender pay gaps. We are focusing on that area. We have established the gender pay gap working group, and parental leave will be part of the agenda that we consider.

I close by emphasising once again the Government's commitment to supporting working parents. Next week will be national work life week, which is an opportunity for both employers and employees to focus on wellbeing at work and work-life balance. I look forward to seeing employers in Scotland showcasing their flexible working policies and practices and, in particular, in the context of this debate, how parents can be better supported in their work-life balance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I thank everyone for their contributions.

13:27

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

St John's Hospital (Paediatric Services)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): Good afternoon. The next item of business is a statement by Jeane Freeman on paediatric services at St John's hospital. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I am grateful for the opportunity to update members about progress on provision of paediatric services at St John's hospital in Livingston. I emphasise my commitment to St John's, and recognise the excellence and dedication of the staff who work there in caring for and serving patients and families in the surrounding communities.

It is important to say why an interim service model for the in-patient paediatric ward at St John's hospital has been implemented. In July 2017, the Scottish Government was advised by NHS Lothian that staffing levels were fragile and that there would be no backup available if a member of staff were to be absent at short notice. In those circumstances, there would have been an immediate withdrawal of the in-patient service, which would have caused confusion and anxiety for parents and, possibly, delays in emergency care.

As a result, the board took the decision to implement an interim service model, in the best interests of children and their families. Within the interim model, the majority of children's services have been maintained at St John's. That includes the children's ward being open from 8 am to 8 pm seven days a week and providing a short-stay paediatric assessment service, and the paediatric ward remaining open for day-surgery activity, planned day-case procedures and programmed investigations.

The paediatric out-patient services, neonatal services and community child health services have all been unaffected. Since last July, the assessment unit has seen nearly 2,800 children and has seen more than 2,000 planned investigation unit attendances. The emergency department continues to see more than 11,000 attendances a year, and out-patient clinics have seen more than 4,000 new and review patients.

The board has evolved the interim model since it was first implemented, and that evolution has seen a drop in the number of children who have

been transferred but not admitted to the Royal hospital for sick children in Edinburgh. When the interim model began, the average figure was 12 children a month; since March, the average has been four, which reflects more confident triaging of patients.

Additionally, although the original plan was for children to be redirected to the Royal hospital for sick children at weekends, the board has maintained a daytime weekend rota on all but three weekends in 2017, and every weekend so far this year.

A wide range of children's services continue to be available at St John's, and the vast majority of children who require services locally receive them at St John's. Where there have been shortcomings, I have made it clear to the board that they must be addressed.

For children and their families who have to attend the RHSC, it is vital that support is provided. The case that was raised last week by Angela Constance at First Minister's question time was of great concern to me, so I asked the board to confirm that an apology would be made to the family involved, and that expenses would be reimbursed. That has been done. The incident was a distressing time for the family, and the board has been left in no doubt that what happened was unacceptable and must not be repeated. The board has acknowledged the shortcomings and ensured that staff at St John's and the Royal hospital are clear about the support that is available to parents and carers in respect of travel expenses.

Last summer, NHS Lothian asked the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to review its efforts to secure a sustainable 24/7 staffing model, and the interim model that it had put in place. The college's report reiterated that the preferred option remains a 24-hour model, reflecting the population projections for West Lothian. The college's report envisages a three-year to five-year programme to develop a clear vision and to recruit sufficient trained medical and nursing staff to provide sustainable overnight care. The college concluded that, in the meantime, the current daytime-only paediatric assessment and decision-making service should be maintained.

The board is working to develop and deliver a 24/7 service that is safe and sustainable. That requires a staffing rota that ensures resilience to sickness leave and other short-notice reductions in staff availability. It requires that the majority of shifts be filled by permanent staff, so that rotas can be planned for six-month periods, and it requires a model that equates to having two tiers of trained staff to look after the children of West Lothian overnight—that is, consultant

paediatricians supported by a second full rota of other medical and nursing staff.

One of my first actions on taking up post as health secretary was to write to NHS Lothian to press the board on how it could make further progress towards a 24/7 service. I asked the board to escalate efforts to recruit to the advanced nurse practitioner training programmes for paediatric and neonatal nurses, and I asked for confirmation that all activity on recruitment to those programmes is being undertaken in the speediest possible timeframe.

NHS Lothian has reviewed recruitment activity since the royal college's original report was produced in 2016, and has concluded that a model of care that is delivered mainly by consultants and other medical staff will not fully deliver the board's absolute commitment to reinstating the in-patient service at St John's.

Currently, the board has enough staff to cover the extended-hours daytime service seven days a week. The board recognises that a different approach is required to provide a safe and sustainable in-patient service, and is actively progressing development of the multidisciplinary team, which is made up of medical staff and advanced paediatric nurse practitioners.

There is encouraging progress to report, with training being under way and one advanced paediatric nurse practitioner already able to support the out-of-hours rota. Another advanced paediatric nurse practitioner will be able to do that from October, and one nurse, who is currently on maternity leave, will complete training by the end of 2019. In addition, the board has just recruited three more trainees, two of whom will be available to support the rota in a year, with the third being available the following year. Two advanced neonatal nurse practitioners start training this month.

Recruitment activity to staff the model is live and, in order to build in resilience, the board has committed to overrecruit to the consultant and advanced paediatric nurse practitioner posts. That should mitigate the risks that are associated with the impacts of sickness and other absences, and long-term leave. It means that, in addition to putting into effect the next round of advertisements for two consultants—the advertisements are due to go out in October—the board will advertise for additional qualified or trainee advanced paediatric nurse practitioners, and will offer posts to all applicants, medical and nursing, who are assessed as being appointable through the recruitment process.

I have received an assurance from the chief executive that the board has set milestones for reinstatement of the service when adequate and

safe levels of staffing are in place, with the aim of having the service back on a sustainable basis as quickly as possible. The board will continue to review progress regularly and will bring forward a contingency plan should progress fall below trajectory.

I have asked the director general for health and social care and the chief medical officer for Scotland to review progress by the end of January and to report to me. I intend to inform Parliament of the situation at that time, in order to ensure that members are updated on progress.

The board's improved approach to developing a sustainable model of service is welcome. I have asked the chief nursing officer for Scotland to liaise with NHS Lothian and to provide advice and support to the board on training and development of the advanced paediatric nurse practitioner appointees. Discussions in that regard are under way, and I expect to receive a report by the end of October.

I know that members and the local community are anxious to know when the 24/7 service will be reinstated. I share that anxiety and concern. The board's chief executive has sought to assure me that reinstatement of the full 24/7 paediatric service has the full commitment of the board and will continue to receive the highest level of priority. That, too, is my commitment. We will continue to act, as we have done, to bring that about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I will allow around 20 minutes for that.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. Since the closure of the children's ward to in-patients last summer, more than 700 West Lothian families have had to go through the stress and inconvenience of being forced to travel to Edinburgh for hospital care for their children and babies.

Will the cabinet secretary outline for local people what the milestones that she mentions are and what the health board is doing to put in place a timetable for when we will see what she has outlined today? Will she also agree to visit the children's ward, with elected representatives from across this Parliament, and personally ensure that when the ward returns to a 24/7 service, it will be on a sustainable basis, as she has outlined, and that, in the future, we will not face repeated closures such as the ones that we have experienced over the past few years?

Jeane Freeman: The milestones that the board will put in place, which I am happy to share with members, are about the recruitment and training of the advanced nurse practitioners and the two

additional consultants, which I outlined in my statement. Their purpose is to ensure that we remain on track and that the training is completed as we anticipate, in order to allow those individuals to join the rota. Of course, joining the rota is about taking steps towards returning to a 24/7 service.

There is an initial timetable on the basis of what I have set out and there will be an additional timetable as a consequence of the advertising exercise that I said would begin in October to recruit for the two consultant posts and the advanced nurse practitioner posts.

I have asked the director general and the chief medical officer to remain in constant touch with the board to ensure that those milestones are being met, take action where there is any slippage on progress towards those milestones and report back to me in January, at which point—as I have said—I will make sure that Parliament and members are informed of what progress has been made.

On ensuring stability, I could not agree more with Mr Briggs. The key here is not simply to bring back a 24/7 service; it is to bring back a sustainable 24/7 service, precisely for the reason that the member indicated, which is not to have a future situation in which we cannot sustain that service and families and children in West Lothian are put in the position that they are currently in, which I agree is not an acceptable one, although it is the safest position at this point.

That sustainability is absolutely critical and that is why, as a consequence of our discussions with the board, it has agreed to that open recruitment exercise, which may result in it overrecruiting according to the strict numbers that it needs to return the service. We have said that it is better that the board does that so that we are absolutely certain of sustainability than it is to be one short, which would mean a further delay while it has to advertise and try to recruit again.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for prior sight of her statement. It is now six years since the staffing problems at St John's were identified. The 24-hour service closed for the third time in July last year and has not reopened since, despite continued promises. That has understandably left families feeling let down, anxious and angry.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that the situation at St John's is symptomatic of a wider issue of workforce shortages across the whole of the national health service in Scotland and that that requires a credible and deliverable workforce plan? The cabinet secretary mentioned the milestones in response to Miles Briggs. Will she set out how those milestones will be communicated to local families, so that they are

kept in the loop? Finally, what was missing from the statement was a commitment to when a sustainable 24-hour service will resume. Will the cabinet secretary give a target date today? Otherwise, local families will be left to believe that this is yet again nothing more than warm words and false promises.

Jeane Freeman: Mr Sarwar said “despite continued promises”. I have not made any promises. As the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, I am dealing with the situation now and the action that I have taken since June, and I am now reporting to Parliament on that. I do not believe that my predecessors or I have issued

“warm words and false promises”,

so I also disagree with Mr Sarwar on that.

On the situation being symptomatic of wider workforce issues, I agree and have said before that there are workforce challenges in our health service and that a robust workforce planning mechanism is critical. Earlier today, Mr Sarwar and I discussed the bill on safer staffing that is before the Parliament. That is a critical element in contributing to robust data in order to have wider workforce plans and local health board workforce plans. I think that Mr Sarwar and I share a commitment to the broad position that he has set out. We may well disagree about how far we have got and what we might do next, but I think that, by and large, we are starting from the same place.

Mr Sarwar asked for a target date. For me, giving that would constitute

“warm words and false promises”.

I have said that I will come back to Parliament on the matter in January. I will do that because I will know by then how well we have got on with the recruitment of the additional staff and what I have said about when people will join the rota—how well have met the milestones that Mr Briggs asked about. At that point, I hope to be able to say when we expect the full 24/7 service to return and whether there are possible interim steps in extending the service between January and the final date. I will do that then.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The first two questions from the main Opposition parties and the answers to them have been fairly full, as is agreed parliamentary procedure. If there are fairly succinct questions and answers for the rest of the session, we should manage to get through every question.

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): How will the cabinet secretary scrutinise NHS Lothian, oversee the work of the paediatric programme board—that is crucial—and ensure that it picks up the case and provides a clearer plan with interim steps and timescales to return to

a 24/7 service as soon as possible? Will she meet me and West Lothian parents who want to positively support recruitment by endorsing our first-class children's ward and our local hospital, given that West Lothian is a great place to live and work in?

Jeane Freeman: I will absolutely scrutinise the progress of the paediatric programme board. I hope that Angela Constance agrees that the pace has picked up. We need to maintain that pace and maintain the scrutiny, and that is precisely what I have asked the director general for health and social care and the chief medical officer to do. The chief nursing officer will be involved in that in the specific work that I have asked her to undertake and, in a few short months, the Parliament will be able to see whether we have delivered on what I have set out so far.

I will, of course, be happy to meet Ms Constance and local parents. I could not agree more that the service is excellent and is staffed with very dedicated and skilled professionals, as is the rest of the service in St John's hospital. I hope that our commitment to it is clear. Mr Briggs asked a similar question, which I did not answer. I would, of course, be happy to meet any member who has a relevant interest in St John's hospital.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): Will the steps that the cabinet secretary has outlined flag up in advance whether there are insufficient applicants during the overrecruiting cycle?

Jeane Freeman: Yes, it will. Obviously, we see who the applicants are when we advertise.

I will make two brief points. First, the advertising process will flag up whether there are insufficient applicants. We would then need to look at what we would do. That is one of the milestones.

Secondly, it is also about the stage that the applicants are at as advanced nurse practitioners. They may already have gone down that route and want to work in that particular part of NHS Lothian, or they may be starting from scratch. In that case, the timescales for their completing the qualification will be different. That will be flagged up.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The current situation at St John's is clearly in the interest of patient safety. Will a high level of collaboration continue across NHS Lothian to ensure that, when children are treated elsewhere, it is done in a timely manner?

Jeane Freeman: I have made my expectations about appropriate timely care very clear to NHS Lothian, and I will seek to ensure that there is the high level of collaboration that Mr Beattie is looking for. We will continue to undertake discussions with the board to ensure that those expectations are met.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): The case of the Mackenzie family is not a one-off—far from it.

During the six-year period over which there have been problems at the ward, how many children have had to be driven past their local hospital to go to Edinburgh for treatment when they should have been treated at St John's? When will a 24/7 service be reinstated? What is the view of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health on the model of care that the cabinet secretary has outlined? It is not the model of care that people expect to be reinstated. They will see it as a downgrading of the service.

Jeane Freeman: I will be happy to supply the numbers that Mr Findlay requested after today; I do not have those details with me.

I must absolutely and firmly disagree with Mr Findlay. The model that I am talking about is the model that is supported by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and, from my understanding, by very many people locally, including the staff at St John's, so it is not fair, accurate or correct to say that it is not supported. It is certainly not correct to say that what I have set out represents a downgrading of the service—far from it. It represents the taking—at pace—of the measured, planned steps that we need to take to reinstate the full service. That is what I am committed to, and it would serve us all well if Mr Findlay would recognise that. Legitimate challenge is one thing, but misrepresentation is quite another.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned the efforts to recruit advanced nurse practitioners. There are 2,700 nurse practitioner vacancies across the UK. What steps will be put in place to ensure that the necessary staff will be recruited as soon as possible?

Jeane Freeman: We have the beginnings of a very good track record in Scotland on our nursing staff workforce seeking to become advanced nurse practitioners because of the additional opportunities that that offers them and the additional skills that it enables them to acquire. When I was at Wishaw general hospital on Tuesday, I met a number of newly qualified advanced nurse practitioners, who had just joined the rota, and some trainees. They said to me that they never expected that their career would be so fulfilling and rewarding, or that they would continue to learn so much. Those are our advocates for the new position, and we will make as much use of them as we can. In Wishaw and, I believe, elsewhere, we now have a second cohort and a waiting list for the third cohort to train.

I think that the post of advanced nurse practitioner is one that our nursing workforce will

increasingly embrace, and we very much welcome the additional skill, commitment and compassion that they will bring to that work.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Lothian MSPs have been assured by NHS Lothian on an on-going basis that the lack of an in-patient ward at St John's is being given the highest level of priority. Frankly, we have heard that for years. Today, we are told that two trainees will be available to support the rota in about a year's time, and that there will be another a year later. There has been a complete lack of urgency on the matter. The fact that there is no target date in sight greatly concerns me. Can the cabinet secretary assure the Parliament that she will insist that the period of waiting and inactivity is finally over?

Jeane Freeman: I had hoped that I had already done that. NHS Lothian might have given assurances to local MSPs, but what members are getting today is an assurance from me, as the cabinet secretary. There has been an increase in the pace of the board's activity as a consequence of our intervention.

Ms Johnstone's characterisation of what I said about the additional staff who are joining the rota and those who are in training somewhat understates what I said. I have given assurances, laid out a plan, made a commitment to return to the chamber in January to update members on where we are and said that there will be additional scrutiny at the most senior level of our NHS in Scotland. That comes from me. I have given those assurances to the chamber, and I will undoubtedly be held accountable on them.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The cabinet secretary said in her statement that

"The college's report envisages"

that

"a three to five-year programme to develop a clear vision and ... sufficient trained ... staff"

will be necessary to bring the unit back to 24/7 sustainability. Given that a lot of the kids who depend on the hospital will be adults by then, that seems an incredibly long period. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether that is the outer limit of the period for which those kids can be expected to wait? Might the changes be delivered earlier? If we are truly in for the long haul, will the cabinet secretary undertake to come back to Parliament regularly to update us on progress?

Jeane Freeman: My first point to make on that is that the college in question is the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and it, rather than me—or, with the greatest of respect, Mr Cole-Hamilton—is the clinical expert. The member set out what the college's 2016 report said. The health

board asked the college to come back in 2017, and at that point the college said that a 24/7 model was still the right model for St John's and West Lothian. However, we have made it clear to the health board that it needs to have a multidisciplinary and multiskilled team to deliver that 24/7 model. I set out how far the board has got on that so far and where it will get to by January, and I said that I will report to Parliament at that time.

Therefore, my timescale is shorter than three to five years, and I believe that the model that we are now progressing, which is clinically safe and which will provide the right care for children in the right place, is shorter than three to five years. However, as I said to Mr Sarwar, I am not prepared to give a target date at this point. The right thing for me to do is to ensure that the milestones are met and that the steps are taken. As I have said, I will come back and report to the Parliament in January on where we have got to. By my calculation, that is four months away; I think that every four months is relatively frequent, so I hope that Mr Cole-Hamilton is satisfied with that.

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Earlier in the year, the Nursing and Midwifery Council reported an 87 per cent decline in the number of nurses and midwives from Europe joining the United Kingdom register. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government's hostile approach to immigration will result in similar figures being replicated across the medical workforce, including at St John's hospital?

Jeane Freeman: Mr Paterson is undoubtedly correct about that reported 87 per cent decline. No one in the chamber can argue with the fact that the impending Brexit, whatever form it may take—whether it is no deal or we do not know what kind of deal—is of serious concern in a number of areas across health, not least of which is our workforce. The issue is not just about whether people want to come and work in this country, although we have benefited greatly from that; it is also about the mutual recognition of qualifications, but the UK Government still has not reached a decision on that matter. There is a great deal of uncertainty for our current workforce who come from the European Union and for others who we would wish to join us. Equally, there is uncertainty among staff from this country who might wish to go elsewhere, which we would benefit from if they train and work abroad for a few years and then come back, bringing that expertise with them. All of that contributes to the environment of uncertainty in which we in the health service—in our boards and nationally—are doing our best to plan what we might do in those deeply unfortunate circumstances.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary outline what additional costs the Scottish Ambulance Service has faced as a result of transporting patients to and from Edinburgh?

Jeane Freeman: I am afraid that I cannot do that now, but I am happy to look into that and provide Ms Harris with the detail.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will know that Scotland and the UK are in a global competition for clinical talent. Does she agree with me—and with the leader of a public authority who told me last night that one third of its EU members of staff have left in the past 18 months—that recruitment drives are clearly hampered when the prospects for EU staff following Brexit are so uncertain?

Jeane Freeman: Mr Brown is absolutely right. We have two difficulties in the current situation—actually, we have a range of them, but let me stick with two. One is for EU nationals who are currently living and working in our country, a large number of whom are working in our health service, who are unsure about their future position. We the Scottish Government have done everything we can to try to reassure people. I wrote again to those staff members in the health service just this week to assure them that we very much value the contribution that they make and to say that, as far as we are concerned, Scotland is their home and we want them to stay. I understand the uncertainty in their minds about their position and that of their families.

The second difficulty is for individuals who would want to come and work in our health service and benefit from that but who are anxious about the status that they might have, whether their families can come with them and what will happen in the months and years to come. I completely understand all that, which simply makes the job much more difficult.

Given that we are enriched by the experience of having those people in our health service, the difficulties that I have outlined will diminish the overall quality of what we do as a health service across the piece.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement about paediatric services at St John's hospital. *[Interruption.]* Before we move to the next item of business, we will have a short wait while the Minister for Mental Health dries off her speech.

Veterans and the Armed Forces Community (Support)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-14094, in the name of Clare Haughey, on Scottish Government support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland. I ask those who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Clare Haughey to speak to and move the motion. Minister, you have 13 minutes.

15:02

The Minister for Mental Health (Clare Haughey): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to set out to Parliament the action that the Scottish Government has taken over the past year to support veterans. This update will focus on the steps that we have taken to implement the recommendations of the Scottish veterans commissioner's report, "Veterans' Health and Wellbeing—A Distinctive Scottish Approach", which was published in April.

This is the second annual update to Parliament on the work that we are taking forward to support veterans and recognise their unique contribution to Scotland. This morning, I was honoured to meet some of those veterans when I visited Erskine care home facility in Bishopton and saw at first hand a number of fantastic projects, including the advanced nurse practitioner service and the dementia nurse service. The organisation is one of many across Scotland that is doing excellent work to support veterans and their families. I am encouraged to see so many organisations represented here today because we want to continue to work closely with the third sector to improve the lives of veterans.

Earlier this month, in the programme for government, the First Minister outlined our commitment to ensuring that there is no disadvantage to members of the armed forces and veterans community when they access services and support. Scotland led the way in being the first country in the United Kingdom to appoint a veterans commissioner four years ago. Eric Fraser CBE was appointed to promote veterans' interests and make sure that the policies that we as a Government have in place provide ex-servicemen and women with the best possible support and opportunities.

Eric Fraser stepped down at the end of August, having had a significant impact on many aspects of the lives of members of the armed forces and veterans. I thank him for all that he achieved during his time as commissioner and wish him all the best for the future.

I am very pleased to welcome Charlie Wallace as the new Scottish veterans commissioner. I, and my ministerial colleagues, look forward to working with him to build on Eric Fraser's many achievements.

Eric Fraser's report on veterans' health and wellbeing recognises the strong track record in Scotland of ensuring that veterans are given the best possible treatment, care and support. It also sets out 18 recommendations for strengthening and enhancing Scotland's approach to providing healthcare and support for veterans. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that the healthcare needs of serving personnel and veterans are better understood and supported in the national health service. We value the skills and experience that veterans bring to their communities. That is why we have accepted all the recommendations in the commissioner's report. I will set out the actions that we have taken so far and the work that we will carry out over the next year to implement the recommendations.

The commissioner's report highlights the fact that the way in which healthcare for veterans is provided is outdated. Our current policy states that all veterans should receive priority treatment for health problems that they experience as a direct result of service to their country, unless another patient's needs demand higher clinical priority. The commissioner calls for greater focus on the principles of excellence, accessibility and sustainable treatment for all veterans. That is in line with our ambition to provide safe, effective and person-centred healthcare for everyone in Scotland. We will work with stakeholders to develop what the commissioner calls a "distinctive Scottish approach" that ensures that veterans' health sits at the heart of current and future models of service provision in Scotland.

The joint group on armed forces and veterans healthcare will be central to taking that forward. The group is chaired by the director general for health and social care and includes representatives from the serving community, veterans organisations, Scottish Government officials and other stakeholders. The report recommends that the membership and remit of the group should be refreshed to provide strategic leadership to deliver that distinctive Scottish approach to veterans' health. We agree with that recommendation. The Scottish Government is working with Veterans Scotland to refresh the group. That will ensure that the right structure is in place to implement the recommendations of the commissioner's report and provide leadership to develop our wider healthcare for veterans policy. The model that is being considered will consist of a smaller operational delivery group, which will deliver actions agreed by the joint group. A new structure will be in place by the end of the year.

The commissioner also highlights that the integration of health and social care has changed the way that healthcare is provided in Scotland. We need to ensure that veterans' healthcare is still provided to a very high standard through that new approach. We will be working with the integration joint boards to make sure that veterans' health needs are considered in the delivery of services.

The main way in which veterans are supported in the health service is through NHS champions. Champions are officials who have volunteered to support armed forces personnel, veterans and their families in their area to ensure that they get access to high-quality services and treatment when they need it. We are working with Veterans Scotland and the joint group to strengthen the network of champions and raise awareness of the support that they provide.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):

I was fortunate to be sitting beside one of the champions earlier this week and to hear about the work that is being done to support those who have post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health issues. Will the minister congratulate everyone involved in the champions network and recognise the radical change in how we support veterans after combat, particularly in light of the fact that 100 years have passed since the armistice in 1918?

Clare Haughey: I echo Mr Stevenson's words. The champions do a fantastic job and I thank them personally for what they do. I have spoken about the change in mental health services and mental health provision many times in Parliament. I am proud of the change in how we treat our veterans, particularly when they are suffering from mental illness.

Earlier this year, updated information was issued to NHS veterans champions, NHS chief executives and primary care leads to distribute in their health board areas. It included guidance on how veterans can share their full service medical record with their general practitioner. We are also building links between NHS and local authority armed forces champions to reflect health and social care integration.

My officials have also worked with Veterans Scotland to update the information for veterans on the NHS inform website about how they can access healthcare. That was followed by an awareness-raising campaign in June to coincide with armed forces day. NHS inform is evaluating the veterans content on its website to ensure that the information that is provided is as helpful as possible in providing online support.

The commissioner also recommended setting up a managed clinical network to oversee the delivery of veterans' healthcare. The Scottish

Government asked NHS National Services Division to look into setting up such a network as a potential longer-term solution to ensuring equitable and sustainable health services for veterans. I should be clear, however, that the Scottish Government does not drive that process, which is managed by NSD. I am pleased to announce that the consideration of a proposal to establish a network has moved to stage 2 of the NSD planning process. That means that a full application and a detailed work plan will now be developed. A range of stakeholders and interested parties will be involved in developing the proposal.

The commissioner's report highlights the importance of being able to identify veterans to understand their health needs, including in areas around health inequalities and issues such as drug misuse. We recognise that. We are refreshing our drug strategy, "The Road to Recovery". The new strategy, which will be published later this year, will recognise the need for a range of services supporting different people with different needs.

In spring next year, a new drug and alcohol information system will be introduced. It will gather data on people engaging with drug and alcohol treatment services, meaning that, for the first time, accurate data will be available on the nature and scale of drug misuse among veterans. The new system will provide a single record for individuals as they move through treatment and recovery services. It will provide valuable data on veterans and allow support and services to be tailored accordingly.

I welcome the focus on the mental health of veterans and their families in the commissioner's report. It rightly highlights a number of positives, which we should be proud of. The report recognises the significantly improved support for those suffering mental ill health after time spent in the armed forces. It recognises that, in recent years, veterans have been able to access a number of specialist and mainstream services, with Scotland being in the vanguard in many ways. It also recognises that the majority of those who leave the military do so without severe mental health problems and cope well with the transition to civilian life.

The report's clarity on the importance of mental health and wellbeing is in line with the guiding ambition in our mental health strategy: we must prevent and treat mental health problems with the same commitment, passion and drive that we apply to physical health problems.

Although there is much to be proud of, I agree with the commissioner that there is no room for complacency and that further improvements can be made. However, I am confident that many of the key themes and 40 actions in the Scottish Government's 10-year mental health strategy will

impact positively on veterans and their families. On Tuesday, I made a statement to Parliament setting out progress in delivering the actions in the strategy since its launch in March last year. A detailed progress report has also been published on the Scottish Government's website. I am confident that fully implementing the strategy will lead to improvement in many areas.

To support improvements, I expect that in 2017-18, NHS investment in mental health will have exceeded £1 billion for the first time. Our commitment to good mental health was clearly set out in the programme for government. We will introduce a comprehensive package of measures to improve mental health services for children, young people and adults, and to ensure that support for good mental health is embedded across our public services. We will invest an additional £250 million in the period to 2022-23 to support that, and we will work across all levels of government, public services, the third sector and communities to deliver it. That will help to drive improvement across the whole system, including for veterans and their families.

I also acknowledge the commissioner's call to protect specialist mental health services. He mentions the services that are provided by Combat Stress and veterans first point. The Scottish Government funding that is available to support veterans' mental health through those organisations will total more than £5.8 million over the next three years. That funding will help to support veterans first point services across six areas in Scotland to provide a one-stop shop for veterans and their families, no matter what their health, social, housing, employment or other needs are. It will also fund specialist mental health services and intensive treatment programmes provided by Combat Stress for veterans who are resident in Scotland.

As members know, I recently launched the Scottish Government's suicide prevention action plan, "Every Life Matters". I am clear that no death by suicide should be regarded as either acceptable or inevitable. More needs to be done to help people who are contemplating suicide, including veterans, and to ensure that the right support is in place for those who have lost loved ones to suicide. I hope that that demonstrates our commitment to improving mental health services for veterans and I look forward to considering what further help and support we can offer.

I recognise that our veterans leave service with a range of skills that can be transferred to other careers, not least our NHS. A number of veterans have moved from the armed forces into careers in the health service, and we want to do more to support veterans who want to do that. NHS Scotland is exploring ways of promoting career

opportunities for veterans, including through case studies and information on the NHS Scotland careers website, and through existing training and development opportunities.

I again thank Eric Fraser for his important work in highlighting not only the excellent services that are already in place, but how we can continue to ensure equitable and high-quality services for our veterans. We have much to be proud of, but his report highlights areas in which renewed focus is needed.

We have accepted the recommendations that are set out in the report and now need to respond appropriately to the challenges that have been raised. I have demonstrated how the Government has started to implement the recommendations through beginning the process of setting up a managed clinical network, sharing information about the support that is available to veterans from the NHS and improving the structure of the joint group. Over the next year, we will work to fully implement the distinctive Scottish approach to healthcare for veterans.

As a society, we owe a debt of gratitude to our veterans and we must ensure that that is recognised through high-quality services to meet their needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I cannot remember you moving the motion.

Clare Haughey: I move,

That the Parliament recognises and values the contribution of the Armed Forces and veterans community to Scotland; commends the excellent work of the first Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Eric Fraser, including his most recent report on veterans' health and wellbeing; welcomes the new Commissioner, Charlie Wallace, and supports continuing partnership working across all levels of government and the private and charitable sectors to ensure that the Armed Forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to opportunities across Scotland.

15:15

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest as an armed forces veteran. I welcome Graeme Dey to his role and I wish him well as the Scottish Government's new veterans minister. I pay tribute to and thank Keith Brown for all the work that he has done over the past few years for our armed forces and veterans in Scotland. I also thank Eric Fraser for his work as the former Scottish veterans commissioner.

The Scottish Conservatives will support the Scottish Government's motion at decision time today, and I hope that the Scottish Government will support my amendment to the motion. Veterans must be supported in every possible

way, and I hope that the debate will raise awareness of how that has and can be done.

I welcome serving members of the armed forces and veterans who are in the public gallery to watch today's debate. Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. I also welcome Charlie Wallace, with his vast military experience, to his post as the new Scottish veterans commissioner. I am sure that Mr Wallace will champion the abilities of Scotland's veterans and ensure that they are supported.

Our first commissioner, Eric Fraser, made an enormous effort to highlight the voice of our armed forces community. I thank him for his detailed research, which showed the ways in which veterans can be supported and encouraged the provision of more opportunities for them in their communities.

Today, I will focus on veterans' mental health support, which is an area that it is vital to understand and improve, especially as veterans transition back into civilian life. We must be careful to remember that many veterans return to their families and communities without the weight of mental health issues. We should never assume that they are automatically suffering or in need. However, we should not assume that those who face such problems can be left to take care of themselves or to make themselves known.

Scotland's veterans can experience a multitude of issues on their return from active service, including PTSD, anxiety and depression, to name a few. Their mental health state often seems to be a factor that either causes or is influenced by those problems, and we must emphasise isolation in that regard. A survey that was undertaken last year found that a third of ex-service personnel felt lonely or isolated from others due to physical or mental health issues. Some veterans struggle to communicate with friends and family on their return, and those difficulties easily seep into other aspects of their lives, such as finding suitable employment and housing.

We must not forget that the armed forces community that is made up of their families and loved ones can also face social isolation and mental health issues, particularly if they are bereaved. I was reminded of that fact by a recent parliamentary event that I attended and sponsored, which was entitled not just a wife.

Eric Fraser's informative health and wellbeing report showed that the older generation of veterans are at greater risk of loneliness, which, understandably, they can find very challenging.

I have already raised in this chamber the issue of suicidal thoughts among early service leavers and female veterans. Ensuring their wellbeing should be of the utmost importance to the Scottish Government.

Public misconceptions about the capabilities and skills of veterans also pose potential problems for them. Eric Fraser raised the need to encourage society to value the vast range of skills that veterans have to offer. I hope that the Scottish Government will open up more opportunities for ex-service personnel to contribute to their communities, free from stigma and the limited expectations of others.

It is encouraging to see the support that is already on offer from the variety of mental health charities in Scotland. An amazing 320 armed forces charities exist in our country, of which almost 50 provide health and wellbeing services alone. Combat Stress continually ensures that its treatment programmes offer the best care for its veterans. Those who are in a long-term programme with Combat Stress are considerably less likely to be affected by mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and PTSD. Veteran participants also experience fewer issues with alcohol and social involvement.

Breakfast clubs for veterans are another excellent avenue of support. They are cost effective and they encourage veterans to meet one other in a relaxed environment at the beginning of the day. Poppy Scotland and Legion Scotland collaborate with groups such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health to act as a referral pathway for those with mental health challenges, working through Veterans Gateway and befriending services.

On the whole, it is reassuring to witness the marked progress in the support that is on offer to the armed forces community throughout Scotland. Veterans are treated with more respect and care than they once received, but we need to do more in the sector in Scotland. I welcome the funding that the Scottish Government has allocated thus far and what the minister said in her speech. Veterans organisations have been supported through the Scottish veterans fund in various projects across the country. The United Kingdom Government has also worked closely with the Samaritans this year to publish a guide on mental health issues among servicemen and women. I hope that those endeavours will increase awareness of the support that is available to our veterans and their loved ones.

However, the Scottish Government must not become complacent where the mental wellbeing of Scotland's veterans is concerned. Mental health support must be given a higher priority than it has been in the past. Sadly, there was no mention of support for the armed forces community in the Government's recent mental health strategy progress report. The mental health centre in Leuchars has been closed, despite the fact that an increasing number—

Clare Haughey: I thank Mr Corry for taking my intervention. I assure him that the Scottish Government views veterans' health as a high priority and that I mentioned veterans in the statement that I made earlier this week.

Maurice Corry: I note what the minister says and thank her for those points.

That means that the standard of care for our servicemen and women is nowhere near what it should be, and the stark gap in provision must be addressed. If the resources of NHS Scotland and the Ministry of Defence could be collaboratively pooled, that might allow the drop-in centres to reach their optimum level of mental health support. I suggest to the minister that the Vale of Leven hospital would be an ideal centre for that, particularly given the large number of military personnel in the Helensburgh and Lomond area in West Dunbartonshire, including the Clyde basin.

The Scottish Government must encourage deeper research into the mental health issues that veterans face, and that should not be limited to PTSD, as we know that veterans are affected differently from the general population. I hope that plans will be made with a long-term view in order to ensure that the current service users are consistently helped as they grow older.

Veterans first point is an example of the services to which the Scottish Government must devote more time and effort. Its regional drop-in centres offer not only mental health services but support in education, housing and welfare, among other areas. Specialist veterans' therapists and clinical psychologists are on hand to tailor advice that is based on the specific needs of individuals under their care. The Scottish Government must work more closely with regional health boards to ensure that that lifeline service is underpinned and allowed to continue with greater clarity regarding its goal.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): I confirm that the Government will accept Mr Corry's amendment. However, does he recognise the very substantial sum that the Scottish Government has already put into the veterans first point system—the best part of £1 million?

Maurice Corry: I accept that, but we need more focus in the health boards. We are in the new era of integration joint boards—I declare an interest as I was chairman of one in Argyll and Bute, and I understand the problems. There is still a learning curve there, so I implore the minister and the Minister for Mental Health to look at that and make sure that they understand what veterans require from the services. There is a bit of ignorance there, not on the part of ministers, but on the part of the health boards.

Effective governmental support for our veterans' wellbeing can only be worthwhile. If it can be secured with better communication and stability—for example, through the health boards—other areas of veterans' lives, such as housing and employment, can then be made much easier. Veteran support can be made more efficient through stronger partnership. I can assure members that a solid foundation of mental health support will encourage Scotland's veterans to move forward.

I move amendment S5M-14094.2, to insert at end:

“and that health support is being delivered to the Armed Forces and veterans' community to meet any specific needs that they may have as a result of their service.”

15:25

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): As Mr Corry has done, I declare an interest as an armed forces veteran. I welcome the new Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans to his post. In line with Mr Corry, I thank Keith Brown for the hard work and obvious passion that he brought to the subject of veterans and armed forces, which, in the history of this Parliament, has not before been higher on a Government's agenda. That is a testament to Mr Brown's work, and I thank him on behalf of Labour members.

I very much welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on the subject of armed forces veterans and the work of the Scottish veterans commissioner, and to talk about the vital support services and charities that operate in Scotland and throughout the UK. From the outset, I acknowledge the debt of gratitude that Scotland owes to those who have served in the defence of freedom, and put on record the continued support that we, on this side of the chamber, give to our armed forces personnel and veterans in Scotland. We are committed to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that our veterans and their families receive the support that they need and deserve. In particular, we recognise that our service personnel often need help with the transition to civilian life—particularly in finding housing and employment—and we recognise that those who leave the service can bear physical and psychological scars for many years after their service ends.

Being a member of the armed forces, particularly during times of conflict, is immensely stressful—beyond anything that we might imagine. However, that stressful situation creates a level of commitment and an intense bond among service personnel that is unique to our armed forces. I could only listen and try to take it on board and comprehend it when I heard from a soldier who had served in Afghanistan what it was like to come

under fire, and what the impact on their battalion or regiment was when it lost a member of its own, who was as close to them as any member of their family might be.

I can only imagine how isolated someone must feel if they are discharged from the armed forces into society alone, with no family support, and having had such a close bond with the comrades with whom they fought and whom they possibly lost in combat. They go from living in close quarters with people whom they considered family—eating, sleeping, working and socialising in the same close group—to being discharged into a community of strangers who tend not to understand military life and the bond between people that it creates.

The majority of servicemen and women make an overwhelmingly successful transition into civilian life. Our veterans in Scotland are not a problem; they are an absolute asset to communities. As the minister said, veterans have transferable skills that they may not realise they have, which then become assets to companies and communities.

For the reasons that I mentioned, it is not hard to see why some veterans struggle to adapt and reintegrate, which can put a massive strain on family life as well as on those without family. It is vital that advice and support services are in place for former service personnel to adjust to living in mainstream society. We must support plans to co-ordinate and deliver support and advice services from the public, private and voluntary sectors for ex-service personnel, their partners and their children.

There are too many fantastic organisations that provide support and advice to ex-service personnel and their families to mention and do justice to them all, but I want to mention some of them. We must continue to support organisations that do tremendous work in the community for former service personnel across Scotland, including the Royal British Legion, which provides practical care, advice and support to armed forces personnel, ex-servicemen and women of all ages and their families.

Along with Poppy Scotland, the legion runs a poppy appeal annually. Recent appeals have emphasised the increasing need to help the men and women who are serving today as well as ex-service people and their dependents. The legion also assists any serviceman or woman to pursue their entitlement to a war disablement pension, and every year up to 200 ex-service personnel in Scotland are represented at war pensions tribunals.

Just across the road from the Parliament is the Scottish veterans' residence, which provides

residential accommodation to more than 300 ex-service people and their partners and has helped thousands of veterans throughout Scotland since it was established. The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association, whose Lanarkshire branch covers my region of Central Scotland, offers financial, practical and much-needed emotional support to current and previous members of the armed forces and their families through services such as forcesline, a support service independent from the chain of command, which serving members of the armed forces can go to in confidence that they will receive the support and advice that they need. It also runs a forces additional needs disability support group and organises children's holidays run by volunteers, which offer experiences and activities that some of the children would not normally have access to.

Erskine was mentioned by the minister. It is a leading provider of care for veterans in the country and provides fantastic services in the community.

There are things that individual members of the Scottish Parliament can do to assist armed forces veterans and their families, and supporting some of those fantastic charities and the work of the Scottish veterans commissioner is just the start.

I will close as I opened, by acknowledging the debt of gratitude that Scotland owes to those who have served in our armed forces in defence of freedom. We will support the Government motion and the Conservative amendment. As always, we are more than happy to work on a cross-party basis to support veterans in Scotland.

15:32

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): About one in 20 adults in Scotland has served in our armed forces. I want to emphasise that the vast majority of them go on to lead perfectly normal lives, but a significant number do not. I speak as an ex-serviceman, having served some 15 years in the Army at home and abroad. Like me, the vast majority of former service personnel who live in Scotland today have benefited greatly from their time in uniform.

In last year's veterans debate on 16 November, I criticised the Scottish Government's decision not to fund fully the veterans first point service in NHS Grampian. We have heard about veterans first point, and I am astonished that people do not realise that it is not available everywhere. The Scottish Government insisted that 50 per cent of the funding for the service had to be the responsibility of our underfunded health boards. NHS Grampian could not do that, so the service folded. Maybe our new ministers are not aware of that.

Graeme Dey: Ministers are very much aware of the situation at NHS Grampian. It was disappointing that NHS Grampian did not accept the Scottish Government's offer of matched funding, as the majority of health boards did.

I want to pick up on the point about NHS Grampian being underfunded. NHS Grampian's resource budget has increased by almost 20 per cent in real terms since 2010, and in cash terms by 57.8 per cent since 2006. The decision on first point was for NHS Grampian to make. Mr Rumbles cannot blame the Scottish Government for that.

Mike Rumbles: I am thankful for that intervention, because I can give a bit more information to the minister, who is completely unaware of the situation with NHS Grampian. Maybe that is why the Government pulled the service from NHS Grampian. Does the minister understand that £165 million was pulled from NHS Grampian's funding by the Scottish Government? The Scottish Government's own funding formula has done that over the past nine years.

I was not going to raise the issue of funding, but the minister has raised it, so I am going to pursue it, because we cannot allow that misinformation to be put across. If NHS Grampian were funded in proportion to its population, that would be something, but it is funded at 10 per cent below that, even according to the Scottish Government's targets. The Scottish Government has failed for the past nine years to reach its own target. That is why NHS Grampian could not afford to spend the money.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Mike Rumbles says everything is the SNP's fault.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Would members please listen to Mr Rumbles?

Mike Rumbles: It is the SNP's fault, on this occasion. I am not trying to make the debate partisan—*[Interruption.]* The minister seems to be. I am responding to what has been said, which is certainly changing the tone of the debate. *[Interruption.]*

I cannot understand the Scottish Government's position. The truth is that the Scottish Government has been short-sighted in its refusal to fund fully the veterans first point centres. If it were to fund them, we would have the service across the country, and people in my area would benefit greatly from it. The Scottish Government should not turn a blind eye to former service personnel in the north-east.

As is the case with the Scottish Government's programme for mental health services, there are issues with the suicide prevention strategy being somewhat slow. People who have risked their

lives for this country and who have given years of service in the armed forces must be safe in the knowledge that they will return home to well-resourced services for mental health and physical health. As long as the Scottish Government is cutting funding to lifeline services, I treat with some scepticism statements of support of the sort that I have heard today.

I am here today representing the people I represent, so it is about time that the Scottish Government listened to voices such as mine and stopped patting itself on the back for providing a service across the country when the service does not exist in Grampian.

I am thankful to the many great organisations that work in my area—especially Age Scotland, which has stepped into the breach. However, it serves only the over-60s, and there are a lot of veterans in Grampian who are younger than that. Age Scotland, Poppyscotland and Help for Heroes have stepped into the breach and are doing work that the Scottish Government has, in my view, a civic responsibility and a moral obligation to carry out.

It is not uncommon for service personnel who left the armed forces many years ago to be still struggling to adjust to civilian life. This summer, we learned that the Scottish Government and the UK Government have either failed to log or have not provided, for one reason or another, figures on the number of veterans in Scotland who have committed suicide or have attempted to do so. I make the case that we need that information from both Governments. I am not trying to criticise them—[*Interruption.*]—I am trying to ask them to do some work.

The Presiding Officer: If members wish to make interventions, they should press their button, get on their feet and make a request. Otherwise, they should keep their comments to themselves.

Mike Rumbles: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

At the end of 2017, the UK-wide charity, Combat Stress, which works with veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions, reported a 143 per cent rise in referrals over the past 10 years.

Some veterans—I keep mentioning this—especially those who have served in the armed forces for only a short time, are at significantly increased risk of self harm, according to researchers at the University of Glasgow. For example, the risk of self harm among veterans who have had brief periods of service currently averages 30 per cent above the norm. Further, a recent report shows that veterans are more prone to homelessness than non-veterans are, and are 10 per cent more likely to become homeless in Scotland than they are in England. I would like to

know why that is. We need more work to be done on that.

Some of our veterans have fewer transferable skills, limited family and social networks, higher-than-average debt, increased levels of isolation, more chance of homelessness and so on, so I welcome the work that our charities are doing to provide support for veterans in Scotland. Without them, the situation might be much worse. I also welcome the fact that the Scottish Government provides a measure of funding to most of our health boards—that is, those that can afford to put in 50 per cent and match its funding.

I make no excuses for the points that I have made. I am representing the people of Grampian, who feel that they are not represented by many of their north-east MSPs, whose voices could be raised as I am raising mine now. I really want the Scottish Government to turn around. I believe that there is a moral duty on the Scottish Government to fund our health boards properly so that they can all help our veterans who need help.

All of our veterans have done their duty. I want the Scottish Government to do its duty for all our veterans.

The Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate, and start with Keith Brown to be followed by Brian Whittle.

15:39

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Our armed forces are an essential and vital part of our communities—I think that there is consensus on that. They contribute vastly to Scotland's economy, and they enrich our society with their wealth of knowledge, skills and experience. We all recognise the dedication, professionalism and sacrifice of our armed forces.

Recent conflicts and the on-going fight against terrorism have demonstrated the magnitude of the debt of gratitude that we owe our armed forces, our veterans and their families, which has been spoken of by a number of members.

That recognition is important to the wellbeing of our veterans. For example, the first world war commemorations have included drumhead services marking the start of the war, the Quintinshill rail disaster, Scotland's entry to the Gallipoli campaign, the battle of Loos, the battle of Jutland—there were services in South Queensferry and Orkney—and the centenary of the battle of Arras. Commemoration events will continue to be supported until we have marked a century since the end of the first world war, through a service to mark the centenary of the sinking of HMY *Iolaire* on 1 January 2019. We appreciate the sacrifice that has been made—to

turn a current political phrase on its head—by the few for the many.

That is why I welcome the steps that have been taken by the Scottish Government to recognise that sacrifice and to support our armed forces and services personnel and help them to make a transition to civilian lives. I do so on the basis that the Scottish Government does not—in fact, none of the devolved Administrations does—receive any dedicated resources from the Treasury to carry out those activities. They are all done at the discretion of the devolved Administrations. Despite the demand that we have heard—not least today—for specific veteran-centred services, it is nothing short of stomach-churning hypocrisy and mendacity that people use the ending of UK Government funding for services in Scotland as an expedient way to attack the Scottish Government. Many veterans feel the same way as I do.

The Scottish Government's 2012 "Our Commitments" report outlines the extensive work that is carried out to support veterans and their families, and has informed the subsequent development of a widespread network of armed forces champions. It committed more than £10 million to organisations that support veterans who have housing, healthcare, employability and other needs.

Mike Rumbles: Does Keith Brown understand that the veterans first point service is a health service? The health service is fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. It is our responsibility.

Keith Brown: I understand that. Unfortunately, Mike Rumbles does not understand that the initiative that he talks about was funded by LIBOR—London interbank offered rate—funding from the UK Government, which has ended. The Scottish Government has picked up the reins and has continued to provide the services. It is stomach-churning hypocrisy and mendacity from some people to use that as a stick to beat the Scottish Government, rather than properly to represent the interests of veterans.

The "Renewing our Commitments" document was published in 2016 to reflect on Scotland's achievements so far and to set out future priorities. I am very proud that the Scottish Government appointed the UK's first veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, who has been mentioned and who recently retired—I add my voice to those that have thanked him for his work. As Maurice Corry said, he was succeeded by Charlie Wallace, who is equally dedicated to promoting the interests of former members of the armed forces.

Considerable progress has been made, including the fact that the Scottish veterans fund has, since its creation in 2008, committed more

than £1.3 million to more than 140 projects and organisations that support veterans across Scotland, and to the development of a programme of work that will identify and tackle barriers that are experienced by service leavers when they seek civilian employment. That should not just be any employment—it should be employment that is commensurate with the skills, experience and abilities that veterans have developed while they were in the armed forces. An example is the colour sergeant who was grateful, when he came out, to get a job as a truck driver, but whose experience and abilities really demanded so much more.

We have helped to build stronger working relationships between the Scottish Government, the veterans community and private sector employers. We have promoted clear signposting for service delivery through the veterans-assist.org website, and we have ensured that long-term clinical needs are much better understood and supported in the NHS. We have also improved transition pathways for people who leave the services, and we have taken steps to make it easier for armed forces personnel and veterans to rent and own a home. It is still the case that most serving armed forces personnel do not understand that they are entitled to put their name down for a council house and that they accrue points during their service. Why do they not know that? Why is the MOD not telling them of those rights?

Over the summer, we witnessed the ridiculous spectacle of the UK Government's defence secretary claiming to be a champion of the armed forces. Most of the people whom I have talked to saw that merely as political game playing. The UK Government did that by announcing payments to armed forces personnel who were earning more than £33,000 a year who faced modest income tax increases under the Scottish Government's scheme, under which 70 per cent of Scottish taxpayers pay less tax. That was despite the UK Government—the alleged champion of the armed forces and veterans—having shed 2,000 military and civilian jobs in Scotland since 2012, and having suspended the type 31 frigate contracts at Clyde shipyards, which is a betrayal that puts thousands of essential skilled jobs at risk.

Furthermore, the MOD sets the armed forces terms and conditions, and members should not forget that the UK Government's public sector pay cap still applies.

Of course, veterans living in Scotland benefit from a wide range of services that are not available elsewhere in the UK, including free school meals, prescriptions and eye tests, and paying no tuition fees and getting living costs support in higher education. If the UK Government were the true champion of the armed forces, it

would no doubt ensure that squaddies who are based in England, Wales and Northern Ireland would look forward to the MOD compensating them for the fact that they do not have access to free school meals, prescriptions, eye tests and all the rest.

The truth is that successive UK Governments have hammered the armed forces in Scotland—including through the systematic dismantling of proud Scottish regiments that were rooted in their local communities, including the one that I represent. They have undertaken a base-closure programme that will drastically reduce MOD spending in Scotland.

Maurice Corry: Presiding Officer, I think that we are veering off the subject. We should be talking about veterans and not having a political speech from Keith Brown.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Brown is close enough to the topic.

Keith Brown: I have already made the point that how we treat the armed forces has a fundamental impact on the wellbeing of our veterans. People serving on the Afghanistan front line being served with a P45 will be affected by that.

Earlier this year, a freedom of information request to the MOD revealed that 220 staff in Scotland earn below the real living wage of £8.75 an hour, yet there has been no UK Government action.

I am very proud of, and make no apology for, the fact that the Scottish Government has led from the front so that, as a society, we do right by our armed forces and, therefore, our veterans. No one should suffer disadvantage as a result of military service—whether they are active service personnel and veterans or their spouses, partners and children—and Scotland must continue to offer the excellent support for veterans that has been developed by this Parliament over recent years. I support the motion.

15:47

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to take part in today's debate. It seems particularly apt to be discussing support for veterans and the wider armed forces community in Scotland right now, given that, in not much more than six weeks, we will unite across the country and the continent to mark 100 years since armistice day and the end of hostilities on the western front in the first world war.

Today, I do not want to talk about the end of war. I want to talk about what comes after it ends and what happens when those who have bravely served their country with honour and distinction

take off their uniform for the last time and return to civilian life.

The need for veterans to have support after their service is nothing new. Back in the first world war, men leaving their unit received a medical examination and Army form Z22, which allowed them to claim for any disability arising from their service. The support for veterans was far from perfect, but it shows that, as a country, we have long recognised the need to support those who put themselves in harm's way for their country.

Today, Scotland has much to be proud of when it comes to supporting veterans, but that does not mean that we cannot do more, whether that is by building on existing good practices or by exploring completely new avenues.

South Scotland, and Ayrshire in particular, is fortunate when it comes to support for the armed forces community. Ayrshire is home to about 37,000 people who have served, or are still serving, and their families. It is also home to outstanding examples of support for veterans.

Hollybush house, which is one of three Combat Stress residential treatment centres in the UK and the only one in Scotland, is a short drive from Ayr. Hollybush provides residential accommodation and support to veterans dealing with mental health issues, offering them a safe and private place to take time and recuperate.

In Kilmarnock, the Poppyscotland Ayrshire welfare centre is one of only two centres in Scotland that allow visitors to access support from a number of organisations under one roof. Built with funding from the MacRobert Trust and LIBOR fines, the centre plays host to organisations such as the Regular Forces Employment Association, veterans first point Ayrshire, the St John and Red Cross Defence Medical Welfare Service and Combat Stress. A person can go into the centre and receive help and support with finding employment, securing housing and dealing with mental or physical health problems and a wide range of other issues.

Mike Rumbles: Does the member agree that the Scottish Government has a responsibility to ensure that that sort of service, which is available to his constituents, is also available to my constituents?

Brian Whittle: I understand the member's concern, which he has expressed previously. I would like such support services to be available to all our veterans in Scotland.

Just as the many different specialisms in our armed forces work together as a united force, we must ensure that the many organisations that offer help to veterans work together to deliver the best possible support. One of the best examples of

partnership working among forces charities and others to deliver wrap-around support is the unforgotten forces project, which brings together 15 organisations with the aim of improving support for veterans in Scotland who are over 65 and their families. The project is led by Poppyscotland and its members include Action on Hearing Loss Scotland, Age Scotland, Erskine Hospital, the Scottish Older People's Assembly, Royal British Legion Scotland, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen & Families Association—Forces Help and the University of the West of Scotland.

A key feature of the unforgotten forces project is the ease of referral between member organisations. Contacting one group is like contacting them all. Such seamless working between groups makes life easier for veterans by taking some of the stress out of looking for help and enabling support organisations to deliver a better service more quickly.

The unforgotten forces project is a great example of organisations working together to build a community with a shared sense of purpose. Anyone who has served in the armed forces will talk about how strong the sense of belonging to a community is. The creation of the same sense of community for someone who has left the armed forces is a vital component in helping the person to adjust to civilian life. Communities come in many forms; they can enable veterans to make new friends or find employment. Even something as simple as connecting people who share a love of playing sport or support a football team can tackle the sense of isolation and loss that comes to people who leave the armed forces.

Unlike some of the members who have spoken in the debate, I have never served in the armed forces. However, I have some understanding of how it feels to be defined as one thing one day and then to lose that identity the next day. A professional athlete spends most of their time working with a small team, which trains together, travels together, lives together and competes together. Their entire world is defined by what they do as an athlete, until one day they reach the end of their career and realise that they must now be something else.

That change can come suddenly. I did not plan to retire from athletics when I did; when I was preparing for the Olympics, I broke my ankle, which left me unable to train or compete at a critical time. It is hard to explain how it feels when a job that has so utterly dominated one's life comes to such an abrupt halt.

I am by no means suggesting that a career as an athlete is comparable to a career in the armed forces. However, to one degree or another, both careers take a person away from everyday life and put them into a smaller, very focused community.

Acknowledging the change that will come and having the opportunity to prepare for it can make a big difference to its impact. I must be honest and say that I am still most comfortable in the company of my old colleagues in athletics—and I retired more than 20 years ago.

Early intervention to support veterans and the armed forces community is important and needs to cover a broad range of issues, from employability to health, housing and supporting the families of service personnel. Throughout Scotland there are great examples of partnership working and innovative thinking that are helping to transform the lives of veterans and the wider armed forces community. However, we should be asking whether we can do something earlier. If a veteran needs help, do they know where to go? Will they feel comfortable getting in touch? Should they go to a service, or should the service come to them?

Not every veteran needs help when they leave the armed forces, but from the moment a person decides that it is time to leave, they should know that help is there if it is needed. Sun Tzu said that every battle is won or lost before it is fought. The same can be said in the context of protecting our veterans' health, especially their mental health. By intervening early and building strong partnerships between organisations, we give ourselves the best chance of helping veterans at the earliest possible stage, which can make a difference to treatment and recovery.

I welcome the Scottish Government's continuing commitment to the armed forces community. Scotland has much to be proud of when it comes to how it treats its veterans, but there is more that we can do. I look forward to working with members of all parties on the issue in future.

15:54

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to voice my support for the armed forces and the veteran community.

Like others, I express my thanks to Eric Fraser, Scotland's first veterans commissioner—the first in the UK, I believe—and I wish his successor, Charlie Wallace, well in his endeavours to galvanise a team Scotland approach to ensure that all spheres of government and civic Scotland play their part in providing the best possible support and opportunities to our armed forces, our veterans and their families.

From my engagement with veterans, I often sense that they are acutely conscious of the stigma associated with labels, particularly for those who experience mental health issues. I believe that the motion sets the right tone in focusing—rightly—on those who need support and on the families of those who made the ultimate

sacrifice but in recognising as well that veterans have talents and skills that we want to tap into. I noticed a few minutes ago that my constituents Mr and Mrs Elliot are in the public gallery. They are great assets not just to the veterans community but to the wider Livingston community.

Of course, we absolutely want Scotland to be the destination of choice when our men and women from the armed forces return to civilian life.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is not just veterans we should be welcoming but their families, many of whom bring the transferable skills that we could use up here. Will the member join me in welcoming the families who return with veterans to live in Scotland?

Angela Constance: Aye, indeed. When I was education secretary, I worked very hard with various organisations to tap into the talents of veterans and their families, particularly those who could help out in our classrooms.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Scottish War Blinded centre in Linburn, in my constituency, and I am pleased that the veterans minister has had an early opportunity to visit that wonderful national resource. He will no doubt recall that the Scottish War Blinded charity has doubled its membership in the past five years and will support any veteran with sight loss, no matter the cause. As I stated in the recent parliamentary debate on suicide prevention, Scottish War Blinded provides a life-enhancing and at times a life-saving service due to its work to reduce social isolation, which is an issue that Maurice Corry also raised.

I was genuinely shocked by the high levels of social isolation in the ex-service community. A survey by Poppyscotland and the Royal British Legion found that 70 per cent of respondents thought that loneliness and isolation are a serious issue. Research by Scottish War Blinded found that nearly two thirds of respondents said that their sight loss had directly contributed to feelings of loneliness, the top reasons being problems with mobility and transport and vision impairment making it hard to make friends.

The great thing about Scottish War Blinded is that it wants to do more to help more veterans access specialist equipment and support, and it is not even asking Government—or anyone else for that matter—for more money to do so. However, what it needs is better and earlier signposting of veterans to the charity through health services and when people are going through the process of obtaining the certificate of vision impairment. I have written to ministers about that and I hope that it is something that they can help with.

I recognise the logic of the count them in campaign; there is a need to know who is a

veteran and where they are. That is important information if we are going to provide the right services, at the right time, in the right place. That is particularly true in relation to health and wellbeing.

On that point, it would be remiss of me not to mention my constituent Mr Williamson from East Calder, who is campaigning for free swimming for veterans locally. We have been on a wee bit of a correspondence merry-go-round. Although the Scottish veterans fund can be accessed to support physical and mental wellbeing, it cannot be used to cover the cost of existing services. However, I appreciate the advice of the minister and Veterans Scotland. They point to partnership working to identify a suitable organisation or project. Therefore, the search for a solution to access free swimming continues. Perhaps in future considerations, ministers can think about how funding can be more flexible and criteria can be more adaptable.

Other members have said that this year is the centenary of the end of the first world war. There has been a rich seam of local activity in the area that I represent. West Lothian Council museums service's fantastic @WW1WestLothian history Twitter feed follows the Royal Scots regiment and tweets the regiment's experiences as if in real time. There are various other local projects that are run by volunteers, such as the 1914 to 1918: Fauldhouse remembers project and the far from the front website, which tells the story of life in West Calder during the great war. Next month, there will be a play in the west kirk of Calder that tells the story of West Lothian and Bangour hospital during the war. Bangour hospital was requisitioned by the military in 1915 and housed more than 3,000 wounded servicemen by 1918.

I pay tribute to the members of the Livingston branch of the Royal British Legion. They do a fantastic and very poignant festival of remembrance, and they have recently embarked on a tour of remembrance in France and Belgium. On behalf of the people of Livingston, they are paying their respects and commemorating the last 100 days of the great war.

As we approach remembrance day, we should acknowledge the importance of what we do every day—not just on remembrance day—to support our veterans, the armed forces and their families.

16:01

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate on Scottish Government support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland.

Like other members, I acknowledge the good work that is taking place in Scotland. Good

progress has been made through the Scottish Government, local government and the many service and veterans organisations working together. The document that the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans issued this week demonstrated much of that good work.

Members of our veterans and armed forces community serve and have served our country with honour, courage and commitment. It is right that we take note of that and offer the Parliament's respect and gratitude for their service. It is also right that we remember those who lost their lives serving our country.

It should be obvious that veterans and their families should be given the support that is required when it is needed. However, that is not always the case, particularly for people who have been involved in recent conflicts. It is easy for a person to switch off the reality of conflict when that conflict is taking place thousands of miles away and poses no immediate threat to them or their family. However, the realities of the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan included 632 British soldiers being killed and tens of thousands being injured. Even those statistics cannot allow me to begin to imagine the horrific experience of being in armed conflict.

That is why we all in Scotland have a duty to all those who have served in our armed forces, particularly those who have served in recent conflicts, and now need our support. Combat Stress, which is a UK-wide charity that works with veterans with PTSD and other mental health conditions, has seen a 143 per cent rise in referrals over the past 10 years. It is not right that many veterans who have served our country are left behind on return and that a number of them end up homeless, jobless or lacking the support that they need. Those people have put their lives on the line doing a job that they were sent to do. Surely they deserve better treatment when they return.

Two months ago, I lodged a parliamentary motion on the suicide figures for veterans. That motion was not about political point scoring; it was about addressing the very real concern that the number of UK veterans who take their own lives is not being accounted for and is being overlooked. The data is not made available to the public. Sharing that information would allow for a better understanding of what is going on and would provide a vital resource to prevent further tragedies. That view is supported by the human rights lawyer Amer Anwar and Admiral Lord West, who is a former head of the Royal Navy, as well as by the Mental Health Foundation Scotland. Earlier this week, we had a ministerial statement on the annual report on the Government's mental health strategy. However, information on the

number of former service personnel who take their own lives was not available, and I again ask why that is the case.

Clare Haughey: I would like to offer Mr Rowley a bit of reassurance. One of the actions in the suicide prevention action plan is that we will investigate every death by suicide. I anticipate that such an investigation would identify whether the person who had died was a veteran. Therefore, that information would be available at that point in time.

Alex Rowley: If that could be achieved, it would certainly be a step in the right direction.

I wrote to the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans on 19 July to ask what was being done to address the issue. In response, he said that the Scottish Government was exploring how to share data between databases to address that problem. That was back in August. He might be able to say more about that when he winds up the debate.

I would like to end by quoting Rose Gentle, who is a leading campaigner whom I met a number of years ago. Her 19-year-old son, Gordon, of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, was killed by a roadside bomb in Basra in Iraq in 2004. Earlier this year, she told *The Scotsman*:

"It's wrong that the information on veteran suicides is kept hidden. They should have 'veteran' there beside the list of occupations to let people understand what's happening ... The situation for boys leaving the services now is just as bad as it ever was. Basically, it all gets back to what they've seen. And then they've got to come back and live with it, the nightmares, and at the same time trying to get their lives going again. A lot end up homeless and struggling. They are just really depressed and feel that life is not worth living. It can take 10 or 15 years or more for them to admit to what's happening to them. But we're going to see more of it in the future."

She concluded by saying:

"It's charities that are mostly helping these boys, not the government."

I accept Keith Brown's point that the UK Government needs to be more involved and that we should unite to put pressure on the UK Government to show the same initiative that has been shown in Scotland.

Sadly, I have met many families who have lost a loved one in the most recent armed conflicts, and they all speak of the need for better support and services for those who came home. Good progress is being made, but more must be done to ensure that support is available for veterans when that support is needed.

16:08

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Dregghorn and Redford infantry and cavalry

barracks are located in my constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands, and the Army personnel—those who are serving and those who are retired—and their families are an integral and valued part of the community.

The commissioner's report recognises that a significant number of men and women in our communities struggle with service-related injuries and conditions. It also points out that the work in establishing

“specialist’ physical and mental health services in Scotland has had a significant impact over subsequent years and has rightly attracted considerable attention and praise.”

I am very pleased that the Scottish Government is building on that with the recently announced increased investment in mental health services. Over the next three years, an additional £5.8 million of funding will be provided to veterans first point and Combat Stress to help them to provide specialist mental health support for veterans, and a further 800 mental health professionals will be recruited over the next five years in key areas such as GP practices and accident and emergency. That will drive improvements in the services that will benefit veterans and their families.

It is clear that the Scottish Government's support for the armed forces community is absolute. The veterans first point centre in Lothian, which was established during 2009, was the original first point project, and it is now part of a network of eight centres across Scotland. The project's strength is in no small part down to the fact that it was designed in collaboration with veterans, who were seeking a mental health and wellbeing service that understood them while meeting their needs for wider support and advice in a clinical manner.

It is 10 years since the Scottish Government, supported by Standard Life, established the Scottish veterans fund, which has provided more than £1.3 million of funding to charities and organisations, supporting more than 150 projects. The Scottish veterans fund goes a long way to supporting initiatives to improve employment opportunities and to help veterans transition after serving, not least in my constituency and across Edinburgh. The funding awards that were made earlier this year are supporting some of the sterling organisations and projects for veterans across the Lothians.

One of those organisations is Support in Mind Scotland, which has been awarded £29,000 from the fund to develop the veterans community cafe at the Stafford centre over the next two years. With the help of SVF funding over the past year, the cafe has been able to open weekly on Wednesday evenings at the Stafford centre. Veterans and their families are welcome for hot

drinks, hot food and a chat, as well as tai chi and meditation if they wish.

That focus on community and wellbeing is also at the core of the Lothian Veterans Centre, which is another organisation that benefits from SVF funding. It has been going since 2009, with an aim first and foremost of creating a welcoming and friendly environment and providing person-centred support for ex-service personnel and their families from across Edinburgh and the Lothians. The charity provides important information, advice and support on health, employment, training and housing, which are the areas where we know that veterans require the most assistance.

Although I thank the Scottish Government for that funding, we know that funding for veterans charities comes from a wide range of funders and individuals. I want to take a moment to mention Tom Gilzean, who it was recently reported is within touching distance of hitting his target of collecting £1 million for a range of charities. Tom is a well-known face in Edinburgh. He is a veteran, and has been collecting funds for his favourite charities for 22 years, mainly around the Princes Street area. One organisation that has benefited from his years of collecting donations from the public is the Edinburgh personnel recovery centre, which provides residential accommodation for 12 personnel and has capacity for 15 day attendees within the grounds of the Erskine Edinburgh home. The personnel recovery centre is managed entirely by Army personnel who are responsible for the welfare and recovery of the resident soldiers.

Homelessness is an issue that affects many veterans. We are all aware that homelessness has a huge impact on people's health and wellbeing. I greatly appreciate the Scottish Government's determination on the issue and its commitment to provide funding to Scottish Veterans' Residences to deliver affordable rental homes for former armed forces members and their families as well as delivering for those in need of temporary accommodation. In addition, the Scottish Government provides funding to the Scottish Veterans Garden City Association and gives priority access to veterans who wish to own their home and who require assistance through the low-cost initiative for first-time buyers.

Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee found that, at this time of housing crisis across the UK, the Ministry of Defence has 10,000 empty service family homes—that is 20 per cent of the total lying empty. The committee also found that the number of empty homes across the UK has remained unchanged in 21 years. In Scotland, there are 1,000 empty MOD homes and, in Edinburgh, 169 are lying empty, many of which are in my constituency. Would it not be helpful to

homeless veterans, especially those who feel isolated, if the MOD allowed them to be housed on a temporary basis in those empty homes before they were moved on to a permanent tenancy of their own?

Supporting our service personnel and their families is a commitment that we all share, which must not end when they stop serving.

Maurice Corry: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The member is just concluding.

16:15

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): During the summer recess, I was invited to attend the military tattoo at Edinburgh castle. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend, but I have had the privilege of witnessing that spectacle before. Given that I was invited in my then role as convener of the Education and Skills Committee by Colonel Gibson of the Lowland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association, as part of the year of young people, I sent a member of my staff, because I was interested in all the good work being carried out by and for young people across Scotland.

Members might be thinking that this debate is in support of those who have retired from their military career, not those who are just learning the ropes, but it is not every day that I take part in a military debate in the chamber, so I wanted to take the opportunity to thank all the volunteers who work with cadets to provide them with a positive destination and tools for life. Many of the volunteers are veterans or servicemen and women themselves. This is a perfect opportunity to acknowledge the wonderful work that is being done and to highlight the importance of veterans in general society.

The armed forces are complex and varied organisations. Men and women join up to the Army, air force or navy, where the variety of roles can be quite staggering. Within each of those organisations is a complex network of roles, from cooks to engineers and military police to medics. The skills learned are not just vital to the defence of the country but the foundations for a transferable skills set that can only benefit Scotland when those retiring from service use them in our economy and public services.

That is why I whole-heartedly welcome this debate on how Scotland welcomes and provides for those who served their country. I have been aware for some time of the plight of servicemen and women who suffer from homelessness after leaving the armed forces, which my colleague Gordon MacDonald has just talked about. I worked

closely with a number of veterans when they were based in Cathcart old parish church in my constituency. I remember Keith Brown visiting when he was the veterans minister. I saw and heard for myself the toll that forces life—and leaving that life—can take on individuals who are trying to reintegrate into mainstream society.

Research shows that ex-armed-forces personnel are more likely to be homeless than the rest of the population, with debt, mental health problems and life-changing issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder being contributing factors.

Having been a board member of a housing association while I was a councillor—and knowing how helpful they generally try to be—I decided to write to every housing association in my home city of Glasgow to ask what provision they are making for Scotland's veterans community. Although they were varied, the responses were very encouraging. If any member for Glasgow, or any member for a constituency or region further afield, thinks that it might be helpful to see some of those responses in order to use the information in their constituency, they should please contact my office, because they are available. I wish that I had time to share every response, but, as I said, the responses are available for any member, or indeed any veteran, who wishes to see them.

Some housing associations have no definitive policies for the housing and support of veterans but have promised to conduct a policy review, which I was encouraged to hear. Others have more proactive procedures in place, such as Link Housing Association, which stated:

“We recognise the challenges faced by people leaving or being discharged from the armed forces, and will be guided by the recommendations in the Scottish Government's ‘Social housing allocations: a practice guide’ and will ensure that when we assess applications from ex-service personnel we will

- Give consideration to injured ex-service personnel who require adapted housing as a result of their injury/disability
- Not impose residency or local connection criteria which may disadvantage ex-service personnel from fair and equal access to housing and
- Be mindful of and supportive to the needs of ex-service personnel wives/widowers/civil partners whose spouse is killed in action or dies before discharge date”.

The response from Glasgow Housing Association was by far the most encouraging of all. After responding to my letter and discussing with the chief executive of Wheatley Group, Martin Armstrong, how we could move things forward, GHA has now set aside 10 homes per year for the specific purpose of being available for former

armed forces personnel. In an interview in the *Evening Times*, Mr Armstrong said:

“we’ve always given as much support as we can to help veterans settle back into civilian life, including with their housing. But we thought that the idea to support people coming out of the armed forces by setting aside a guaranteed number of homes”—

as suggested by me—

“was a good one. We are delighted to ear-mark 10 homes a year to help.”

I would like to thank Mr Armstrong not only for listening to my request to help but for setting out a standard of support for our veterans, which I hope will be replicated across this country as far as each and every housing association is able. I appreciate that GHA is a particularly large organisation and that not all associations will be able to do the things that it can because of its size. If we want to encourage retired armed forces personnel to make Scotland their home, then it is imperative that they have the very basic right to a roof over their head.

A nurse who is a retired servicewoman gave us an insight into how difficult it is to re-engage on civvy street. Captain Catherine Philip works in a voluntary role with veterans now and has a personal hand in supporting many former military personnel. She told us:

“Most vets when they leave the armed forces work as nurses, join the police, work in prisons ... vets feel a need to care and give back. We would stop at the scene of an accident and give help because that’s how we were trained. We will try things we have never tried before because our training tells us that’s how we will learn.”

The words of Captain Philip, or Cathy as she insisted on being called, tell us why the motion is so important and why we must continue to do our best for those who have served in our defence forces, who then use their skills for the betterment of society. Our veterans ask very little of us in return and want to contribute in a meaningful way to the fabric of Scotland. It is not just for their benefit, but for the benefit of society. Captain Cathy Philip says:

“if you want a job done well, then employ a veteran”.

Those are very wise words.

I want to finish by recognising that we are in the centenary of the end of world war one. Those of you who are just a wee bit older than me—that is probably only Stewart Stevenson—will remember the words of Lloyd George, who said that veterans should be returning to “homes fit for heroes”. Let us house our heroes, use their skills and begin to pay them back for what they have given us.

16:21

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate and pay tribute to those who have put their lives on the line in the service of our country. Like many members, I recognise that, with the best will in the world, we will from time to time need to send our service personnel to fight on our behalf. In such circumstances, we have an absolute obligation to look after them and their families, to the highest possible standard.

As a much younger man, back in 1958, during the formative years of the NHS, I saw the problems that were caused by a backlog of second world war veterans who had not been properly cared for. I had been stupid enough to play around with explosives, at the expense of my left hand. In an ironic twist, this was a few months after I had been accepted to RAF Cranwell to train as a fighter pilot—given my subsequent track record of accidents it probably saved the public a lot of money. During my recovery period at Roehampton hospital, I witnessed a multitude of veterans from the second world war, who had still not received their artificial limbs, being bussed in and out daily to attend non-existent appointments. They repeated the process day in, day out, starting in the early hours and returning unseen, disappointed and late. It was degrading.

As a young teenager, I was shocked and astounded by the situation, which led to my very first political action: organising a wheelchair protest march across Roehampton Lane in London. Eventually, we made the evening papers and a junior minister was dispatched to quell the riot. In the end, things got a little better. We now have our health service, which can provide a better service.

Fortunately, the care that we provide to veterans has improved significantly since then. I am very pleased that, instead of simply focusing on physical injuries, we look to help with mental health, life skills and living arrangements. However, we cannot honestly say that it is job done or the end of the story. Mental health in particular remains a real issue. My colleague Maurice Corry spoke eloquently both on the challenges that service personnel face and on the perceptions that we as a society have about the care of our veterans. We must be careful to treat them as the valued and valuable members of society that they are.

In the north-east, we have some fantastic organisations, such as the Aberdeenshire SALUTES—supporting and linking up to ex-services—project. The project tries to provide all ex-services veterans, including family members, with a single point of contact for support throughout the local area. Such ventures can be

vital for members of our veteran community, many of whom can be unaware of the support that they can get, or have subsequent trouble accessing it.

With that idea in mind, I urge caution. It is great that we have third-sector organisations that are willing and able to take on those tasks, and we are well served by more than 300 veterans charities that operate across Scotland. However, the public sector can do better. In the north-east, we were extremely disappointed to see our local veterans first point centre in Aberdeen close last year, after a funding shortfall. Of all the things that we can seemingly find money for, this would seem to me to be an obvious choice, and I urge ministers to look into the situation again in the run-up to the forthcoming budget.

Of course, the other prominent issue in this debate is housing. Too often we see ex-service personnel struggling to find somewhere to live. We see it on the streets of nearly every city, and it should shame us. We have had initiatives at the Scottish and UK level that are designed to help veterans find a home, but we are not yet at a point at which that is being communicated effectively to those who are in need. Anything that we can do in that respect would go a long way.

I firmly believe that those who put themselves forward to defend our country and the ideals and values that it represents deserve the very best support we have to offer. I recognise that a lot is being done, but we can do better. That is what we should resolve to do, and in doing so, we should co-operate to give back to our veterans and their families for the great service they have done for us.

16:26

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I declare that I am a northern area committee member of the Highland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association, and in that role I am happy to support reservists, many of whom are former servicemen. I noted James Dornan's reference to the cadets, who play a valuable role, often under the leadership of former service personnel and who work with young people across Scotland and the UK.

The Highland RFCA covers approximately one quarter of the landmass of the United Kingdom, extending north from the Forth and Clyde valley to encompass the whole of the Scottish Highlands and Islands.

On Tuesday, I had the privilege of meeting the Defence Medical Welfare Service, which Brian Whittle referred to. That is a fantastic organisation that, since 1943, has given support to more than 1 million patients and their families. I was greatly impressed by the work that has been done by that

organisation and by many others. It was a privilege to hear many of its stories on Tuesday.

The backdrop to all this was well illustrated when, in May 1915, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae wrote the poem "In Flanders Fields" after witnessing the death of his friend the day before:

"We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields."

That illustrates the experience of service personnel and it should be no surprise that that experience can lead to people having needs after they have served in the forces; we are addressing those needs today and will have to address them for a long time. The poem has echoed down the 100-plus years since it was written, and is the reason why we wear a little red poppy on armistice day. As I said in my intervention on the minister, we approach the 100-year anniversary of the armistice, not the end of the conflict, and we should celebrate that. We have seen many memorial services and preparations to honour those who fought in that great conflict, and the great sacrifices that they made.

In my life, I have been fortunate enough to travel to many corners of the world, in many of which one sees the imperial war graves. When I was in Burma, some 40 years ago, the only thing that seemed to work effectively was the graveyard outside of Rangoon, where every blade of grass was within a millimetre of its neighbour, where the book of remembrance was pristine and where the memorial was excellent. Nothing else in that country worked properly, so it was great to see such dedication.

A week ago in my constituency, the community came together for the rededication of a memorial marking the commencement of the war. Bands played, prayers were given, and scriptures and poems were recited, including the poem that I just quoted. The Lord Lieutenant of Banffshire, Clare Russell, said:

"The dedication will in no way glorify war or mark any kind of celebration of what was one of the darkest moments in the history of mankind. Rather it will be an occasion for people to remember and to work for peace."

It was a truly intergenerational tribute, as members of the Royal British Legion stood alongside uniformed youth organisations. That happened around Scotland, which indicates the respect and regard that we have for our veterans.

I am proud that we have taken the steps that we have in Scotland. Other nations in these islands equally respect our veterans, but they support them in different ways and they could learn a little bit from the way that we do it.

Gordon MacDonald referred to the Scottish veterans fund, which has supported 19 projects in the past year and continues to be an important support that is provided to veterans.

The motion before us refers to Eric Fraser, the former veterans commissioner—many members have referred to him, too—and to Colonel Charlie Wallace, our new veterans commissioner. The commissioner's role is important, because there are something like 400,000 veterans in Scotland who have served in our armed forces at some point in their lives. Further, about 20,000 people in the UK leave our armed forces every year, and the transition to civilian life can be quite difficult for some people.

There are more than 50 veterans organisations in Scotland, which are part of the 300-plus charities that Maurice Corry referred to. Poppy Scotland is well known to us, as is veterans first point. Those organisations, often working with the Scottish Government, are integral to what we do.

The Scottish veterans commissioner's report described testimony from John Johnston, a veteran and a research project officer at Borders general hospital, who was helped by veterans first point. John stated:

"The whole ethos of veterans first point is that they go the extra mile for everyone who accesses the service. They helped me get out of the house and meet with likeminded people which ultimately is the reason I am still here today."

Mike Rumbles: Will Stewart Stevenson take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just closing.

Stewart Stevenson: John Johnston continued:

"Even once you've finished treatment or completed a programme ... it never closes its doors on you."

My personal connections are modest. I inform James Dornan that my father knew Lloyd George. He was his election agent when he stood for the rectorship of Edinburgh university. His cousin, James Stevenson, was in Lloyd George's Government during the first world war and was ennobled by Ramsay MacDonald in the 1920s.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no holding you back, Mr Stevenson.

16:33

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I have always acknowledged that Stewart Stevenson has had multiple careers, but I did not realise that he is as old as the hills and can remember back to whenever it was.

It gives me great pleasure to close on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party. As other members have, I thank Keith Brown for his service as a

minister, particularly in the policy area that is under debate. We have not always agreed on every policy area, but on this one we certainly have. I also welcome Graeme Dey and Clare Haughey to their new ministerial posts.

I am the deputy convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community. I know my role—it is to keep Maurice Corry in check, which I fail miserably at, I am happy to say.

I welcome the many veterans and serving personnel who have been in the gallery today and I thank them, as others have done, for all their service to the country. We are very grateful to them.

As my constituency is now probably home to most of our armed forces personnel, I am particularly interested in how provision is made across a range of services—health, housing, education and employment, to name but four. I will not have time to do all of them justice in six minutes—I am being told that I now have seven minutes, so I will certainly try—but I hope to have a positive dialogue in the future with the new Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, Graeme Dey, so he will not get off lightly.

The focus of today's debate has been access to health services—in particular mental health services, which have been mentioned by almost every speaker. I, too, welcome the work that was done by Eric Fraser, Scotland's first commissioner for veterans, on health and wellbeing, and I welcome the new commissioner, Charlie Wallace, to his post. I look forward to working with him in the future.

In considering mental health, I reference the work that was done by the Forces in Mind Trust with its report "Call to Mind: Scotland", which was published at this time of year two years ago. Its review of mental health services for veterans praised the work that had been carried out in Scotland and the commitment of professionals to do more, but it also identified critical gaps. In a series of some 16 recommendations, it signposted key areas for improvement.

The report from the veterans commissioner very helpfully builds on that early work, and some of the recommendations not surprisingly cover similar areas for improvement. This afternoon, members from across the chamber have covered some of those recommendations, and I welcome many of the comments that the Minister for Mental Health made in her opening speech, but I want to push just a little more. We know what the problem is, and some of the solutions have been suggested in the recommendations in the two reports. What we need is an implementation and monitoring framework that says who is responsible for each

action, when it will be achieved and, importantly, how much resource will be attached.

I welcome the global figures that the minister outlined earlier, but it would be useful to tease out what applies to veterans and which health boards are providing which services. I hope that she will take the time to look at that. I am keen—I am sure that the ambition is shared across the chamber—that the Government walks the walk and makes that a reality.

To stick to one local thing, I support Maurice Corry's suggestion about a specialist mental health unit at the Vale of Leven hospital. It is disappointing that the MOD does not appear to be interested in that, but I hope that the minister, Clare Haughey, might be persuaded.

I turn briefly to housing, which was touched on by other members. I am very conscious that there are veterans who leave the forces and end up being homeless, whether through lack of preparation before they leave the service or through inability to cope with life on civvy street. Homelessness can and should be prevented, but the numbers are going the wrong way. I ask the minister to take a look at what more can be done in prevention.

I will move on to education, which I do not think anybody else has raised. I want to mention two specific issues—first, the service pupil premium that is provided for pastoral care by the Department for Education in England, and secondly the MOD education support fund. The service children premium is not available in Scotland and is not part of the criteria for pupil equity funding. That is disappointing, given the concentration of forces families in some local authority areas.

The education support fund started life in 2011 with £3 million, then it grew to £6 million in 2014, which was welcome, but for the next two years it will have budgets of £3 million and £2 million. I welcome its continuation by the UK Government, but I am disappointed that the numbers are going the wrong way. Scotland appears to have received above-average funding from that route, which is great. It has helped to deliver support activities in local authorities that have large clusters of service children in their schools, providing help during what we know are stressful periods of relocation and deployment separation.

I want to make a positive suggestion to the minister. Instead of short-term project funding, how about having a Scottish service pupil premium that would deliver sustainable and long-term support, which would allow schools and local authorities to plan better? I am told that stress and its consequences have already been legislated for in the Education (Additional Support for Learning)

(Scotland) Act 2004 and are also part of getting it right for every child. That is very welcome, but it needs to be properly funded. The current formula does not take the needs of service children into account. I hope that the minister will consider the matter. I encourage him to do so and to report back to Parliament at a future date.

Finally, let me turn briefly to employment. Much work is going on to ensure that veterans are supported into employment, but there is more to do on training and transition. I welcome the focus on employment, but I also want to mention the important role that military spouses play. They perform a critical role in supporting our servicemen and women, but their huge array of skills is going unrecognised, and they struggle to find work in places around our military bases. As it does in Maurice Corry's area, in Helensburgh in my area, Recruit for Spouses is doing great work to open doors for military spouses and to use their skills and talents to benefit the local economy. I hope to see more of that. Like Mr Corry, I recently attended in Parliament a photographic exhibition by Wendy Faux, called "Not Just a Wife". It illustrated, in pictures and stories, how absolutely inspiring each military spouse is.

I look forward to working with the new minister to make progress on all those issues in the future.

16:41

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Clare Haughey for bringing the motion to debate. I am very happy to support it and my party's amendment.

At the outset, I ought to declare that, like Maurice Corry, Keith Brown, Mike Rumbles and Mark Griffin, I am a veteran. I will not make the mistake, as I did the last time that we had a debate on this issue, of saying that we were all soldiers together, because Keith Brown rapidly corrected me then to say that he was a marine. I am a veteran of the Blues and Royals, which is the regiment in which my son now serves.

I take this opportunity to thank Eric Fraser for the energy and dedication that he brought to his role as Scotland's first veterans commissioner. I would like to welcome his successor, Charlie Wallace—another veteran—to his role, and I am sure that he will bring the same passion to supporting our veterans as Eric Fraser did.

In closing the debate, I would like to mention one or two points that have been brought up today that I consider to be important. Maurice Corry talked about isolation, but I say to him that it is not just ex-service personnel who can feel isolated—families and partners can, too. On being discharged, service personnel and their families are no longer part of the tight-knit community that

they are used to. That can give rise to loneliness and sometimes, in the case of the ex-serving personnel, a feeling of being worthless. We need to ensure that their skills, which are numerous, allow those people to become part of new teams and worthwhile members of the new communities that they join.

Maurice Corry made it clear that we need partnerships between Government and charitable welfare organisations to support veterans, and I agree whole-heartedly. Brian Whittle built on that. He spoke about how difficult it is on one day to be part of a small, committed and dedicated team and, on the next, to feel cast adrift. Those are wise words. However, although some find transition difficult, others find it easy. Tom Mason spoke about the obligation to look after veterans and their families. He said that the job is not done until it is complete, and that we have to do more—I agree. Mark Griffin highlighted the debt of gratitude that Scotland owes to members of all our armed forces and their families. Again, I agree. Mike Rumbles stressed the need for early intervention and for appropriate medical care to be made available. Keith Brown spoke about the great importance of armed forces champions. Angela Constance spoke about the need for a team Scotland approach to our veterans, which is absolutely right. Alex Rowley said that when it comes to veterans we must never leave anyone behind, which is an excellent summary of the position. We never should, and we never will. Gordon MacDonald spoke of the need for specialist medical and mental health services for veterans who need them. He also spoke about homelessness—which I will come back to—and why veterans should never be without a roof over their head. James Dornan spoke about the part played in volunteering by veterans, who bring from the services a great transferable skills set. Stewart Stevenson talked about how reservists contribute to the armed services, and how they should not be overlooked when we talk about the subject. Jackie Baillie spoke about the need to identify those who need help and what we should do to help them, and I agree with her.

I want to talk briefly about homeless veterans. I agree that addressing the issue is vital, and we could do more to use unused married quarters for veterans. It is a good idea. I know that it is something that the services have struggled with, because as units are posted in and out of areas of Scotland they must have quarters available for the families, and it is difficult to know how many of those quarters will be needed at any stage. However, I believe that it is an idea that we should look at more, and it is an issue that is not too difficult to solve, so we should be able to balance the current use of army quarters against future

use. We could work cross party to come to a solution on that.

One of the things that was mentioned by the previous veterans commissioner is the need to identify people who need help early. I stress that we should never forget those people who leave the services earlier than they planned to. Those are the people who feel most vulnerable and often need our help, so we should be finding ways of monitoring those people, looking at them and identifying early on when they need help, before they actually ask for it.

It is clear to me—and, I think, to everyone in the chamber—that veterans and their families require support at all stages of their life. I have to mention something that I mention every time that we talk about veterans, which is protection from legacy investigations. Members may remember that I recounted the story of Dennis Hutchings in the chamber at the end of last year, and I would like to remind those in the chamber today of his story, because brave veterans who have put their lives on the line to defend the country are still being hounded in their retirement and dragged through the courts to face accusations that have already been investigated and closed.

Dennis Hutchings, a former life guard, is just one of many of ex-soldiers in that position. He served in Northern Ireland during the troubles and is facing legal action. After two initial investigations, he was told that the matter was closed. However, he is now being charged with attempted murder, despite there being no evidence, no living witnesses and the loss of key forensic evidence. I do not believe that that is right. As parliamentarians, we must fulfil our basic duty to our veterans by protecting them from the witch hunts that are going on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I caution you, Mr Mountain. So far, what you have said has been okay, but we must watch what we say if there are live court proceedings. I think that sufficient has been said. Let us put it like that.

James Dornan: I hope that the member is not suggesting that, because somebody was in the armed forces or is a veteran, they should therefore be immune from prosecution for anything that occurred while they were in the forces.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be happier, for the reasons that I have just expounded, that we do not pursue that particular area. You have made your point, Mr Dornan, and I think that Mr Mountain should continue with his speech, bearing in mind my cautionary words.

Edward Mountain: I very much take that point, and I would like to say that I absolutely believe that everyone should be held accountable for their actions. However, 90 per cent of the population

will have little idea what it is like to face split-second decisions during combat, knowing that inaction could cost lives. Thankfully, most of us have not had to face that.

Moving forward, I would like to encourage the Scottish veterans commissioner, the Scottish Government and members of this Parliament to look at those Scottish veterans who face legacy investigations and ask whether, in service of their country, they have done enough to avoid being hounded for actions 40 years ago.

The Scottish Conservatives support the ongoing work of the Scottish Government in repaying our debt to our Scottish veterans, and we look forward to seeing Charlie Wallace building on the excellent work of the previous commissioner. I also look forward to working with the new minister with responsibility for veterans affairs. If he is supporting our veterans, I will do everything that I can to help.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Graeme Dey to close for the Government.

16:49

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Let me begin by thanking members for their contributions to the debate, which is one that has served to remind us that many MSPs from across the political spectrum have a close personal interest in our armed forces community.

The role of veterans minister is one that I am delighted and honoured to take on. In the three months between my being appointed and this, my first debate in the role, I visited a range of organisations and employers that support veterans, met veterans ranging in age and situation, and had many conversations with them, which gave me helpful insights and ideas about where the Government needs to focus.

It has all been extremely helpful, because my job is to build on the work that Keith Brown did to improve the lives of and support for members of our armed forces and veterans community in Scotland. It was excellent work, including the creation of the veterans commissioner post and the redevelopment of the Scottish veterans fund. I join Jackie Baillie, Maurice Corry and Mark Griffin in recognising that.

I welcome the helpful pointers in the contributions of a number of colleagues today. Maurice Corry noted the role of local health and social care partnerships in delivering services. I agree with him. They are pivotal to the delivery of long-term sustainable services and I expect them to deliver in a way that reflects veterans' priorities and the military covenant commitments.

Angela Constance noted the work of Scottish War Blinded. When I attended its annual conference, I was struck by the incredibly positive view that users had of the support that is afforded them by that organisation.

Brian Whittle highlighted the work of Hollybush house, which I visited recently. He is correct about the great work that is done there by Combat Stress. In acknowledging that, I note the partnership working that has gone on between Combat Stress and NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The analogy that he drew between athletics and the armed forces was thought provoking and I think that it will have resonated with the veterans present.

Alex Rowley, in another thoughtful and considered contribution, touched on the data gathering issue. I am not in a position to greatly expand on what I said to him in our exchange of letters but, for the benefit of other members, I say that the Government is looking at how information that is held on the NHS central register might be transferable to the Information Services Division, in order that we can improve the collection of data on veterans who have contact with NHS mental health services. Once established, that information can be used not only to track the tragedies that at times occur but to highlight those who are at risk and identify what support they might need. There is a lot of potential there, and I welcome Alex Rowley's interest in that subject.

Gordon MacDonald and James Dornan offered some interesting ideas on housing. I acknowledge James Dornan's efforts to secure the commitment of GHA to provide 10 houses annually specifically for service personnel.

There were a number of other welcome contributions. Jackie Baillie set me a series of challenges. I will not have the time to respond to her in detail, but I, too, look forward to engaging in them—I think.

One of the first tasks that I embarked on in government was to undertake a range of discussions with my ministerial colleagues to ensure that we have a whole-of-Government approach to supporting our armed forces community. I am pleased to say that, across areas such as health, housing and employability, the response has been entirely positive. We will be working closely together, and potentially with other colleagues in the years ahead, to improve and refine the support that is on offer to our veterans.

Partnership working across the public, private and charitable sectors is also key here, and the role that is played by armed forces champions in local authorities remains crucial. I am committed to strengthening our network of champions in local

authorities as well as other public bodies, and working in genuine partnership with them.

As well as updating Parliament, the debate has provided an opportunity to welcome our new veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace, to his post and to thank Eric Fraser for his work over the past four years. I echo the earlier words of thanks to him from around the chamber, and I note in particular Eric Fraser's work to change perceptions and ensure we see veterans as assets. That has been incredibly important.

This week, the Scottish Government published "Scottish Government Support for Veterans and the Armed Forces Community in Scotland", which sets out some of what we have delivered but also highlights the actions that we are taking to look across ministerial portfolios at service delivery in order to identify and understand areas for improvement.

The needs of veterans are likely to change in the years ahead as we see a shift in the demographics of the veterans population, so it is right that we consider how we need to adapt to that.

As part of reviewing our service provision and in keeping with the partnership approach that I touched on earlier, we are working with the Ministry of Defence and other devolved Administrations on a new veterans strategy.

We are extremely aware that accurate data and better identification at the point of referral are essential if we are to develop a clearer picture of needs, so I am delighted to confirm a positive outcome to the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland's count them in campaign, which Angela Constance spoke about. Earlier today, the National Records of Scotland set out the current plans for the 2021 census, which include a new question to provide robust statistics on the size, location and profile of our veterans population in Scotland. I know that that plan will be welcomed widely and that it will help us, along with our partner organisations, to develop and improve services. The final decision will lie with the Scottish Parliament, but I can advise members that, subject to the legislative agenda, a draft order will be laid in late 2019.

However, we are also aware that easy access to the right information is vital for the armed forces community, particularly for those who are transitioning out of the services or moving to Scotland for the first time. Over the past year, the Government has continued to improve how we provide information about services that are available. For example, in June we published the "Welcome to Scotland" guide. Information was a key recommendation in the commissioner's housing report, and this year we published an

updated version of the housing guide, redesigned to improve its content, visual impact and accessibility. I continue to work with the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning on how we can better address and prevent homelessness among our veterans population.

Maurice Corry: I welcome the minister's comments. In relation to MOD housing, I have had some success with the Royal Navy at Faslane, where we have moved families around. There is an open door and an opportunity. If the minister would like to discuss how I did it, I am more than happy to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is an invitation for the minister—you can answer, please.

Graeme Dey: That is another invitation to engage, and I will take that offer up.

The veterans employability strategic group is progressing our engagement on employability and it continues to take forward the veterans commissioner's previous recommendations, including work placements and the accreditation and mapping of military skills into the civilian workplace. Earlier today, I was pleased to launch a veterans employability concordat with key partners on the veterans employability strategic group, which sets out our enduring partnership arrangement to support those who are transitioning from the armed forces into fulfilling civilian careers. We are also accelerating opportunities to create business workspaces near military bases to help those who want to develop their own businesses.

We are lucky to have a strong veterans charitable sector here in Scotland, and I have already had the opportunity to meet Veterans Scotland, Poppyscotland, Legion Scotland and many others that are delivering great support. The Scottish Government continues to support veterans organisation and charities directly through the Scottish veterans fund. Those projects and initiatives provide essential support to our veterans community. This year marks the 10-year anniversary of the veterans fund, with more than £1.3 million given to more than 150 projects throughout Scotland.

Looking to the future, I can say that our focus will continue to be on working positively and collaboratively across Government and more widely with the charitable and private sectors to champion our armed forces community. There are great examples of support for veterans throughout local authorities in Scotland and I am keen to see that best practice shared widely. I am also keen that we continue to see cross-party support, both here and more locally, on delivering for veterans.

Today's debate shows that MSPs, in the main, are capable of taking that approach, and I acknowledge and welcome that. We know that we lead the way in many areas here in Scotland, but it is right that we take stock in order to maximise efficiency and adapt to changing needs. My ministerial colleagues and I, along with other members, remain committed to providing the best possible levels of support for veterans, both now and in the future.

Business Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-14131, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revised business programme for next week.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Wednesday 3 October 2018—

delete

followed by Ministerial Statement: Health and Care Update

and (b) Thursday 4 October 2018—

delete

2.30 pm Scottish Government Debate: Women and Girls in Sport Week

insert

2.30 pm Ministerial Statement: Health and Care Update

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Women and Girls in Sport Week—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

Meeting closed at 17:00.

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are two questions to be put today. The first question is, that amendment S5M-14094.2, in the name of Maurice Corry, which seeks to amend motion S5M-14094, in the name of Clare Haughey, on Scottish Government support for veterans and the armed forces veteran community in Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S5M-14094, in the name of Clare Haughey, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises and values the contribution of the Armed Forces and veterans community to Scotland; commends the excellent work of the first Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Eric Fraser, including his most recent report on veterans' health and wellbeing; welcomes the new Commissioner, Charlie Wallace, and supports continuing partnership working across all levels of government and the private and charitable sectors to ensure that the Armed Forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to opportunities across Scotland, and that health support is being delivered to the Armed Forces and veterans' community to meet any specific needs that they may have as a result of their service.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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