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Thursday 29 November 2018

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Thursday 29 November 2018

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Mental Health Strategy (Rural Areas).....	1
Sectarianism.....	2
Air Travel to Islands (Access for Disabled People).....	3
Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance (Delivery).....	4
NHS Lanarkshire (Meetings).....	6
Nitrogen Dioxide Pollution (Aberdeen).....	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Brexit (Fishing).....	10
Local Government Funding.....	13
Michelin Factory (Update).....	15
Cowlairs Decontamination Unit (Closure).....	16
Islamophobia and Antisemitism.....	16
Brexit.....	17
Asia Bibi.....	19
Small Business Saturday.....	19
Medical Devices and Implants.....	20
Real Living Wage (Ministry of Defence).....	20
Dog Shock Collars.....	21
Prisoners (Temporary Release and Parole).....	22
ScotRail (Franchise Obligations).....	23
ST ANDREW'S DAY 2018	27
<i>Motion debated—[Tom Arthur].</i>	
Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP).....	27
Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP).....	30
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con).....	31
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	33
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	34
Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con).....	35
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP).....	37
The Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development (Ben Macpherson).....	39
HOMELESSNESS	42
<i>Motion moved—[Aileen Campbell].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Graham Simpson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Pauline McNeill].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Andy Wightman].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell).....	42
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con).....	48
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab).....	51
Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green).....	54
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD).....	57
Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP).....	60
Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con).....	63
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP).....	64
Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab).....	67
Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP).....	69
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	71
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP).....	73
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab).....	76
Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP).....	78
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con).....	81
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	83
James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP).....	85
Andy Wightman.....	87

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	90
Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con).....	92
The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart).....	95
DECISION TIME	100

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 29 November 2018

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

General Question Time

Mental Health Strategy (Rural Areas)

1. **Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its strategy is for tackling mental health issues in rural areas. (S5O-02629)

The Minister for Mental Health (Clare Haughey): Action 12 in the “Mental Health Strategy: 2017-2027” outlines our commitment to supporting the development of the national rural mental health forum. The forum was established in 2017 and, through Scottish Government funding, it helps people in rural areas to maintain good mental health and wellbeing. The forum also develops connections between communities across rural Scotland to reflect the unique challenges that are presented by rural isolation. Membership has grown from 16 to 60 organisations, with the forum meeting quarterly to discuss outcomes such as how people in rural communities can overcome barriers to accessing and seeking mental health support.

Claudia Beamish: I thank the minister for that encouraging answer, and I welcome action 12. The forum’s increased membership is evidence of demand and need. The forum is making a difference in tackling mental ill health in the unique context of rural Scotland, where around a million Scots live and where deprivation is hidden. I recently held an event for local employers in my region to highlight the help and support that the forum can provide. Will the minister continue to work with the forum throughout the lifetime of the Government’s mental health strategy?

Clare Haughey: Government funding for the forum covers the financial year 2018-19, and the 2019-20 spending review process is on-going. I certainly recognise the work of the forum under its chair, Jim Hume. The forum has done some fantastic work and it is now the national network for driving change rurally.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The minister will be aware of the closure of two wards at the Royal Cornhill hospital in Aberdeenshire. The closure has given rise to concern in my constituency about the capacity for dealing with patients from Orkney. Will she investigate those concerns and provide reassurances that there will

be the capacity to meet the needs of patients from the islands?

Clare Haughey: I assure the member that the Scottish Government is aware of the ward closures and that it is working closely with NHS Grampian to ensure that there is capacity. If the member would like to write to me with his specific concerns, I will certainly be able to look into them and get back to him.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Levels of depression in the agricultural sector are thought to be increasing, and the suicide rates of farmers are among the highest in any occupational group. It is understood that one agricultural worker per week takes their own life in the United Kingdom. What mental health support is being offered specifically to farmers and agricultural workers in rural areas?

Clare Haughey: As I said in my answer to Claudia Beamish, there is the national rural mental health forum, which is doing a lot of work with farmers and the farming community. I expect that that work will continue. The national suicide prevention action plan will look at suicide prevention measures throughout the country. That work will involve looking at specific occupations and reviewing suicides to see whether lessons can be learned to prevent further suicides.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): People in rural and urban areas in my region tell me increasingly that they can access services only when they are desperate and in crisis. What does the minister advise I tell people who come to me and say that they are seeking help but cannot get it?

Clare Haughey: The Government prioritises mental health. That is evidenced by the increased spending over the past few years: we spent £1 billion on mental health in 2017-18. I encourage anyone who is experiencing a mental health crisis to seek help from their primary care team. There are also telephone services, such as NHS 24 and breathing space, that people who are in crisis can use.

Sectarianism

2. **James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to tackle sectarianism. (S5O-02630)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): We continue to work towards a sectarian-free Scotland by supporting a wide range of activity in formal and informal settings. That includes supporting work by organisations such as Nil by Mouth, Supporters Direct Scotland and the sense over sectarianism campaign. We are supporting the delivery of Scotland’s first national education resource for tackling sectarianism, which is freely available to all. That

work builds on a record investment of £13.5 million over the past six years, which has supported 120 projects to deliver anti-sectarian education and activity across Scotland. We continue to see a positive impact in the communities that are benefiting from that work.

James Dornan: The cabinet secretary may be aware that, on Tuesday evening last week, I convened the first meeting of the cross-party group on combating sectarianism in Scottish society. It was great to be joined by fellow MSPs from the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Conservatives and the Greens, as well as by external members from the Church of Scotland, Nil by Mouth, the Scottish Women's Convention, the West of Scotland Regional Equality Council and others.

I am encouraged by the work of the Scottish Government in addressing sectarianism and I welcome last week's publication of the final report on the legal definition of sectarianism. However, does the cabinet secretary agree that the only way we can end sectarianism is by working together as a society? Will he commit to work with the cross-party group in the future?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I will commit to work with the CPG in the future.

I want to take a moment to put on record the outstanding work that James Dornan has done personally to tackle sectarianism. As is evident to those of us who are on social media, he has taken a huge amount of personal abuse for standing up to sectarianism in Scotland. He should be commended on that. He has dealt with that with a huge amount of dignity.

I am very pleased that James Dornan has convened the cross-party group and I am pleased to see that there is cross-party consensus that we must tackle the problem of sectarianism. I hope that he and the group will come to a view on how best to tackle the problem. The Government will work closely with him on that.

The Government is working on legislation on hate crime and we are considering sectarianism and whether to introduce a statutory aggravator of sectarian prejudice. The consultation is currently under way and we will keep an open mind on that. Whenever we can assist in relation to the law or—as Mr Dornan suggests—education, I will be willing to consider any good ideas that come forward, whether from the CPG or from Parliament.

Air Travel to Islands (Access for Disabled People)

3. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to improve access to air transport for

disabled people who wish to travel to and from island communities. (S5O-02631)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): We continue to make airports across the Highland and Islands accessible to people with reduced mobility through our subsidy of Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. HIAL and its airline customers provide services and equipment to enable people with reduced mobility to access air services. HIAL continually reviews its service provision to ensure that barriers to travel for people with reduced mobility are removed as far as possible.

Donald Cameron: I draw the cabinet secretary's attention to the case of Fiona MacKinnon, a resident of Tiree, who suffers from two serious health conditions, one of which requires her to fly to Glasgow to attend regular appointments at the Beatson centre. Due to her fluctuating weight, which is a result of her medication, she is sometimes deemed ineligible to fly. What action can the cabinet secretary take to ensure that Fiona can travel with dignity and that others in her situation can do so, too?

Michael Matheson: I understand that HIAL has engaged with the issue and with the individual on taking flights to Glasgow. The most up-to-date information that I have is that the matter has been resolved by HIAL and that there is equipment in Tiree to support the woman to access air services as and when necessary. However, if the member would find it helpful, I am happy to ask HIAL to contact him to provide further details on that.

Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance (Delivery)

4. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will rule out the delivery of personal independence payment and disability living allowance by the Department for Work and Pensions under agency arrangements. (S5O-02632)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): People who rely on disability benefits have consistently told us that what matters most to them is that they are paid the right amount of money on time, so the most important consideration will be to ensure a safe and secure transition of the benefits from the DWP. The timetable and delivery schedule will be announced in the next year.

Mark Griffin: I note the cabinet secretary's answer and remind her that disabled people are desperately keen to know how and when their benefits will be fully delivered by Scotland's new social security system. They want an end to the DWP's involvement in their disability benefits. For

carers, the Government has agreed that the DWP should continue to deliver carers allowance for the next two years, with no changes to earner thresholds or study restrictions, and with payments and debts collected under Tory rules. That would not be acceptable for disability benefits. Can the cabinet secretary today confirm that there will be no DWP involvement in disability benefits?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I appreciate Mark Griffin's challenge to the Government to do more and to do it faster. As Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, I certainly bear that in mind when I work through the programme for this. However, I am also conscious that members rightly tell me and the Government to learn lessons from past public sector programmes where we or—particularly around universal credit—the United Kingdom Government have done things in an ill-advised fashion and not at the correct speed.

I am conscious that we must have a realistic timetable and delivery mechanisms in place when delivering this programme, which is a joint programme with the DWP. As I said, those will be announced next year. The pace will be quick on this—the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 was passed only earlier this year. However, the overriding priority must, and always will, be safe and secure transition.

The member raised the issue of the carers allowance supplement and the decisions that we took on that. Those decisions were taken specifically to ensure that we could get money to carers who have the lowest incomes directly and quickly. That was the first step on the Scottish Government's journey of looking at carers, and we will continue to look at issues to do with carers very seriously in the future.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the Scottish National Party Government will maintain disability benefits, not cut them; ensure that they remain universal, not means tested; and reform the disability assessment process to ensure that it works for service users and that disability assessments will be carried out by the public sector in Social Security Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member is right to point to all those commitments that the Government has made. We are committed to maintaining the level of the disability benefits that are paid to individuals and to raise it annually by at least the rate of inflation. We will also protect disability assistance by ensuring that benefits continue to be non-means tested.

We are involving people who receive those benefits in the design of our system's process for disability benefits. I therefore know that they want

to ensure that the assessments are undertaken in-house by Social Security Scotland, ensuring that the DWP and private sector agencies will no longer be involved in the assessment process.

NHS Lanarkshire (Meetings)

5. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport last met the chief executive and chair of NHS Lanarkshire, and what was discussed. (S5O-02633)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Ministers and Scottish Government officials meet regularly with the leadership of all our national health service boards, including NHS Lanarkshire, to discuss a range of matters. On Friday 2 November, I chaired NHS Lanarkshire's annual review at University hospital Hairmyres and went through a number of matters with the chair and the chief executive.

Monica Lennon: Cole Thomson from East Kilbride is six years old. His mum, Lisa Quarrell, is desperately trying to find a cure for the crippling epileptic seizures that leave Cole paralysed and unable to speak. So far, Cole has not been prescribed the medicinal cannabis that could greatly help his condition. Cole has touched the hearts of thousands of people, and a petition led by East Kilbride Community Trust is pushing for urgent action. Time is not on Cole's side. Will the cabinet secretary do everything that she can do to ensure that Cole gets the medicine that he needs?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Ms Lennon for her supplementary question. I absolutely understand the issues that she raises and the distress and upset that are being caused to the family.

Prescribing of medicinal cannabis rests on regulatory changes from the United Kingdom Government. Those changes came into effect on 1 November, so we very quickly issued guidance to our health boards and practitioners at that time.

I am happy to look at the case further and to speak with the member about the particular questions that it raises, and about what we—the Scottish Government and the health service—can do to assist.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): With regard to the cabinet secretary's discussions with NHS Lanarkshire, I welcome her decision to review the consultation on possible sites for the proposed new Monklands hospital. Can she advise Parliament how long the review will take?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful for that supplementary question and for Richard Lyle's support for the decision that I took to review the

process for identifying the options that should be consulted on. It is important that I make it clear to Parliament that I have expressed absolutely no opinion on the location.

I have made it clear to NHS Lanarkshire and, I hope, to residents of the area that the Government supports a replacement for the current Monklands hospital. The issue that is being reviewed is the manner in which a view is reached on the choice of alternative locations, the manner in which the decision on those choices is taken, and the manner in which the consultation is held. We want it to be held in such a way as to ensure that the maximum number of voices are heard before the board reaches a view on the recommendations that it wishes to make to me for my decision.

We are finalising the specific terms of the review and who will lead it: I hope to be able to make an announcement on that very shortly. I expect the review to take a relatively short time, because of what it will look at. I am very conscious that the Government, the board and—I am sure—residents of the area want to move quickly to reach a fully informed, genuinely considered and publicly consulted-on view on the recommended best location for the new replacement hospital for Monklands. I will announce the personnel, the remit and the timetable of the review shortly.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): In NHS Lanarkshire, the absenteeism rate has climbed for the fourth year in a row, from 4.7 per cent to 5.7 per cent, compared with the Scottish Government target of 4 per cent that the SNP has never achieved. The rising workload that is a result of staff shortages is playing a huge part in that.

The cabinet secretary recently announced an extra 2,600 nurse and midwifery places. Although those additional places are very welcome, they will not even cover the posts that are currently vacant. Does she recognise that workforce planning still falls short of what our NHS requires?

Jeane Freeman: I recently announced an increase—for the eighth year in a row—in the number of nursing and midwifery places. I also announced the continuation of the highly successful return to practice programme for nurses who want to return to practice after a period of absence, as well as an increase in the pre-registration work that the Open University in Scotland undertakes, which is another very successful programme.

Through our work on the number of nursing and midwifery places, we are acting to ensure that we maintain the increase in recruitment that is necessary. We are doing the same with regard to medicine undergraduates. The allied health professions, too, are an important area of work in which we are looking to ensure that we recruit and

train in a range of different ways in order to widen access across all the professions.

Our workforce plan is based on the best evidence that we have available, and it continues to be refined as that evidence improves. Our Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Bill is currently being considered by Parliament and is about to reach the decision-making stage at stage 1. It will assist us in providing further robust evidence for our workforce planning.

I do not accept Mr Whittle's assertion, and I make the point that the Scottish Government has the most advanced NHS workforce planning in the United Kingdom. Perhaps he could take down south some lessons on how we are doing things.

Nitrogen Dioxide Pollution (Aberdeen)

6. Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that 13 locations in Aberdeen have illegal levels of nitrogen dioxide pollution. (S5O-02634)

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): Aberdeen City Council has produced an action plan containing a number of measures to improve air quality. The Scottish Government is working closely with the council as it implements the measures in the plan, and is providing practical and financial assistance to monitor air quality and to support delivery of measures. As announced in the 2017-18 programme for government, the council will establish a low-emission zone in Aberdeen by 2020.

Tom Mason: I remind members that I am a councillor in Aberdeen City Council.

I know that the cabinet secretary will be as worried as I am by the reports in *The Press and Journal*, given the potential deadly consequences of such levels of pollution. In some areas, it is as high as 48 micrograms of nitrogen dioxide per cubic metre, which is well above the European Environment Agency's air quality directive limit of 40 micrograms per cubic metre. According to British Lung Foundation research, King Street is one of the worst-affected streets in the city; it is home to the Aberdeen community health and care village, so patients are forced to breathe that toxic air on the way to receive their medical treatment.

Therefore, I ask what consideration the Scottish Government has given—either itself or through the Scottish Environment Protection Agency—to making additional support available to the local authority, so that it can take action against the pollution now, rather than just waiting for the low-emission zone in 2020?

Roseanna Cunningham: As I indicated, the Government is already discussing that with the local authority and has provided funding over a number of years to do the necessary work. I agree with Tom Mason that such results are a real concern, especially in urban areas, where there are hot spots that create significant difficulties. However, work is on-going in Aberdeen, and a number of things are being done to improve air quality. I mentioned the air quality report already. We know that the Aberdeen western peripheral route will make a significant difference to air quality in Aberdeen. A further city-wide traffic count is proposed, following the opening of the AWPR. There is work going on.

I have also just announced that an independently led review of the cleaner air for Scotland strategy will take place. I hope for input from everyone to that. However, we must, equally, keep an eye on specific problems and, as I said, speak directly to local councils about them.

First Minister's Question Time

12:02

Brexit (Fishing)

1. **Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** The power to assert our position as an independent coastal state with full, unfettered access across our waters, or a plan to go back into the common fisheries policy with no controls at all—which of those does the First Minister think is the best plan for our fishermen?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I think that the Tories' raising the matter of fishing today is, in a political sense, something of an early Christmas present. Jackson Carlaw appears to be attacking me on fishing because I continue to support membership of the European Union. The strange thing about that attack is that so does Jackson Carlaw and Ruth Davidson. Here is Ruth Davidson on 1 October 2018, just a few short weeks ago:

"Like I say, I voted to remain. I fought for remain. If there was another vote tomorrow, I would still vote remain."

On that issue, it would appear that there is no difference between me and the Scottish Conservatives. Where there is a difference is that, on 11 December, Scottish National Party MPs will vote against the Tory deal that sells out Scottish fishermen.

We know that Tory pledges on fishing are not worth the paper that they are written on. Let us have a look at them. The Tories said that there would be annual negotiations rather than an overall agreement. The political declaration commits to an overall agreement. The Tories said that there would be no link between access to waters and access to markets. The political declaration makes it clear that there will be such a link. Far from leaving the common fisheries policy behind, the EU statement makes it clear that the new agreement will build on the common fisheries policy.

The Tories tell us to ignore all that and that they will get what they want at the end of the day, but they have handed all of the leverage to the European Union. Unless the United Kingdom agrees to its rules on fishing, the EU will block a trade deal. It takes just one country to do that. I am delighted that Jackson Carlaw has given me the opportunity today to highlight the truth of the matter, which is that, just as they did on the United Kingdom's way into the European Union, the Tories are selling out Scottish fishermen on the way out.

Jackson Carlaw: I gave the First Minister the opportunity to answer a question but, as is so

often the case, she read out the answer to the question that she would prefer to have been asked rather than the question that was actually asked.

The Scottish Fishermen's Federation has been absolutely clear. It says that under the Prime Minister's Brexit deal, the UK will be out of the CFP and will become an independent coastal state. More than that, just yesterday, in an email to every member of this Parliament, it confirmed its backing for the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. That is the SFF's position. Is the First Minister seriously trying to tell us that she knows more about fish than the Scottish Fishermen's Federation?

The First Minister: Jackson Carlaw wants to trade quotes and I am happy to indulge him. Here is the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation:

"Well, I can only talk personally having had these years behind me, and I really wouldn't trust the Tories as far as I could throw them. Whenever it comes to fishing it's always been a sacrificial lamb."

Is Jackson Carlaw saying that he knows more about fishing than the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation?

I know that the Tories are desperate to spare their blushes on this, but they are rewriting history. The commitment was never just—[*Interruption.*] They do not like this, but they are going to hear it. The commitment was never just about being an independent coastal state. That is the bare minimum. What the Tories promised was annual negotiations. Now we know that there will be an overall agreement. They promised no link between access to waters and access to markets. The political declaration makes it clear that there will be that link, and the statement issued by the European Union makes it clear that the EU will demand an arrangement that builds upon the common fisheries policy.

No amount of bluff and bluster from Jackson Carlaw takes away from this fact. Yet again, the Scottish Tories have sold out Scottish fishermen. Shame on them.

Jackson Carlaw: "Shame on them," concludes the First Minister. If shame was a currency, the First Minister's pockets would be bursting. In fact, if shame was a currency, she might even be able to fill the black hole in her independence financial plans, too.

What the First Minister is actually saying is that she does know better than the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. The reason why the First Minister will not back the SFF's position is that she cannot. She is trapped by her own policy on Europe. The plain fact is that, for all its posturing and pompous outrage, the SNP's policy is to rejoin the EU and, because there is no way round this, to rejoin the common fisheries policy.

Article 38.1 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union says that being a member of the European Union, as she wishes an independent Scotland to be, means that one must sign up to the common fisheries policy. There are no reviews. There is no reform. It is not a question of liking it; it is a question of lumping it.

Is it not simply deceiving people to pretend that that is anything other than a fact?

The First Minister: Jackson Carlaw really has to explain this a bit more simply to people. He says that all of that flows from the fact that I want Scotland, and indeed the UK, to remain in the European Union. Again, I would say to him that he does, too—or so he says. When Ruth Davidson says,

"If there was another vote tomorrow, I would still vote remain",

it seems to me that she wants Scotland still to be a member of the European Union. If all of what Jackson Carlaw says flows from that, it applies to Ruth Davidson as much as it applies to anybody else.

Jackson Carlaw also talks about the Scottish Fishermen's Federation pledge and attacks me for not signing it. Yesterday, the Prime Minister refused to sign the Scottish Fishermen's Federation pledge. We do not need to sign a pledge, because we will do what matters. On 11 December, SNP MPs will vote against the deal that sells out Scottish fishermen. The question for Jackson Carlaw, and all the MPs who will sign the pledge is, will they vote against that deal or not? Yes or no?

Jackson Carlaw: The First Minister's advisers have given her a thick folder of answers to questions that I have not asked. I did not mention any pledge to her, but since she asks, the Prime Minister did the deal that is going to deliver the pledge.

Let us just sum up the SNP's position. It accuses Theresa May of selling out on fishing, but it would drag us straight back into the CFP. It demands a renegotiation, but with whom? The Chancellor of Germany, the Chancellor of Austria, the Prime Minister of France, the President of the EU, the President of the European Council, the EU's lead negotiator, the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland and even Guy Verhofstadt, together with every other European leader, are saying, "This is it—this is the only deal on the table."

They say—and I say—"Back a deal that delivers an orderly exit, protects jobs and delivers more control of our waters than we have had for half a century." The First Minister says, "Vote down the deal," which means more chaos and more

upheaval and all in the hope that it will deliver on her obsession with a second independence referendum. That is not in Scotland's interests, and it is not standing up for Scotland.

The First Minister: Something is starting to become very clear at First Minister's questions: the redder Jackson Carlaw's face gets and the more he points wildly across the chamber, the more trouble he is in.

Jackson Carlaw asks me to support a deal that is bad for Scotland and bad for the UK when the Prime Minister right now cannot even persuade her own party to back it. That is the reality. The SNP will continue to do what the SNP always does: we will stand up for Scotland. This deal will take Scotland out of the European Union against our will, take us out of the single market against our economic interests, put us at a potential competitive disadvantage with Northern Ireland and, into the bargain, sell out Scottish fishermen.

Jackson Carlaw talks about the SNP using Brexit to advance the case for independence, but I say to him that Brexit does that all by itself. It needs no help from the SNP. Of course, that threadbare line is just a device for the Tories, because the opposite is true: they are exploiting independence to avoid hard questions on Brexit. It will not wash. People see right through it, and increasingly, they are seeing right through Jackson Carlaw and all his Tory cronies.

Local Government Funding

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

This time last week, the First Minister stood up in this chamber and claimed that she had given

"a very fair settlement to local government."—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2018; c 14.]

Today, the Accounts Commission has reported that funding for councils was cut in real terms by £220 million in the last year. It also says:

"funding from the Scottish Government to local government decreased at a faster rate, 6.92 per cent, than the Scottish Government revenue budget at 1.65 per cent."

That is taking Tory austerity and quadrupling it. What is fair about that?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As I am sure Richard Leonard knows, the Accounts Commission report that was published this morning is for financial year 2017-18. We are currently in financial year 2018-19, and for this financial year, the finance secretary in the budget earlier in the year delivered a real-terms increase in local authority revenue budgets, ensuring that local government can protect front-line services. Of course, he managed that against a backdrop of massive cuts to the Scottish Government budget imposed by the Tories at Westminster. Richard

Leonard would have more credibility on these issues if he did not continue to back a situation that allows Tory Governments at Westminster to cut this Parliament's budget.

Richard Leonard: Let me go back to last week. At the same time that the First Minister was telling the chamber that councils were getting a fair deal, letters from headteachers were being dispatched to parents across Falkirk, warning them of unprecedented cuts, including cuts to support staff.

Catherine Sneddon of Bo'ness received one such letter. Her son Louis, who is 10 years old, has a learning disability and epilepsy. Yesterday, Catherine told me:

"Year in year out we brace ourselves for cuts to his support network ... take that away from him and other children who need the ASN support packages ... and our children decline in physical and mental health alongside their medical issues."

Is the First Minister seriously saying to the Sneddon family that that is fair?

The First Minister: As Richard Leonard will, or should, be aware, the leader of Falkirk Council has since issued a statement apologising for the misleading impression that was given by the letters and has given assurances about education services in Falkirk. I hope that Richard Leonard will accept and welcome that.

In terms of education funding overall, Richard Leonard quoted the Accounts Commission report at me. On page 17 of the report, which relates to 2017-18, he can read that

"Education expenditure increased by 3.2 per cent (1.5 per cent in real terms)."

For this year, local authorities have set education budgets that are 3.8 per cent higher than the budgets that they set for the previous year, which is a 2.3 per cent real-terms increase. Since the Scottish National Party came to office, total revenue spending on schools has risen by almost £500 million, which is more than 10 per cent.

I will briefly go back to the Falkirk issue—Richard Leonard may want to reflect on this point. One of the issues that Falkirk Council faces is the cost of Labour's private finance initiative scheme for schools. [*Interruption.*] Richard Leonard will not want to hear this, but I think that it is good that he does. In 1998, Labour signed a PFI deal for schools that had a capital value of £65 million, but the total cost to the taxpayer is going to be £314 million. That amounts to a cost to the taxpayer of £13.3 million a year. I think Labour should be apologising for that.

Richard Leonard: The Accounts Commission report says that Scottish Government revenue funding to councils reduced by

“2.3 per cent in real terms”

in 2017-18, and that

“The financial outlook is for reductions in Scottish Government revenue funding to councils.”

Let us be clear about this: Falkirk is an SNP-run council. The council cuts are being made by an SNP Government in Edinburgh and we have reached the point at which headteachers in schools across Falkirk are writing to parents to tell them that this so-called fair settlement means swingeing cuts. The result is that vulnerable children such as Louis and families such as the Sneddons face the stress of cuts to the services and the support that they need. Where is the fairness in that? Is Louis not entitled to realise his potential? Do children such as Louis not deserve to receive the education that they need? When will the First Minister stop imposing austerity on Scotland's children and instead start investing in Scotland's local services?

The First Minister: In this financial year, Falkirk Council set an education budget of £158 million. For Richard Leonard's information, that represents an increase of £8 million on the previous year. As I said, the Accounts Commission report, which he likes to quote at me when it suits him, says that, in 2017-18,

“Education expenditure increased ... by 1.5 per cent in real terms”.

We know that in this year spending on schools has increased, and we know that, overall, under the SNP, spending on schools in revenue terms has increased by 10.3 per cent. All of that has happened in spite of the swingeing cuts that have been imposed by Westminster on the Scottish Government's budget.

I repeat: Richard Leonard would have more credibility on these issues if he did not continue to support a situation in which Tory Governments at Westminster are allowed to impose cuts on this Parliament's budget. When he changes his tune on that, people might be more prepared to listen to him on other matters.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): We have a number of constituency questions.

Michelin Factory (Update)

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Can the First Minister update Parliament on the progress that is being made in securing a future for Michelin in Dundee, in the light of the recent meeting between Derek Mackay and the Michelin executives?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Shona Robison for raising that important question. Scottish Government remains focused on securing the best positive outcome for Michelin's Dundee

site and its workers. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work had a very productive meeting with Michelin executives last Friday, at which we presented propositions relating to the future of the site and its workforce in Dundee.

The finance secretary will convene the third meeting of the Michelin Dundee action group tomorrow morning and he will update the group on Michelin's response to the proposition and on the next steps. Once the group, which includes representatives of the workforce, have been informed of the outcome of those discussions, the cabinet secretary will of course update local members. We are working with trade unions, Dundee City Council and the United Kingdom Government and across political parties, including local MSPs, to achieve the best possible outcome for the Michelin site and all its workers.

Cowlairs Decontamination Unit (Closure)

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): The closure of Cowlairs decontamination unit in Springburn led to the cancellation of more than 700 operations, some of them major, across hospitals in Glasgow. A whistleblower stated to the newspapers this week that, had the closure and a large-scale incident occurred simultaneously, hospitals would not have been able to cope. The unit has reopened on a phased basis only. Can the First Minister assure me that patients will receive alternative arrangements as soon as possible, and will she outline the action that will be taken to prevent the situation from happening again?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I can give that assurance. The board of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is already working hard to ensure that patients whose operations were cancelled as a result of the closure get alternative arrangements as quickly as possible. It was a very regrettable situation, but steps were taken as quickly as possible to rectify it. As the member said, Cowlairs opened again on Tuesday, but all appropriate steps will be taken to ensure that such a situation is never allowed to recur.

Islamophobia and Antisemitism

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): At a time when hate is on the rise, we got some hope. This week saw the Muslim and Jewish communities come together to sign a landmark joint communiqué to call out and challenge Islamophobia and antisemitism in Scotland. Together, Muslim and Jewish women born in Scotland are telling about how they have been called traitors, spat at and told to go home, and how they are scared of travelling on Scotland's public transport system. In the same week, we saw the horrific video of the

young Syrian boy being racially abused and insulted at his school in Huddersfield.

Silence is no longer an option in the face of such hate. Does the First Minister agree that we cannot leave the fight against Islamophobia to the Muslim community, that we cannot leave the fight against antisemitism to the Jewish community, that we cannot leave the fight against all forms of prejudice and hate to any individual community and that it must be a fight for all of us? *[Applause.]*

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I absolutely agree. I congratulate the Muslim and Jewish communities on the actions that they have taken this week. Their actions in doing what they have done this week are a better representation of Scotland than the actions of those who indulge in hate crime.

I absolutely agree that there is no place for silence. None of us should be bystanders when it comes to tackling and calling out hate crime; there is an obligation on all of us. I say very clearly but very strongly that an attack on any Muslim, any Jew or any member of any minority community should be seen as an attack on all of us, and that we should have solidarity and stand shoulder to shoulder at all times. I say that as First Minister and I hope that I am joined in that sentiment by every single member in the chamber. *[Applause.]*

Brexit

3. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am concerned about the First Minister's plan to compromise with Theresa May. Cathy Newman from Channel 4 tweeted last night that the First Minister told her that she would back the Norway option if the Prime Minister put it on the table. However, the Norway option will take us out of Europe, give us no say in Europe and damage our economy. Can I plead with the First Minister not to wobble, but to stand strong and oppose all and every kind of Brexit?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I sometimes think that Willie Rennie must have been asleep over the past two years when the rest of us have been battling on the issue. I will set out for him again—I will try to do it in very simple terms—what my position is and what the position of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Government is.

Our strong, overriding preference is to stay a member of the European Union. That is why, as I have said to Willie Rennie previously in the chamber, we will back a second vote to allow people to choose to stay in the European Union. We very much hope that that proposition can command a majority in the House of Commons and that SNP MPs will be part of putting that majority together. However, if that proposition

cannot command a majority—I hope that it can, though—then, as we have said for the past two years, we would favour a compromise option of staying in the single market and customs union because that is better than coming out of the single market and customs union and would be the least damaging option for our economy. It is not our first preference, but as a compromise it is better than the alternatives that are on the table. I hope that that is crystal clear for Willie Rennie.

Instead of constantly trying to attack the SNP on the issue, Willie Rennie might one day think about lifting a finger to try to persuade Labour to back a second vote. If he can do that, we will be able to put that majority together and give people across the United Kingdom the opportunity to stay in the EU and, of course, the people of Scotland the opportunity to express that preference for a second time.

Willie Rennie: This is First Minister's questions, I remind her.

The First Minister is opposed to Brexit, but is prepared to back it, too. Just yesterday—*[Interruption.]* This is important. Just yesterday, the Treasury told us that every kind of Brexit would damage the economy. Jobs and businesses are at stake and I do not understand why the First Minister is prepared to accept that. The UK Government is on the ropes, previous loyalists are opposing the Prime Minister and we finally have a chance of stopping Brexit. This is not the time to accept any new kind of Brexit. I was pleased that the First Minister told 700,000 people on the streets of London that she was committed to stopping Brexit dead in its tracks. How could she look those people in the eye if she ends up backing any form of Brexit?

The First Minister: I will be corrected if I am wrong, but I do not think that I am. I am sure that I read in the newspapers the other day that there is a Liberal Democrat member of Parliament in the House of Commons who is going to vote for Theresa May's deal. There are no SNP MPs who are going to do that. Let me try to make it out. I feel that Willie Rennie is starting to make himself look just a little bit silly on this question.

The SNP opposes Brexit. We want Scotland and the UK to remain in the EU. We will back a second vote to give people across the UK the opportunity to choose to stay in the EU, but if we or Willie Rennie cannot persuade Labour to come behind that and it simply cannot command a majority—I hope it can, but if it cannot it is not for want of trying on the part of the SNP or even of Willie Rennie—then it would be irresponsible not to look at the next best compromise that protected jobs and the economy. That is the position of the Scottish Government and of the SNP.

The other thing that Willie Rennie never manages to explain is how he can justify seeing Scotland taken out of the European Union against our will. If there is a second vote and we get the same result all over again—which, of course, we hope would not happen—the fact of the matter is that Scotland would be no better off. The real question is, will Willie Rennie stand up in that second vote, if Scotland votes again to remain, and will he back all options, including independence, to make sure that Scotland can remain in the EU?

The Presiding Officer: We have some interest in asking further supplementaries. I encourage questions to be succinct and answers similarly so.

Asia Bibi

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The First Minister may be aware that yesterday was red Wednesday, when many churches were thinking of Christians around the world who are suffering for their faith. Is the First Minister able to raise with the United Kingdom or Pakistani Governments the case of Asia Bibi and the Christian minority in Pakistan who are not afforded equal rights in that country?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Like many people, I am absolutely appalled by Asia Bibi's case and by the continued reticence of the international community in offering her asylum, now that she has been released from prison. The Scottish Government strongly condemns the persecution of minorities, including the targeting of innocent people based on their beliefs. I share John Mason's concerns about religious intolerance and misuse of the blasphemy laws, and I urge the Government of Pakistan to protect and guarantee the fundamental rights of all its citizens. The Scottish Government has repeatedly raised concerns over the issues directly with the UK Government and the Government of Pakistan, and we will continue to do so. We also strongly support international processes such as United Nations scrutiny of the record of individual member states.

Small Business Saturday

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On Saturday, many small, independent shops up and down high streets across Scotland will take part in small business Saturday, including Swans shoe shop and the Tony Huggins-Haig gallery in Kelso. However, we hear today that the number of Scottish retailers going bust is on the rise, according to research by French Duncan. Among other cost pressures, rising business rates are being blamed. When will the First Minister realise that her Government's high-tax agenda is punishing our high streets, and take urgent action to support Scotland's retailers?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I fully support small business Saturday. To celebrate it, I will visit a small business that opened recently in my constituency called Category Is Books, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex bookshop. I hope that members will take the opportunity to support small businesses across the country.

It is a bit rich for the member to stand there and talk about business rates. This Government introduced the small business bonus, which benefits many small businesses across the country. This Government continues to support the small business bonus.

In Scotland, including the small business bonus and many other reliefs, we have the best package of business rates relief of any country in the UK. Rachael Hamilton should support and welcome that.

Medical Devices and Implants

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): This week, "Panorama" exposed serious failings in the regulation and testing of medical devices and implants. This is a global issue and dozens of countries are affected. It is clear that the system in the United Kingdom, the European Union and across the world is not fit for purpose. As a positive step, will the Scottish Government now introduce a register of all implants?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are happy to give consideration to anything that lies within our power. As the member is aware, the regulation of these devices is a reserved matter. Responsibility lies with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, and we have written to it on more than one occasion asking for it to take action.

However, as we have done with mesh implants, we will continue to look at what we can do within our powers. I will ask the health secretary to look into the specific suggestion and write to the member in due course.

Real Living Wage (Ministry of Defence)

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): It was reported this week that the Ministry of Defence is paying more than 200 civilian staff in Scotland less than the real living wage. Will the First Minister join me and many others in calling for the real living wage, and for the powers to implement it to be devolved to this Parliament?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I would echo that call. The MOD and all Government agencies should pay the real living wage. The Scottish Government is a real living wage employer.

A higher proportion of workers in Scotland are paid the real living wage than in any other UK nation, but we recognise that there is still work to do. I look forward to the day—and I hope that we can persuade other members across the chamber to support this—that employment legislation is devolved to the Scottish Parliament so that we can take the action that we consider necessary to ensure that all workers get fair work.

Dog Shock Collars

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will ban the use of dog shock collars. (S5F-02837)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform announced in January this year, we have introduced guidance that was widely accepted and reported at the time as being an effective ban on the use of electric dog collars as training aids. That was not a legislative ban on the use of such collars, and it was never intended to be, but it is intended to avoid the misuse of such collars and, ultimately, to prevent the unnecessary suffering of dogs.

I appreciate that some members think that we should go further, and equally I understand that some people think that we have already gone too far. The cabinet secretary committed to issuing the guidance and that is what we have done. She also committed, however, to reviewing the effectiveness of the guidance after 12 months and to considering whether any further action is required. That is exactly what we will do.

Christine Grahame: Unfortunately, the cabinet secretary said in January:

“I have decided to take steps to effectively and promptly ban their use in Scotland.”

That is not what happened; as the First Minister said, guidance was issued. However, many animal welfare organisations, such as the Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club and the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and people like myself, want a straightforward ban, as there is in Wales. With no ban, can the First Minister tell me how effective the guidance is? Will she advise whether there has been any reduction in usage?

The First Minister: During the Parliament’s debate on the matter back in January and during discussions with stakeholders on the wording, it was clearly recognised that the guidance would be advisory. The Kennel Club said at the time that it welcomed the ban on shock training devices and that

“strict guidance has been published which provides advice on training methods and training aids for dogs”.

The guidance was published on 15 October, so it is too soon to comment meaningfully on its effect. As I said earlier, we have committed to reviewing its impact after 12 months. We will do that in light of the practical experience of Scottish enforcement bodies and any new legislation in other administrations. We will then consider whether any improvements need to be made to the approach that we have taken.

Prisoners (Temporary Release and Parole)

5. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s position is on reforming the rules regarding the temporary release and parole of prisoners. (S5F-02829)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As we committed to doing in this year’s programme for government, we will consult on measures to improve the openness and transparency of the parole system and how we can strengthen the voice of victims and their families in that process. The consultation will be published before the end of this year, and we will take action informed by the responses that we receive. We also committed to ensuring that victims and their families receive better information and greater support ahead of prison release arrangements, and those issues will be considered by the new victims task force, which will hold its first meeting on 12 December.

Liam Kerr: I welcome the First Minister’s partial commitments on parole reform, although whether the consultation translates into real action for victims and families is another matter. The Michelle’s law campaign is also about strengthening victim and family rights before temporary release from prison is granted, as it was the temporary release of Michelle Stewart’s killer that kick-started the campaign. The SNP must deliver on Michelle’s law, so will the First Minister commit today to expanding the consultation to cover temporary release?

The First Minister: First, I again pay tribute to the family of Michelle Stewart for their campaign, which is having a real impact on the issues.

As I know the member understands, parole and temporary release are two entirely separate processes. We absolutely recognise the importance of strengthening the voice of victims and their families in parole and temporary release. That is why in the programme for government we committed to action to improve both of those. That included a commitment to consult on measures to improve the openness of the parole processes. That consultation will seek views on how we can strengthen the voice and role of victims and their families, and it will cover the issues that are raised in the Michelle’s law proposal as they relate to

parole. As I said, that consultation will be published before the end of this year.

Temporary release from prison is not controlled by the Parole Board for Scotland, so it will not be part of that consultation. However, we are committed to improving the support and information that are available in relation to temporary prison release arrangements, which is why that issue will be considered by the new victims task force. As I said a moment ago, it will meet for the first time on 12 December and it will be co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Lord Advocate. I hope that that assures the member that both of those issues and the very different processes will be properly and fully considered.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Automatic early release was introduced in 1993 by a Conservative Government. Although early release is an important part of rehabilitation, it can lead to confusion at the point of sentencing about the time that someone will spend in jail. Does the First Minister agree with me about the importance of transparency in sentencing? Does she also agree that the scope of, and the resources that are available to, the Scottish Sentencing Council must be reviewed, given that it has taken three years to publish two pages of guidance?

The First Minister: As I know Daniel Johnson knows, early release is not the same as temporary release. However, all those issues will be looked at fully by the victims task force. It is because all those issues will be included that the Lord Advocate is co-chairing the group. There are a number of concerns about how the processes operate at the moment, but they are all in place for good reasons, many of which are to do with the rehabilitation of prisoners as they come back into society. However, it is also vital that there is appropriate and proper protection for the public and that the voice of victims and their families is heard. Therefore, in the consultation on parole arrangements and in the wider consideration of the issues by the victims task force, the issue that Daniel Johnson has raised will receive proper consideration.

ScotRail (Franchise Obligations)

6. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that ScotRail has failed to fully deliver 29 franchise obligations. (S5F-02834)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Colin Smyth refers to committed obligations, but he does not mention that, of the 272 obligations in total, ScotRail has already delivered 128, with a further 115 on track for delivery by their due date. Of the remaining obligations, 14 are overdue and

we expect most of those to be achieved in 2019, and 15 are categorised as having a challenging delivery date. Transport Scotland is working closely with ScotRail to ensure delivery of all committed obligations, which will deliver passenger benefits across the network. With a programme of such scale, it is normal for some delivery outcomes to change, but the focus when managing such changes is always the best interests of the passenger.

Colin Smyth: It is disappointing that the First Minister seems dismissive of the fact that ScotRail is not delivering important obligations to fully improve journey times, integrated ticketing and station investment. Those things are clearly not important to the First Minister. ScotRail is failing not just on those 29 franchise obligations; punctuality has plummeted to a new low, with almost one in five trains running late. Passengers are sick and tired, and they deserve better. So far, the First Minister's response has been to give ScotRail a free pass to breach its public performance monitoring—PPM—benchmarks and to team up with the Tories to block Labour's plan to end this failing franchise. How bad does it have to get before the First Minister will take meaningful action? If the First Minister will not end this failing franchise, can she answer this straightforward question: does she honestly believe that ScotRail will hit its 92.5 per cent PPM target—yes or no? If her answer is yes, when will that happen?

The First Minister: I was not dismissive; I gave the member the full facts in response to the question that he asked. Some of those facts were probably inconvenient for the question that he wanted to follow up with, but that is not my worry. As I said, 14 of the 29 obligations are listed as overdue but we expect most of those to be achieved in 2019. Of the 15 obligations for which the delivery date is considered challenging, most have the potential to be achieved in the first part of 2019.

On the wider issues of delays that he talked about, we deeply regret any inconvenience to passengers. Around half—sometimes more than half—of all delays on the ScotRail network are the responsibility of Network Rail. As I have said many times in the past, Network Rail is not the responsibility of this Parliament, although I look forward to getting the support of Labour members to make it the responsibility of this Parliament. I am sure that Colin Smyth is aware that, just this morning, the Office of Rail and Road took formal action against Network Rail to deliver improved performance and confirmed that ScotRail's performance in 2018-19 has been impacted by severe weather. That lies behind many of the delays that we have seen. We are working with ScotRail to improve performance so that the PPM target is met.

On the issue of the franchise, this Government, having won the powers—powers that Labour refused to give to this Parliament when it was in Government at Westminster—took action to ensure that, for the first time, there can be a public sector bid for the next franchise. If Colin Smyth wants us to go further, I invite Labour to join us in supporting a call for the full devolution of powers over rail so that full nationalisation could be an option. Right now it is not, because Labour continues to block those powers coming to the Scottish Parliament.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The First Minister thinks that Network Rail is the cause of the majority of delays. What does the First Minister say to passengers who were on the Waverley to Helensburgh service on Monday, who were left stuck at Uphall station when their train decoupled, leaving three carriages stranded at the station? Does the First Minister know why that incident happened? Can she reassure the travelling public that nobody in Scotland will be left behind on Scotland's railways?

The First Minister: I understand that the particular incident that the member raises is currently being investigated by the Office of Rail and Road. That is the appropriate action to take. I am not claiming that half of the delays are down to Network Rail; that is a fact. If all members across the chamber came together and demanded the devolution of Network Rail, we could have full, integrated responsibility and we would be able to do even more to improve performance on our railways. I would be delighted to have the support of the Tories and Labour in making that move.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The latest ScotRail performance statistics show that three in four trains on the Milngavie line are late or cancelled. Does the First Minister believe that ScotRail is fulfilling its obligations to passengers on a line on which they cannot get three out of four trains reliably?

The First Minister: The Donovan review—which I am sure the member is aware of—is looking at particular, specific actions to deal with issues on that line. However, I do not think that that performance level is acceptable for passengers. That is why we are working with ScotRail and have set stringent expectations that it will take action to improve performance and the passenger experience.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. We will move to members' business.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. At First Minister's question time last Thursday, a Scottish National Party member caused unnecessary concern about

nuclear safety events at Faslane in relation to our United Kingdom submarine fleet by placing a political spin on the facts, which produced an inaccurate picture—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear the member.

Maurice Corry: That has caused alarm for our armed forces servicemen and women who serve in the UK submarine fleet and keep the UK safe. As the fleet moves in total to Faslane, we hope that the families of servicemen and women will join them to live in Scotland. We must support our UK submarine fleet crews and families, and we must not make inaccurate statements in the chamber.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Corry's point is similar to the point that Ms Baillie raised last week. It is a political point in response to a political opinion. All members are allowed to make such a point, but it is not a point of order.

Before we move to members' business, we will have a short suspension to allow the public gallery to clear and to allow members and ministers to change seats.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

St Andrew's Day 2018

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I ask people who are in the public gallery to leave quietly, as the Parliament is in session.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-14747, in the name of Tom Arthur, on St Andrew's day 2018—*#MakeSomeonesDay*. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the celebration of St Andrew's Day; understands that the theme in 2018 is, *Make Someone's Day*; notes the view that everyone should celebrate the national day; believes that it is an opportunity to promote Scotland to the world as an inclusive and outward looking nation; welcomes the launch of St Andrew's Fair Saturday, which will take place on 1 December; understands that this will be a celebration of arts and culture, and considers the celebrations to be an opportunity for people in Scotland across all faiths, beliefs, cultures and ethnic origins, and Scots internationally, to mark the contribution of Scotland at home and across the globe.

12:49

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): It is my great pleasure and privilege to lead this year's St Andrew's day debate in our national Parliament. I thank all the members from across the chamber who supported my motion, and I thank the minister, Ben Macpherson, for his engagement with members before the debate and for providing information on how the Scottish Government is supporting the celebration of St Andrew's day across Scotland.

This is the 10th St Andrew's day debate that we have had since the Parliament reconvened in 1999. The first time that we debated our national day was in March 2004, in a members' business debate that the late Donald Gorrie secured. As we approach the 20th anniversary of devolution, it is perhaps revealing about the Parliament's early years that it took until almost the second year of the second parliamentary session to recognise St Andrew's day in a parliamentary debate. Donald Gorrie was, of course, an independent-minded MSP who, ahead of the 2007 elections, famously advised his Liberal Democrat colleagues to "never say never" to an independence referendum. I am sure that my colleagues are grateful that his colleagues did not take his advice.

It is an interesting coincidence of history that the first St Andrew's day debate on or around the day itself was led by Dennis Canavan, some eight

months after Mr Gorrie's members' business debate. It is fair to say that no Scottish politician of recent times has done as much as Dennis Canavan to promote participation in St Andrew's day. His most enduring legacy in this area is, of course, the St Andrews Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Act 2007. However, he has also been a driving force on the St Andrew's day campaign committee and is now the secretary of the cross-party group on St Andrew's day, of which I am honoured to be the convener. That group rightly commands support from across the chamber, and I encourage members to engage with the group over the coming 12 months ahead of St Andrew's day 2019.

I also wish to recognise the contribution of the Scottish Government and other colleagues who have secured St Andrew's day debates over recent years. The record holder—if that is the appropriate term—is, of course, Linda Fabiani, who, as a Government minister, led debates in 2007 and in 2008. On the day on which the latter debate was held, almost exactly 10 years ago, there was also a debate on fishery negotiations with Europe—some things never change. More recently, debates have been secured and led by Kevin Stewart, Annabelle Ewing, Bruce Crawford and Michael Russell. Those debates have generally been consensual and have served to remind us that we have more in common than divides us.

The debates also serve as an opportunity to reaffirm our inclusive sense of Scottish identity. In a previous debate, you yourself, Presiding Officer, framed the issue succinctly by stating that St Andrew's day serves as a

"symbolic reminder that we are the Scottish people, whether or not we were born here."—[*Official Report*, 21 December 2015; c 70.]

That spirit of inclusiveness is carried into this year's celebrations.

The theme for St Andrew's day 2018 is *#MakeSomeonesDay*—a message that is not only relevant but necessary. This year, our national day falls at the end of a month in which children were tear-gassed by the world's only superpower and our fellow European Union citizens were described as queue jumpers. It falls in a year in which, in the man-made tragedy of Yemen, the largest documented outbreak of cholera in history continues. Further, it falls at a time of unprecedented wildfires, floods and extreme weather, which affirm that we are on the brink of climate catastrophe.

In an era of such darkening skies, a sense of fatalism and despair can become overpowering, which is eagerly exploited by those who wish to fan the flames of intolerance and hatred. Therefore, it is at such times that simple acts of

kindness, decency and humanity become essential. Every interaction that we have with another human being is a small pebble dropped into the pool of our collective experience. We do not know how far the ripples will travel, but we each determine by our actions whether we send them with good will or malicious intent.

Communities, societies and nations are ultimately the sum of a complex web of relationships between individuals, and it is the strength of each of those innumerable connecting threads that determines the health of the whole. By taking time to think of others—to make someone's day—we can each generate sparks of light that together will illuminate the darkened skies that we currently face. In that spirit, I very much look forward to attending Barrhead men's shed's fifth birthday party tomorrow, before joining Lochwinnoch elderly forum for its annual St Andrew's day lunch. Those two groups work all year long to make someone's day.

This weekend, we will again celebrate small business Saturday, and I know that I am not the only member who will be sampling the produce of many of our small and independent traders, which I will also do as I visit Christmas fairs across my constituency. This year's small business Saturday is particularly special as, for the first time, we will also be celebrating St Andrew's fair Saturday.

The fair Saturday movement originated in Bilbao, in the Basque Country in northern Spain. It started in 2015 as a positive cultural response to the excessive consumerism of black Friday. Since then, the movement has grown, year on year. Last year, events took place in 114 cities, with more than 140,000 artists and members of the public participating. Those events generated almost €200,000 for local social causes. I am sure that, this year, there will be further increases in participation, and I look forward to learning how communities throughout Scotland will embrace the fair Saturday movement.

I also look forward to seeing how the events will complement many other more established St Andrew's day events, such as the work that is led by BEMIS Scotland to celebrate our diversity, the famous St Andrew's conga, which was pioneered by Glasgow the Caring City, and the St Andrew's day debating tournament grand final, which will take place in this chamber.

St Andrew's day offers a chance for all Scots—new and old, near and far—to come together to celebrate our unique contribution to the world and to recommit ourselves to our values of fairness, equality and compassion. Some cynics might level a charge of Scottish exceptionalism; so, in concluding, let me respond with this: as individuals, as communities and as a nation, our actions follow from our values and only we can

define our values. This St Andrew's day, let us recommit to the values that we choose and, in doing so, make someone's day.

12:56

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I thank Tom Arthur for bringing the debate to the chamber to highlight St Andrew's day. I have always thought that we need to do more at home to celebrate Scotland's national day, because, across the world, global Scots probably do more than we do at home to celebrate St Andrew's day. I have been an expatriate on a number of occasions, so I understand that people miss home and want to make the most of days such as St Andrew's day to celebrate their Scottishness.

Friends and family of mine who have lived and worked around the world have been involved in organising and enjoying St Andrew's day balls and events. Friends of mine who lived for a few years in Baku, in Azerbaijan, enjoyed such events, and I very much enjoy looking at their photographs. My aunt and uncle were heavily involved in running the Singapore St Andrew's society ball every year, which was a huge affair with pipers, dancing and everyone in ball-gowns and national dress.

However, when we are at home, we do not celebrate St Andrew's day quite so much, and I wonder why that is the case. If every local authority decided to implement the local holiday, as the Parliament voted for in 2006, perhaps we might stand a better chance of St Andrew's day becoming the special day that it should be, and which it is in other countries.

Of course, there are exceptions. My party holds a St Andrew's day dinner, which was hosted by *Independence* magazine the other week. In Edinburgh, the day marks the start of the winter festival, and VisitScotland has a list of amazing events that are happening throughout Scotland to celebrate St Andrew's day.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The member rightly states the importance of local authorities being involved. Does she agree that it would be helpful if all local authorities agreed to celebrate St Andrew's day on the same day? Not all do.

Gillian Martin: Absolutely. If we want St Andrew's day to be a real festival, which is a terrific idea, co-ordination is key.

As Tom Arthur mentioned, the theme of this year's St Andrew's day is #MakeSomeonesDay, which is a wonderful idea for the reasons that he gave. The smallest acts of kindness can have a huge impact in brightening someone's day and making them feel better. I love the idea of "pay it forward". My only regret about not having to pay

the toll to cross the Forth bridge any more is that we can no longer pay the toll for the car behind us. We used to do that for two reasons: first, it was a nice thing to do and, secondly, it freaked people out.

I have tried to deliver an act of kindness by offering to close my office tomorrow, so that my staff can have St Andrew's day off. I say "tried" because they are resistant—they are a hard-working bunch who take their responsibilities very seriously, like all constituency staff. I might need to make my offer a demand in order to get them to commit to taking the day off—never look a gift horse in the mouth, guys; please just take the day off.

In the spirit of Tom Arthur's motion, I will collect food for the Inverurie food bank at the local Tesco, as I do every year. That is an act of kindness and support that every volunteer wishes we did not need. However, every year, it reminds me of national traits that we can celebrate: the generosity and fair-mindedness of Scots, which are always in evidence through the donations that we receive.

I pay tribute to the efforts of the 10 schools in my constituency whose pupils have formed a choir to perform at an event linking St Andrew's day with fair Saturday, which was mentioned by Tom Arthur. The proceeds of their concert will go to the local St Andrew's school. St Andrew's school, as many members will know, is a unique special school whose pupils are aged between 3 and 18 and have a range of barriers to learning. The school's emblem is our national flag, which is appropriate given that the school is on the cusp of a very big change as it moves from its current location to form part of the new Inverurie community campus. St Andrew's school will be housed in the new campus, but it will retain its singular identity and will continue to provide a specialist environment and learning for all its pupils. It is testament to the high regard in which the school is held in the local community that school pupils from as far away as New Deer and Turriff have chosen to make St Andrew's school's day.

I wish them all well, and I wish all members a happy St Andrew's day when it comes.

13:00

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I thank Tom Arthur for bringing the debate to Parliament today. I am delighted to have an opportunity to participate, and I congratulate Gillian Martin and Tom Arthur on their considered speeches.

St Andrew's day is a fantastic opportunity to show off to the world what Scotland does best,

whether it is our warm hospitality or rich culture and history. There are many events planned up and down the country to celebrate the day.

I welcome the fair Saturday initiative, which, as Tom Arthur said, is an idea that was taken from the British Council meeting in Bilbao in 2014. Fair Saturday aims to mobilise people through social empathy rather than through commercialism. That relates to something that many of my constituents talk about, which is that black Friday is not very supportive of local high streets and communities.

That ties into making someone's day. On fair Saturday and beyond into the Christmas period, it is only right that we take a moment to see through the commercialism and instead embrace the true meaning of the celebration of Christmas, which is social inclusivity and good cheer.

Closer to home, in my constituency of Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire, some 200 pupils from Hawick, Denholm and Newcastleton primary schools will be putting on their dancing shoes for a lively night of ceilidh dancing. The event, which is held annually, is organised by local branches of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. They have certainly been putting the pupils through their paces in the run up to the main event, with six weeks of practice. Watch this space—we could have some competition for those who are performing on "Strictly Come Dancing". I thank all those who have organised the ceilidh, and I thank Morrison's for donating juice and snacks. Such events are fantastic for pulling the community together and offering people a chance to come together to socialise and have some fun, of an evening.

Such events strike a chord with the campaign that is associated with this year's St Andrews day celebrations, which is #MakeSomeonesDay. If members do anything on social media, they should use that hashtag. The campaign encourages people to share a small act of kindness on St Andrew's day in particular, but I am of the opinion—as, I am sure, are members of all parties—that we should strive to do that every day. The message from the campaign is a reminder that we all should look out for one another, whether it is popping in to visit an elderly neighbour for a chat or volunteering for a local charity, especially as we enter the darkest and coldest part of the winter.

We should look out for our elderly neighbours in particular. In my rural constituency, social isolation is a key problem that will only grow because of our ageing population. Elderly people often cannot travel around so easily, and might for days not see anyone but the local postman. I encourage everyone to check on their elderly neighbours and relatives during the cold winter months, even if it is just to say, "Hello."

To continue on the theme of loneliness, I note that we know that it affects people's mental and physical health. As I have said previously in Parliament, social isolation is likely to cost the national health service as much as £12,000 per affected person, and can be as significant a risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Although the Scottish Government is taking steps to reduce social isolation, a lot more can be done. Campaigns such as #MakeSomeonesDay and the activities that are outlined in the letter that I received from Ben Macpherson can go some way towards helping the situation. I hope that we will all get involved.

In closing, I wish everyone a happy St Andrew's day, and I hope that everybody will take from it an important message, which is that small acts of kindness really can make somebody's day.

13:04

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Today's debate celebrates the day of our patron saint, Andrew, and gives us the chance to celebrate our Scottish heritage. As Tom Arthur's motion says, tomorrow is

"an opportunity for people in Scotland across all faiths, cultures and ... origins ... to mark the contribution of Scotland at home and across the globe."

I am thankful for Tom Arthur's action to ensure that we could have today's important debate.

Members will know that the debate complements the establishment of a new cross-party group that is charged with promoting celebration of St Andrew's day.

St Andrew is also the national saint of other countries, including Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Russia, Cyprus and Barbados. I hope that they, too, are gearing up for their own celebrations. He is also the patron saint of fishermen, fishmongers and rope makers, which is very appropriate to Scotland, given our seafaring heritage, and is perhaps noteworthy, given the recent vigorous debate surrounding the common fisheries policy. St Andrew's credentials as a saint of workers do not stop there, however: he is also the saint of textile workers, miners, butchers, and farm workers.

It is therefore apt that, at least for some public sector workers, tomorrow is a bank holiday in Scotland. As was pursued by Dennis Canavan, the law now allows someone legally to choose not to make payments on St Andrew's day, which is a boon for small businesses and anyone who is budgeting ahead of Christmas. It is a good opportunity for workers across Scotland to fulfil the theme of #MakeSomeonesDay.

I hope that this is a starting point for our new CPG to encourage more organisations and businesses to recognise the day, so that the people of Scotland have the opportunity to take a rest and celebrate their national identity, cultural diversity and membership of the international community.

The same impetus is at the heart of the United Kingdom Labour Party's plan for four new bank holidays on the patron saints' days of the UK to celebrate and share our national cultures, and to strengthen the bonds across these isles.

As the motion states, our celebration of Scotland's art and culture is this year, for the first time, being co-ordinated through fair Saturday, when people will meet from Bowmore to North Berwick and from Stromness to St Andrews to celebrate the national day. Unfortunately, the only event that is being held as part of fair Saturday for residents of my region is in Falkirk. There is, therefore, clearly a bit of work for me to do over the next year, by going back to my region and encouraging more organisations, community groups and artists from Central Scotland to get involved, or at least to get signed up for 2019.

However, for tomorrow, I hope that all Scots—born and bred, new or simply just visiting—get to enjoy the day, rest and immerse themselves in the day's history and our heritage.

13:08

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Our national day is a wonderful opportunity to promote Scotland as an inclusive and outward-looking nation, and to reaffirm to ourselves the things that define our values as a nation. I thank my friend and colleague, Tom Arthur, for securing the debate and giving us all the opportunity to welcome the annual St Andrew's day celebrations.

As colleagues have mentioned, this year's St Andrew's day theme is #MakeSomeonesDay, which implores us to take a moment of time to perform a small act of kindness—perhaps to look in on an old friend, spend a bit of time with a neighbour, or support the local volunteering that goes on in all our constituencies.

I am proud to say that the cup of kindness overflows in abundance in my Ayrshire constituency of Cunninghame South. In Stevenston, for example, the Hendry family at Townhead cafe will once again provide Christmas dinner absolutely free of charge for any vulnerable, elderly or lonely people in the three towns and Kilwinning. Not a week goes by in which our local newspapers do not carry stories of fundraising efforts for various worthy local charities.

If members will indulge me, I will mention some of the local folk who have been doing good things. Pauline Tremble is an Irvine-based artist who provided a series of paintings to raise funds for Whiteleys Retreat in Ayr. Ellie Kennedy from Irvine raised an amazing £700 for the Beatson Cancer Charity and the Little Princess Trust, which is a charity that provides wigs to children who are going through cancer treatment.

The Kilwinning ambulance depot raised £1,900 for the Brain Tumour Charity by putting on an amazing fun day that many of the community took part in, while Bourtreehill scouts managed to raise £300 for the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

The new Kindness Rocks Project campaign is being led by the Rev Neil Urquhart and Father Willie Boyd of Irvine, who have come together to further promote the message of kindness. They are working in association with the North Ayrshire kindness innovation network and the Shoes Brothers, as they are known—if members do a search on YouTube, they will be able to see their song and dance activities—to record a song and video to promote kindness at home, in the workplace and across communities in the constituency in the run-up to Christmas.

As has been mentioned, St Andrew's fair Saturday is to be launched this year as part of the global celebration of fair Saturday to provide a celebration of arts and culture and

“an opportunity for people ... across all faiths, beliefs, cultures and ethnic origins, and Scots internationally, to mark the contribution of Scotland at home and across the globe.”

The theme of kindness is again prevalent. Contributors have been asked to support a social cause and to promote the wider celebration of St Andrew's day through their work. This Saturday, I will be lucky enough to be joining the very hard-working staff of Tesco in Irvine to help with their annual food-bank collection.

St Andrew has an international profile, being the patron saint not just of Scotland, but of Greece, Russia, Romania and Ukraine, so it is appropriate that we reaffirm Scotland's commitment as an open, welcoming and inclusive nation. Amidst the chaotic maelstrom of Brexit and what seems to be a terrible surge in racism and fascism, we should, as Scots, continue to celebrate and aspire to embody our shared global values of respecting human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.

I wish everyone a very happy St Andrew's day.

13:12

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):
Like the other members who have spoken, I am

pleased to speak in today's debate, which celebrates Scottish culture, ethnic origin, heritage and inclusiveness. I am delighted that this year's theme is make someone's day. From across the chamber, we have heard stories of members' backgrounds and experience; I would like to share my Doric culture by reciting a poem by a Mr George Dunbar, about a party that was held on St Andrew's night. The huge amounts of food and drink that were consumed on the night are amazing, and I hope that my reading of the poem makes the day of at least some members.

I have always said that there are some great poems written in the Doric: the best stand comparison with anything that has been written in the English language. Unfortunately, the poem that I am about to read is not one of them. [*Laughter.*] I am using it today because it focused on St Andrew's night. On another occasion, I might be able to give members some of the real quality stuff that has been written in Doric. When I recite a poem, I usually do it from memory—I learn the poem. Unfortunately, I have not had time to learn “St Andrew's Night”.

When bauld St Andrew's nicht cam' roon
A core foregethered i' the toon
Tae hae a rant or lilt a tune,
An' teem a jovial jorum.

They suppit kail an' gweed kail brose,
Whilk needs nae praise in rhyme or prose,
Till faces low't like reidest rose,
Or kaim o' cockalorum.

Comes cock-a-leekie gweedly fairin',
An' haddies sweet, an' caller herrin',
There was eneuch for a', an' sparin',
As fest as thrapples store 'em.

Syne cam' the haggis, het an' reekin',
Its spicy guff ilk nose was seekin',
An' nae a tongue had room for speakin'
Till nippies swack did score 'em.

The rossen breist o' some fat nowt
That aft 'mang juicy girss did rowt,
The dell a ane o' them wad flout,
But scowft what was afore 'em.

Noo sheep's heid roon the table creeps,
Alang wi' birsled tattles, neeps,
An' whang o' ither stuff in heaps;
Some winnert whaur they'd store 'em.

Wi' feesant here, an' peertricks there,
Stoot mealie puddens an' tae spare,
Ye wad' a' thocht some had nae ser',
Sae he'rty they did lower 'em.

Neist rich plum duff an' aipple tairt,
An' trumlin' tarn sae sweetly ser't
Gart ilka chiel pray tae be spare't
Tae form the happy quorum.

Some noo made wye their teeth tae pyke,
Some crackit nilts an' jist sic like,
While tongues were bizzin' like a byke,
Wi' naething noo tae bore 'em.

Wi' sang an' news the 'oors sped by,
While pleasure beamed in ilka eye,
An' care gaed wannerin' wi' a sigh
Ayont aul' Cairngorum.

A deoch-an-dorris, nane may doot,
Was quaff't afore they daunert oot,
Whaur shone the meen's sharp-nibbit snoot;
Some swore they saw a score o' 'em.

An' so wi' sang an' he'rtsome cheer,
Wi' auld acquaintance aye sae dear,
They heild St Andrew's nicht, this 'ear,
As ithers did afore 'em.

I hope at least some members enjoyed that, and that some could understand it. I need little encouragement to speak Doric, and I rarely do an after-dinner speech without doing a poem or a bothy ballad.

It is great to see such vibrant and varying Scottish culture in the chamber today. The debate has been a great opportunity to express and display our wide variety of culture and experiences of St Andrew's day.

I will touch on another part of our shared culture. Part of our shared culture is our flag: the saltire is the flag of Scotland. Ahead of St Andrew's day tomorrow, it is important to get behind the #EveryonesFlag campaign. It is not a flag that belongs to one political party, one belief or that pushes one agenda or political persuasion. It is everyone's flag.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I wonder what the *Official Report* will make of that. I hope that you have the poem written out and I hope that you have an English translation. I followed parts of it. It was wonderful to hear the Doric in your accent.

13:17

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I am loving this debate. I am loving the fact that we are defining the very idea of our nation and our Scottishness. I thank my friend and colleague Tom Arthur for bringing this debate to the Parliament.

I have been involved in these debates on numerous occasions and I always manage to mention what we are doing in Renfrewshire and Paisley with regard to St Andrew's day. In Paisley, it is part of the winter events that start with the fantastic fireworks display, followed by switching on the Christmas lights and then St Andrew's day.

Paisley First, which set up the business improvement district, is having a winter festival in the town centre. There is a massive wheel with lights on it next to Paisley Cross—the London Eye has nothing on that big wheel at Paisley Cross. The festival is an incredible event. If we spend any time as a family over the period, we will probably spend it there. For us, the events ensure the legacy of the Paisley 2021 year of culture.

As Mark Griffin stated, St Andrew is the patron saint of textile workers. If the town of Paisley, with our history in textiles, cannot celebrate our patron saint, absolutely no one else can do it either.

It is right that Scotland's Parliament recognises our patron saint. Over the years, I have looked at the Irish and their idea of St Patrick's day with some envy, as people all over the world celebrate their patron saint's day. For Scotland, St Andrew's day can be a missed opportunity to promote our country and tell the world what we are all about. The Scottish Government has been doing a lot of work on that, but we could still use these events and days to promote ourselves more. The Scottish diaspora is equal to, if not larger than, the Irish diaspora. St Andrew's day can be another example of how we celebrate and promote all the things that are special about Scotland.

I particularly like the theme of this year's St Andrew's day celebration. Making someone's day is a brilliant way to celebrate a patron saint's day and shows that we continue to believe in our people and our communities. On Friday, my office will take the day off. If the idea is to make someone's day, I have already done it for my staff, who will have a day off to rest up after helping the good people of Paisley over the past year. They have promised to have a good day.

The whole point of the campaign is for us to make people's lives that wee bit better. Whether it is by ensuring that a neighbour is okay or by visiting family and friends who we have not seen in a while, if everyone does one small thing, together we can make a huge difference. Surely that is a fitting tribute to St Andrew—it shows what our priorities are. As Paisley's MSP, my priority has always been the people I represent. I always try to make people's lives better. My family is extremely important to me, too, but my daughter Jessica sometimes complains that I get my priorities mixed up and spend more time helping the people of Paisley than I do helping my family and grandchildren. To make tomorrow special, perhaps it would be good for me to visit some of my family and friends and spend time with them.

I thank Tom Arthur again for bringing the debate to the chamber. On days such as tomorrow, we can celebrate Scotland in its entirety. The debate has shown that that is exactly what we will do. The importance of days such as tomorrow is that it shows who we are, what we have done and where we are going. I look forward to seeing how we can further promote St Andrew's day in future, and how we can enjoy Scotland, promote Scotland to the world and tell everyone exactly who Scotland is.

13:21

The Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development (Ben Macpherson): I thank Tom Arthur for securing the debate and all the members who have made such thoughtful, passionate and enthusiastic speeches. It is great to be in the chamber with everyone today and to be part of this important debate.

Our winter festivals boost Scotland's tourism and events sectors, and the Scottish Government is proud to support them with more than £0.5 million. However, as we have heard, they are certainly not all about finance—quite the opposite, in fact. From the unifying spirit of Hogmanay to the remarkable poetry of Robert Burns and others, and from the global solidarity of “Auld Lang Syne” to celebrating Scotland's modern multicultural identity, our winter festivals are positively and purposefully entwined with boosting Scotland's international profile, enhancing our collective confidence, and affirming and promoting our values of fairness, kindness, inclusivity and empowerment.

Building on that, on 1 November I was delighted to launch the Scottish Government-led campaign to showcase Scotland's biggest ever celebration of St Andrew's day. Tomorrow—30 November—Scotland is inviting people from near and far to join in the celebration of Scotland's national day, through co-ordinated partner activity and national and local events right across the country.

What is particularly exciting this year, as others have mentioned, is that for the first time the celebration of Scotland's national day is linked to the global fair Saturday initiative; indeed, I understand that we are the first northern European country to join the initiative, the second in Europe after founding country, Spain, and the first country as a whole to commit to it.

This year, between 30 November and 3 December, up to 100 events will celebrate St Andrew's day—four times last year's number. The celebrations reach across the country, including key island communities, with events in Skye and the Western Isles.

The fair Saturday initiative was founded by Jordi Albareda Ureta, who is a really inspiring person, to promote and deliver positive social change.

Reflecting the progressive and compassionate spirit of fair Saturday, the common thread that connects all Scotland's St Andrew's day celebrations this year is our focus on marking our national day by encouraging Scots far and wide to support others and engage in small acts of kindness to make someone's day. As others have said, whether it is helping a relative, friend, neighbour or stranger or showing compassion where it is needed, whether it is contributing to a

local cause or international charity, or whether it is inviting friends and partners to mark the occasion together, this year throughout Scotland we are encouraging ourselves and each other to celebrate our national day by looking outwards and positively engaging in kindness.

The aim of all this is not only to make a difference but to make Scotland's St Andrew's day celebrations something quite unique. Our celebrations will be the biggest yet, keeping local communities at their very heart, reflecting our values and global reputation for fairness, expressing the importance that we place on the vital and integral role of young people in our society, celebrating the diversity that modern Scotland is all about and working to strengthen the inclusive nature of the modern Scottish identity. So many different initiatives are taking place, from a mass conga of schoolchildren and torchlight processions to multicultural events demonstrating the positive plurality of Scotland's sense of national and global citizenship.

The multicultural celebration of Scotland's winter festivals delivered by BEMIS Scotland has gone from strength to strength. I am delighted that this year groups including the Polish Cultural Festival Association, Edinburgh Interfaith Association and St Giles cathedral in Edinburgh, the Nepalese Himalayan Association Scotland in Aberdeen, the ethnic minority forum in East Dunbartonshire and the Glad Cafe in Glasgow are all celebrating St Andrew's day alongside their own unique heritage, faiths and traditions.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, Scotland is marking its national day by looking outward, not inward. In these times of flux and challenge, it is important to emphasise, as others have in the chamber, that Scotland's national identity is set within our internationalist ethos and traditions. Our sense of ourselves as Scots is and has long been bound up and intertwined with a long-held wider identity as a progressive European and global partner with a broad commitment to global citizenship.

Tom Arthur's motion makes it clear that with St Andrew's day tomorrow and St Andrew's fair Saturday, coupled with the commitments to small business Saturday, we have

“an opportunity for people in Scotland across all faiths, beliefs, cultures and ethnic origins, and Scots internationally, to mark the contribution of Scotland at home and across the globe.”

Whatever members or people across Scotland will be doing, I wish them a very happy St Andrew's day, and I thank them for being part of the wider commitment to making someone's day. Together, we can, through kindness, community and fairness, make an important difference and

demonstrate to the world, ourselves and each other the very best of what it means to be Scottish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:28

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Homelessness

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. Our next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-14962, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on ending homelessness together. I call the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, Aileen Campbell, to speak to and move the motion.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Before I start, I take the chance to congratulate the men and women who represented team Scotland at the homeless world cup in Mexico earlier this month. The players' determination, drive and spirit are inspiring and their participation plays a crucial role in changing attitudes and perceptions of homelessness—they have all done Scotland incredibly proud. That leads me to today's debate, which is all about moving forward with determination and drive to take the actions that are needed to tackle homelessness and to provide people with the support and homes that they need.

Everyone should have a safe and warm place that they can call home. Home is a place where we feel secure and have roots and a sense of belonging. It supports our physical and emotional health and wellbeing. That is why the publication earlier this week of "Ending Homelessness Together: High Level Action Plan" is so important. It translates the aspirations and recommendations from the homelessness and rough sleeping action group, or HARSAG, into tangible actions, which will, through working in partnership end homelessness and rough sleeping and transform temporary accommodation.

Crucially, it is not just our view that the plan will help to transform our approach to homelessness. Jon Sparkes, the Crisis chief executive and chair of the action group, and Lorraine McGrath from the Simon Community Scotland said in an article at the weekend that the plan

"will cement Scotland's position as a world leader in securing the human right to housing that every citizen should have."

Sally Thomas, chief executive of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations said:

"The publication of this action plan gives us a historic opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of vulnerable people across Scotland facing homelessness."

The plan keeps Scotland at the global forefront of tackling homelessness and builds on what are already the strongest rights for homeless people in the world, through which everybody who is found to be homeless is legally entitled to housing. There

is much positive work to build on. Our focus on prevention through five regionally grouped housing options hubs has contributed to a 39 per cent reduction in homelessness applications over the past eight years. We have delivered more than 78,000 affordable homes since 2007, and we are on track to deliver at least 50,000 affordable homes in this session of Parliament, including 35,000 for social rent, backed by more than £3 billion.

However, the reality is that we need to do more. For some, finding accommodation and support at a time when they need it most can be a struggle, and homelessness and housing insecurity remain a reality for too many. That is why, building on our work so far and driven by our ambition to create a fairer and more equal Scotland, we are resolute in our commitment to work towards a Scotland that has no place for homelessness and rough sleeping. That commitment was set out last autumn by the First Minister. It is backed by funding of £50 million over five years and it is why the homelessness and rough sleeping action group was set up.

HARSAG was asked to identify the actions that are needed to end rough sleeping and homelessness and how we can transform temporary accommodation. Chaired by Crisis chief executive Jon Sparkes and with a variety of experts and stakeholders, HARSAG worked at remarkable pace to first produce a set of concrete actions for preventing rough sleeping last winter and then to develop 70 bold recommendations. In addition to that work by HARSAG, the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into homelessness reported its recommendations earlier this year.

I thank HARSAG and the committee for those two pieces of work, which are both important in giving momentum and driving the pace of change that is needed to make good on the vision to create a person-centred system and an end to homelessness in Scotland.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): The cabinet secretary talks about the pace of change. "Ending Homelessness Together" refers to the state of temporary accommodation but says that new standards will not be in place until 2023. Is that really the pace of change that we are looking for?

Aileen Campbell: We continue to work with partners. Of course, we are saying this and taking these actions with a recognition that we need to do more. We will continue to do more and we will work in partnership to change the culture and ensure that those who need housing and support get that when they need it. We recognise that there are areas that we need to concentrate on and areas where we need to do more.

The recommendations and actions seek to transform current approaches and culture, by ensuring that it is people, not just stats or numbers or targets, that are at their heart. For that to happen, the voice of lived experience needs to shine through and to shape and hone what we do. Through a project called *aye we can*, led by the Glasgow homelessness network, HARSAG heard from over 400 people with lived experience, with the aim of understanding what might have better helped to support them.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The experience of one homeless person, whom I regularly see on a pavement in Edinburgh, might inform the debate. He and others are exposed to dangers that we would not think of; a traffic accident took place and a vehicle left the road, giving him three cracked ribs when it hit him. Are we not all working together to avoid exactly that kind of experience and to avoid people being exposed to such danger?

Aileen Campbell: All voices and views and the lived experience work that has been carried out by Kevin Stewart, HARSAG and others have been critical in shaping and honing the work that we are taking forward. That is not going to stop now that the work has been completed and the action plan has been published. They will continue to feed into what we do. In a host of other areas of work across the Government, lived experience is crucial in helping us to get our policies right.

HARSAG has also listened to the views of the dedicated front-line staff who, day in, day out, continue to make a difference to those experiencing homelessness. Those views have been crucial in informing the actions that are set out in the high-level action plan. Embedding a person-centred approach is central to our plans in order to significantly improve the experience of homeless people and to drive forward the systemic change that is needed to end homelessness.

That is why, in partnership with local government, housing and delivery partners, we will develop an ending homelessness together lived experience programme. It will ensure that the engagement that got us to this place will not stop and will allow a continuing focus on listening and responding to people with lived experience and to front-line staff.

Importantly, it will not just be about listening; it will be about acting and responding to those messages to ensure change and improvement. We know that there is no single path into homelessness, and the reality of the variety of social and economic factors involved is that helping someone to resolve their housing needs demands a personalised, tailored response that is agile and adaptable.

Therefore, we will work with local government, housing and delivery partners to give people who are experiencing homelessness greater control and choice, and to ensure that services are working with them to build a package of support that will lead to positive future outcomes. That will include the development of policy options on how new personal housing plans will work alongside a housing options approach.

We will continue to listen to front-line staff and ensure that they are well equipped to carry out their work with high-quality training in areas such as trauma, addictions and mental health.

We will also work with our partners to ensure that systems, policies and procedures empower front-line staff, placing resources in their hands that allow them to make the best decisions, centred around the needs of the person who is in front of them. That will be supported by the development of the housing options training toolkit, the first modules of which will be delivered in spring 2019.

If children are homeless, a wellbeing assessment will be undertaken for each child in the household to ensure that any additional learning or social support is put in place.

In addition, we will continue to explore what measures to prevent rough sleeping and homelessness can be put in place for those without recourse to public funds, working in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others to ensure that clear guidance and training are provided and disseminated to key audiences.

We will work together with partners, including local authorities, the third sector and people with lived experience to develop a public perceptions campaign to challenge misconceptions about homelessness.

We know that there are some groups of people who are at greater risk of becoming homeless, including people fleeing violence and abuse, people leaving the care system and those leaving prison, so we will work with partners to develop clear pathways to avoid homelessness in these groups.

Kezia Dugdale: On several occasions, I have raised the issue of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people with the minister for housing, and the fact that 40 per cent of those young people who declare themselves to be homeless in Edinburgh do so because they have had difficulty coming out, yet I can find no reference to that in the main body of the report. Why not?

Aileen Campbell: LGBT representatives have been involved with the development of many of

the policies that we are taking forward today. If she wants, we will continue to work with the member to make sure that that is very clear to her, because that approach has been clear and very much at the centre of the work that we are progressing. A recognition that many different groups, organisations and people have particular needs has to be reflected in the policies.

The sustainable housing on release for everyone—SHORE—standards, which ensure that everyone has sustainable housing in place on their release from prison, are an example of a pathway. We are working in partnership with local authorities and the Scottish Prison Service to support implementation of the standards in every area.

In all cases, successful prevention of homelessness will rely on better and more consistent joint working between agencies and sectors. We know that getting that right will bring multiple benefits for the people we serve. Our new drug and alcohol strategy, “Rights, Respect and Recovery”, highlights how vital having a safe and secure home is for the prevention of and recovery from problematic alcohol and drug use.

When someone who is vulnerable or at risk seeks help, it should not matter who or what organisation they turn to. Our system needs to be person centred, trauma informed and agile. We need to adopt a no-wrong-door culture that enables people to get the help they need when they need it.

The pursuit of an approach that is based on effective prevention requires a culture change for all organisations that deal with people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Getting that right is important, as Jon Sparkes and Lorraine McGrath articulated in their article.

Homelessness needs to be solved at pace—that builds on the points that Kezia Dugdale made. Rapid rehousing seeks to secure a settled mainstream housing outcome for households as quickly as possible. Part of the solution will require a transformation in the use of temporary accommodation, so that time that is spent in any form of temporary accommodation is reduced to a minimum, with the fewer transitions the better.

Being settled in a home with the right support enables people to have a sense of wellbeing, community and belonging. We need to recognise the importance of settled housing as the foundation for a person to tackle an array of challenges, including addictions, mental health, physical health, employment and avoiding offending and reoffending.

We want a significant shift towards rapid rehousing by default, including the use of the housing first approach when it is appropriate for

people. Housing first provides ordinary settled housing as a first response for people with multiple needs. Housing first recognises that a safe and secure home is the best base for recovery and for addressing other challenges in life, which is why we have already allocated £23.5 million from the ending homelessness together fund and the health portfolio to support the transition. Up to £6.5 million of that will support our partnership with Social Bite, which is working with the Corra Foundation, Glasgow Homelessness Network and third sector partners to deliver housing first pathfinders in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling.

The production of rapid rehousing transition plans, including housing first, will be a fundamental plank of the changes in coming years. Planning is entering the final stages across the 32 local authorities, and plans are due to be submitted in December for implementation from April next year.

We will focus our efforts on preventing homelessness but, when homelessness occurs, an effective response is crucial to safeguard people and prevent the issues that caused the homelessness from becoming worse. That is particularly true for individuals who are, or who are at risk of, rough sleeping.

Last year, through the winter initiative, we showed how we can make a difference to those with long experience of rough sleeping, extremely poor health and a consistent struggle with engaging with support. We will continue to support local winter planning, and we are working with a group of practitioner experts to develop an improved response to safeguard people who sleep rough, or who are at risk of doing so, in our cities and urban centres this winter and all year round.

Today, Kevin Stewart announced that £370,000 will be spent this winter on front-line outreach activity, which will bring spending on that to £918,000 since this time last year. The money will support additional emergency accommodation for those who are sleeping rough, improve the join-up between statutory and third sector services in Edinburgh and provide another £50,000 of front-line flexible funding to empower street outreach staff to make immediate changes for the person they are working with then and there.

We will continue to work with our partners, to make good on the actions that we have set out and to be ambitious on tackling homelessness. We will not cease the actions and the momentum that have built up to get us to the current place.

We will continue to deliver on the actions that we have set out to create a person-centred holistic system that has prevention at its heart and which is delivered by empowered staff who can respond

quickly to need. In doing so, we will make good on our ambition to eradicate homelessness in Scotland. We are not blind to the challenges that remain, which is why it will continue to be necessary to work in partnership with everyone who has that vision and ambition at heart.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that everyone should have a safe, warm, settled home; notes the Scottish Government's commitment to end homelessness and rough sleeping and transform temporary accommodation; welcomes the comprehensive work of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group and the Local Government and Communities Committee to set out recommendations and actions to achieve this shared ambition; supports the publication of the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan, which addresses these recommendations and sets out the steps that the Scottish Government will take in partnership with COSLA, local authorities, the third and public sectors and others across housing, and welcomes the role of the cross-sector Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group in overseeing implementation of this action plan to deliver an end to homelessness and rough sleeping.

14:44

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):

The debate is important, because how we help those who are most in need is a measure of society's values. We have come a long way in the debate on homelessness in this parliamentary session. I took part in the yearlong inquiry by the Local Government and Communities Committee that preceded and—I would say—led to the Government setting up the homelessness and rough sleeping action group. The committee and HARSAG produced broadly similar recommendations, which bring us here today. I commend the Government and Kevin Stewart for acting on those recommendations.

I was pleased to read the ending homelessness together action plan on Tuesday although, as with most Government documents, quite a bit of it is waffle. It is a positive document overall. The focus on a person-centred approach, prevention, providing settled homes for all and joining up resources is right. Our amendment today takes nothing away from the Government motion, which we support. It focuses on unsuitable temporary accommodation. Research by Crisis on unsuitable temporary accommodation, mainly bed and breakfasts and hostels, showed that 60 per cent of residents were subject to curfews—curfews, for goodness' sake; these people are not criminals. Three out of four residents were not allowed visits from family and friends, and 81 per cent of them found that relationships suffered—no surprise there. Some 45 per cent said that they had no access to a kitchen, so they skipped meals. We should not tolerate these lives in limbo.

That is why all Opposition parties put their names to a statement at the weekend calling on

the Government to bring in a change in the law to put a seven-day limit on the time that people can spend in such accommodation.

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): The Government will support the amendment in Graham Simpson's name. We recognise that work needs to be done here. We will consult on all this at an early stage next year and will bring forward legislation in due course to tackle the issue. I thank Mr Simpson for his amendment, and I urge all members to read the study on temporary accommodation in Scotland that was published on Monday by Heriot-Watt University so that they can get a grasp of the fact that we need to personalise the services much more.

Graham Simpson: I am delighted to hear the minister say that. We said that the Government should announce the proposal that we recommend in its next programme for government. I think that that is a realistic timeframe, and the minister's announcement means that something will now happen.

The Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry was detailed and, at times, harrowing, but it will be rewarding if it leads to action. We met many homeless people and I have met more subsequently, just a few minutes' walk from here, where they queue up every night to bed down on the floor of a church hall at Meadowbank. The experience was moving and unsettling.

The committee visited Finland, whose housing first approach was brought in through the inspirational leadership of Helsinki's centre-right mayor, Jan Vapaavuori, while he was the housing minister. That country started by getting the 10 biggest cities on board with the policy, but the aim was clear: to do away with hostels. What came across to me was the need for joined-up working, resources and leadership. We saw at first hand how the housing first approach has worked in Finland and our committee recommended such an approach here. I think that Mr Vapaavuori summed it up well when he said that they changed their mindset in that they decided that what people with multiple issues need first of all is a permanent home, and that that enables their other problems to be tackled.

Housing first became one of our committee's key recommendations and it is good to see the Government get behind rapid rehousing and housing first.

The idea of having five housing first pathfinder cities makes some sense. That follows the approach that was taken in Finland. However, bringing about a sea change—a difference that we will notice—takes more than an action plan, more than consultations and more than phrases such as

“seeking partnerships”, “developing frameworks” and “exploring ways to help”. In the end, on top of all the other actions that are outlined in the action plan, we need more houses. We need places for people to live, and we will have to build them.

Moving to a rapid rehousing model would mean increasing lets to homeless households by 45 per cent across the social and private rented sectors. If all need was to be met within the social housing sector, 52 per cent of all social lets across Scotland would have to be made to homeless households. Currently, an average of 41 per cent of all council lets and 26 per cent of registered social landlord lets are made to homeless households.

Clearly, the target of delivering 50,000 affordable homes in the lifetime of this parliamentary session will help, but we need to go further. Shelter Scotland's commission on housing and wellbeing has estimated that 150,000 households are on the waiting list for a home. The commission also estimated that 73,000 households are overcrowded. That shows the scale of the problem.

The latest homelessness in Scotland statistics show that, during 2017-18, nearly 35,000 homelessness applications were recorded, which is 402 more than the number of applications that were received in the previous year. That is the first increase in nine years, and it is a big number.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Does Graham Simpson think that that increase might have something to do with the roll-out of universal credit, given that it covers the same period as is covered by the statistics? The roll-out of universal credit has certainly had an effect in my constituency.

Graham Simpson: Homelessness is an extremely complex issue. We all need to accept that there is not one reason for people being homeless; there are multiple reasons.

Housing is a human right, but the huge lack of housing has led to people sleeping out on the street and people being stuck in poor-quality accommodation or in cramped hostel rooms. We must redouble our efforts to address that public scandal.

I want to touch on the issue that is raised by the Labour amendment, which the Conservatives will support. Members will not often hear me engaging in gender politics—in fact, I do not think that I have ever done so, so today might be a first. However, Scottish Women's Aid is right to highlight the need to understand the causes of homelessness among women and children. Domestic abuse is a major cause of women's homelessness in Scotland, but women who experience domestic abuse remain

unprioritised on the list of groups with particular needs.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: I am closing.

Thanks to work that has been done in Parliament, across parties, the Government is moving in the right direction. We will never move quickly enough, but it behoves us all to work together to end the scandal of people sleeping on the streets or in hovels, without a place to call their own.

I move amendment S5M-14962.1, to insert at end:

“, and urges the Scottish Government to announce legislation in its next Programme for Government to limit the time that a person has to spend in unsuitable temporary accommodation to no more than seven days.”

14:52

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The queues of homeless people outside winter night shelters have begun to appear in many places. The average overnight temperature in Scotland in December is just above freezing. In the past year in Scotland, 94 men and women have died while homeless. That is absolutely heartbreaking for us all.

That scandal on our streets must end. The action plan must go straight to the heart of the problem. It is no wonder that the average life expectancy of a rough sleeper is 43. We can only imagine the isolation, the misery, the cold and the indignity that rough sleepers have to put up with. They have little chance to enforce their right to a bed for the night.

We owe a great debt to organisations such as Glasgow City Mission, the Bethany Christian Trust, the Simon Community Scotland, Cyrenians and many more for being out there, providing shelter when no one else has done so. However, we know that homelessness is about more than bricks and mortar.

The number of homeless applications has gone up for the first time in nine years. The number of single homeless men is significant, as is the number of homeless young women under the age of 24. There appears to be a change in the pattern of homelessness, and if there is a change, it is important that we spot it and understand why it has happened.

I, too, give credit to the Local Government and Communities Committee, which has been a driving force in Parliament in making homelessness a real priority for the Scottish Government.

Labour will, of course, support the Scottish Government in ending homelessness together. We recognise the work that many organisations have done on the action plan. Indeed, I am proud of the achievements of the last Labour Government, which introduced world-leading homelessness legislation.

I hope that the Scottish Government knows that no progress can be achieved unless we recognise the importance of local government in the delivery of that work. Local government needs the resources to be able to deliver it, and the Labour amendment addresses that issue.

Kevin Stewart: The Government will support the Labour amendment. I recognise that local government needs that helping hand in order to change the culture and to ensure that we get it right, which is why we have the £50 million ending homelessness together fund. We have already committed large amounts of the fund to local government, to allow it to make the change. Only last week, we committed £2 million to deal with rapid rehousing plans and a housing first approach. That will help local government help us to make that change. I agree that we can only achieve that in partnership.

Pauline McNeill: I am on record as wholeheartedly welcoming that important pot of money. However, the central point is that delivery is by local authorities and their budgets. Across the country, local government is struggling and the Scottish Government must recognise that that has to be addressed in the budget.

The findings of the recent Scottish Government report, “Health and Homelessness in Scotland”, came as no surprise. Homelessness and poor health are inextricably linked. Interactions with some services, particularly those related to alcohol, drugs and mental health, increase in the lead-up to a homeless application. Those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless are overrepresented in accident and emergency figures. The report’s findings highlight the fact that, by the time they are seen by a health professional, homeless people—rough sleepers, in particular—are often at crisis point. As Hugh Hill, director of operations for the Simon Community Scotland, points out,

“It’s past time public health took an active role in addressing the stark health inequalities and exclusions homeless people have to endure. This group don’t just experience health inequalities, they define the term.”

Despite that situation, the 2005 health and homelessness standards provide the most recent strategy for NHS boards to support the planning and provision of services for homeless people. Today, I call for a renewed health strategy for the homeless.

As the action plan highlights, in the past year, the most commonly identified support need of a homeless household in Scotland related to a mental health problem, with the figures more than doubling for those in those households with drug or alcohol dependency. A mental health problem is also one of the most common reasons why people fail to maintain their tenancy.

I have supported the housing first initiative and I will continue to do so. However, as Graham Simpson mentioned, the scandal of temporary accommodation and the fact that the law is regularly being broken requires urgent action by the Scottish Government. The charity Crisis has recently drawn our attention to the fact that it is not just the number of people in temporary accommodation that needs to be addressed but the suitability of that accommodation.

In the past year, 400 placements have breached the Homelessness Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2017. The scope of the order should be extended so that no one is placed in accommodation that is not wind and watertight and does not have adequate cooking facilities.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: Presiding Officer, I am not sure, but I think that I have only one minute left.

The Presiding Officer: It is up to you, Ms McNeill. We are relatively okay for time this afternoon.

Pauline McNeill: I will take the intervention.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Ms McNeill for giving way.

In Scotland, 86 per cent of temporary accommodation is in mainstream social housing. We want to see that figure go up, and we will do all that we can to achieve that. I have already said that we will pledge to ensure that we make progress on that front. We will consult on temporary accommodation at the beginning of next year. As Mr Simpson asked us to do, we will announce in the programme for government how we will legislate for that in future. Everyone would do well to support that.

Pauline McNeill: The minister already said that to Graham Simpson, and I am happy to support and welcome what he said.

One of the leading causes of homelessness is domestic abuse, meaning that it is necessary to put in place measures to protect women and children fleeing violence. I agree with Women's Aid and the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland that it is time for a review of legislation to ensure that the survivors, and not the perpetrators,

of domestic abuse have a legal right to stay in their home if they choose to do so.

I ask the Scottish Government to support the call for the creation of an emergency fund to help survivors of domestic abuse pay for items such as furniture for a new home. The action plan must recognise that there is a gendered dimension to homelessness.

Last year, almost half those who were made homeless in Scotland due to rent arrears lived in the private rented sector. High rents are a problem and evictions continue to be a key reason why people lose their home. That is why we will support the Green amendment. We agree that we need to deal with high rents in this parliamentary session.

Local government is key to delivering the strategy on homelessness—without local authorities, the action plan cannot work.

Labour wants the Scottish Government, in accepting our amendment, to acknowledge the need for adequate resources to make the transformational change in our approach to housing towards the rapid rehousing model, which we whole-heartedly support.

There must be a longer-term plan in place to build more affordable homes beyond 2021, whichever party happens to be in government at that time. Without those commitments, the plan to reform temporary accommodation will not work. We are committed to joining with the Scottish Government and Opposition parties to end homelessness. With the provisos that I have outlined, we believe that we can do just that.

I move amendment S5M-14962.3, to insert at end:

“; agrees that there are complex reasons why people become homeless, including mental and physical health reasons, and welcomes the government's commitment to embed homelessness as a priority for improving public health; recognises the gendered dynamics of homelessness and welcomes the work being done by Scottish Women's Aid and the Chartered Institute of Housing on the needs of women and children fleeing domestic abuse, and recognises the key role that frontline staff in local authorities will play in the successful delivery of the action plan, but believes that they need additional resources to reflect this.”

15:00

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): The Greens welcome this debate. The human right to housing is a key priority for us, as I am sure it is for all other parties. Homelessness is an appalling condition to have to endure and it is a mark of shame on any society. Housing is one of the basics of human survival, along with food and water, and it should be provided to the most vulnerable in society.

I thank COSLA and the Scottish Government for publishing the high-level action plan, and for following the recommendations of the Local Government and Communities Committee in adopting a housing first approach for Scotland. I also want to record our thanks to the members of the homelessness and rough sleeping action group for their hard work and leadership.

Whatever else might be said in the debate, it is clear that there is a strong cross-party consensus on ending homelessness. The minister can be sure of our on-going support in principle for his efforts in this area.

In my short time this afternoon, I will focus on some missing pieces of the jigsaw in relation to the key drivers of homelessness. Part 2 of the ending homelessness together action plan sets out measures to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place and contains a summary of the reasons for homelessness. Actions by the landlord and being asked to leave account for 36 per cent of homelessness applications, and a violent or abusive dispute within the household accounts for 13 per cent, with domestic violence also cited among the 22 per cent of “other” reasons.

Preventing homelessness is about upholding the human right to housing by ensuring that people have legal security of tenure and that housing is affordable and habitable—those are human rights. Since 1999, the number of tenants living in the private rented sector has trebled. That is because most tenants in the sector have no choice but to live in that most precarious and insecure type of housing.

I am sure that many members will be aware from constituency casework of individuals and young families being pushed into the hands of homelessness services simply because they cannot afford rising rents. Here in Edinburgh, the average rent for a two-bedroom property is currently £1,033 per month. This week, the Scottish Government released figures for the private rented sector in Scotland from 2010 to 2018. In Lothian, average rents have increased above the rate of inflation for all property types. That means that one-bedroom and two-bedroom properties now cost tenants between 40 and 42 per cent more to rent than they did eight years ago. Given that the United Kingdom consumer prices index rose by 18.7 per cent in that period, it is evident that the cost of housing is rising significantly above the price of goods and services.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I am concerned about the unintended consequences of Andy Wightman’s amendment. There is a worry about accommodation being taken out of that market altogether. I will give the

example of unintentional landlords: individuals whose flat or house is in negative equity and who need to move to another part of the country and therefore let their flat out. However, if they cannot access that accommodation, there is a danger that they will not put it in that market in the first place. That could be an unintended consequence of the amendment.

Andy Wightman: My amendment calls for a review. I will come to the point that the member talked about, but I think that we just disagree. I do not think that somebody’s home should be taken from them because the owner wishes to sell it—I just do not agree with that.

Rent levels are not the only issue. When the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016 came into force, it replaced nearly three decades of short-assured tenancies. A key provision of the 2016 act is the removal of the no-fault grounds for repossession, and we welcomed that. However, schedule 3 to the act also includes 18 statutory grounds. A couple of years ago, I was advising constituents who live on Lorne Street in Leith and who had been served with notices to quit because the landlord, the Agnes Hunter Trust, decided to sell their homes. More than 200 people faced being made homeless. A campaign ensued and their properties have now been taken over by a housing association. One might think that that kind of large-scale eviction will not be able to happen in future, but it can. Under the first ground in schedule 3, tenants can continue to be evicted because the landlord intends to sell the property.

Last year, during the Local Government and Communities Committee’s inquiry into homelessness, as Graham Simpson mentioned, we hosted a session with a range of people who had experienced homelessness, including young care-experienced people. It was a very moving and extremely informative session. One story sticks in my mind. Thomas, who sat next to me in the committee room, was a private rented sector tenant. He was made homeless because his landlord went bankrupt and the creditor seized his property. If he had been a tenant who faced similar circumstances in Denmark, Germany or Portugal, he would have remained in his home, but here in Scotland he was thrown on to the streets. That was followed by a decade-long cycle of trauma, rough sleeping and temporary accommodation. One might have thought that if our modern tenancy legislation had been in place, it would have protected Thomas, but that is not the case. Under the second ground in schedule 3 to the 2016 act, tenants can continue to be evicted because the property has been taken over by a creditor who wishes to sell with vacant possession.

I have been campaigning for more than a year for the rapidly growing short-term lets sector to be better regulated. A staggering number of dwellings have been converted to short-term lets, as landlords seek to maximise revenues. As John Harris writes in *The Guardian* today, in too many cities, families live in temporary accommodation while tourists live in homes.

Constituents have contacted me after being served with a notice to quit because the landlord wanted to operate short-term lets. Again, one might think that the new private residential tenancy regime would protect a tenant against eviction, but it will not. Under the sixth ground in schedule 3 to the 2016 act, tenants can continue to be evicted when the landlord wishes to use the property for a purpose other than providing someone with a home. That is why our amendment asks that the statutory grounds for repossession be reviewed.

I commend Pauline McNeill for highlighting the other important driver of homelessness that I mentioned—domestic violence—and the gendered nature of homelessness. Earlier this year, I met Jo Ozga from Scottish Women's Aid and Callum Chomczuk from the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland to discuss the issue. I welcome the wide recognition that the topic has engendered among the organisations that provided briefings for the debate.

Scotland can and should be a world leader in preventing homelessness, but that can be achieved only if we have an effective legislative base that ensures that everyone has a safe, warm place to stay. Therefore, we call on the Scottish Government to review the current private rented sector law. If the Government agrees to do so, I look forward to working with it.

I move amendment S5M-14962.2, to insert at end:

“, and calls on the Scottish Government to maintain its commitment to ensuring that homelessness is prevented in the first place by reviewing current private rented sector law, including Schedule 3 of the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016, which currently provides landlords with 18 statutory eviction grounds to threaten and force tenants, through no fault of their own, into homelessness.”

15:06

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I refer members to my entry in the register of interests. I jointly own a flat for which the tenants receive housing benefit. The relationship between me and the tenants has existed for 10 years and, in that time, I have come to know a lot about the housing benefit infrastructure and many of the traps that exist in it. I supported the tenants through several periods when they narrowly

avoided homelessness, and I am very glad to call them my friends.

Shelter provided us with an excellent briefing in advance of the debate. Every 18 minutes, somebody reports as homeless and, all told, 30,000 households in Scotland are affected by homelessness. I know from my background that the tragedy of that lies in the 15,000 children to whom that situation applies. We all see the effect of homelessness in our surgeries, in Edinburgh and in other parts of the country where homelessness is a real problem.

I can speak only about my experience of the housing shortage in Edinburgh. Every Friday, constituents of mine have to enter a bidding battle for houses on EdIndex. The fact that they might come 40th, despite having had silver or even gold priority status for more than a year, is astonishing and shocking. There is a great deal of churn in the housing officers to whom they are attached, and although there is no shortage of empathy from many of those housing officers, there is also dispassion, not to mention the heavy bureaucracy. When people find themselves homeless, they often end up in temporary or emergency accommodation, which, in many cases, is substandard. They often experience overcrowding and inappropriate family sharing for protracted periods of time.

In many such cases, there has been a failure to recognise families' highly specific needs. I find the system extremely dispassionate when it comes to disability and additional support needs, particularly where children with autism are concerned. I am grateful for the Labour amendment's referencing of domestic violence, because I think that we should treat women who are fleeing an abusive relationship with their spouse very differently. In such abusive relationships, housing is often used as a tool of coercive control.

We have also heard a lot about the business end of homelessness in Scotland—I am, of course, referring to rough sleeping. In Scotland, rough sleeping is a very different proposition. We need only look out of the window to see the lethal quality of Scotland's weather. Pauline McNeill was absolutely right to reference the 94 lives lost as a result of rough sleeping—in 2018, that is a Dickensian statistic.

What links all those cases is trauma. Trauma is both causal and resultant from homelessness. We only need to look at the groups of people for whom homelessness is most prevalent, whether that is those being liberated from our prisons, Scottish veterans, care-experienced young people or abuse survivors.

Last week, a young veteran came to see me who had been thrown out of his temporary

accommodation because of a violent outburst. The outburst was a result of the diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder that he had from his time in conflict. Happily, I was able to connect him with a veterans charity, which provided him with accommodation, but for five nights, he had to sleep on a church-hall floor. There is something fundamentally broken in our system.

Kezia Dugdale: There must be a few homeless people in this city who would sooner sleep rough than live in some of the high-rise flats in the member's constituency. Will he comment on some of the properties in Muirhouse? What will he say to the Government about what is needed to bring those properties up to standard?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am very grateful to the member for the intervention. I was going to move on to Muirhouse, because I recently toured one of the high-rise tenements in Muirhouse in my constituency. Frankly, it was appalling. I left with a rasp in my throat and tears in my eyes from the black mould that a young mother and her child were forced to endure. We are working with City of Edinburgh Council on that. My colleagues on the city council brought a motion to have an urgent review of the housing stock in Muirhouse; the motion was rebuffed by the city's administration. We are persevering in that regard.

A comorbidity of need comes with homelessness; it is not something that happens in isolation. Forty-seven per cent of homeless people have underlying health or mental health problems and there are links to addiction and other poor social outcomes.

As members know, I spent some time working in the children's sector. Aberlour Children's Charity had Scotland's only refuge for young runaways. One in nine young people will run away from home at some point in their lives, by which I mean that they are absent without their guardian knowing where they are for 24 hours or more—most are sofa surfing and some are sleeping rough. Of those young people, one quarter will experience some form of abuse, whether physical, sexual or financial, while they are running away. That is a terrible statistic and one that we have still not fully addressed.

With homelessness—and not having the confidence and security that come from a stable home—comes stigma. In "Down and Out in Paris and London", George Orwell described stigma when he said:

"Dirt is a great respecter of persons; it lets you alone when you are well dressed, but as soon as your collar is gone it flies towards you from all directions."

With stigma comes mental ill health and a lack of self-worth, which compound the problems associated with homelessness and just getting

back on one's feet. We have a duty to consider our fellow Scots who, tonight and many other nights from now, will face this winter in danger and in the dark—not just on the icy streets of our towns and cities, but in the housing departments and the offices where people have to present every day to find out what emergency accommodation may be available to them.

I am grateful to the Scottish Government for the work that it is doing in this area. We strip out our partisan viewpoints here, because we have to come together to resolve the issue. It is much bigger than any one of us or any party in the Parliament.

I thank the Government for its efforts in that regard.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move to the open debate; members should speak for no longer than six minutes.

15:13

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): In my constituency—an affluent part of the country—homelessness may not be obvious, but in some ways the north-east is a tale of two cities: there is much wealth, but there are also pockets of insidious rural poverty. The long-term trend around Scotland has shown a decrease in homelessness applications since 2008, and I commend the Scottish Government's hard work and efforts to tackle the issue.

No one should have to live on the streets; we should all have the right to safe, warm accommodation and a place that we can call home. Unfortunately, recently, Aberdeenshire has seen a rise in applications despite the overall long-term decline.

In my constituency, the roll-out of universal credit began last month, so it is too early to tell what the impact of the policy will be. However, given the devastating impact that it has already had in other parts of the country—I listened to what Shona Robison said about Dundee—it is fair to say that I am worried. Other areas, where universal credit was rolled out earlier, have seen an increase in rent arrears, which can often lead to homelessness.

There are many reasons why someone might end up facing homelessness, and we know from figures released by Shelter that single men are most at risk, followed by single-parent females.

Who would have thought that 52 years after Ken Loach's film "Cathy Come Home" took the issue into our living rooms and shocked the nation, we would still be battling the causes of homelessness? Factors can include domestic abuse, release from prison, relationship

breakdown, family conflict and financial issues and debt.

I recently had a case of a woman and her children in veterans accommodation in Inverurie who were in real danger of being made homeless because the woman's ex-Army husband had left the family home to pursue an extramarital relationship. It was his service that entitled the family to their house—a house that they had lived in for years. In Aberdeenshire, a dedicated team of housing officers assess and provide low-level housing support to assist in better tenancy sustainment and prevention of homelessness. I put on record my thanks to Aberdeenshire Council, and that department, for their quick response and the way in which they worked with the Scottish Veterans Garden City Association, which owned the housing, to ensure that the family had a new home to go to. Not only that, but the veterans association extended the leaving date so that the family did not have to go into temporary accommodation. I thank all involved very much for that.

Last year, 1,270 referrals were made to housing support in Aberdeenshire. The number of applications under the homeless persons legislation has risen in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire in the past year. One of the critical issues for housing support staff is to ensure that adequate support is given to those with complex needs. It is essential that services continue to work together to achieve better outcomes and meet individuals' needs. One of the ways in which that happens is through the pitstop service run by Turning Point Scotland in Aberdeenshire. The service provides 24-hour support within temporary accommodation to single people with substance misuse issues who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It aims to equip residents with the life skills, confidence and resilience needed to live independently.

In Aberdeenshire, supported accommodation is also operated within a facility for six young people with support needs. In addition, places in supported accommodation are commissioned specifically for young people. I have second-hand experience of that through a friend of mine who was leaving foster care. The family moved, and although he did not want to move, too, he did not really have the life skills to equip him to live independently. He had had quite a traumatic childhood, and we were all worried that he would become homeless. Because there was a partnership relationship with regard to not just where he lived but how to support him into education and to get the skills to work, he is now working as a chef.

One of the other challenges in Aberdeenshire is that people who might have lived their entire lives

in that part of the north-east want to be rehomed there, and that is not always possible. Often, the only available housing is elsewhere, for example in the city. They might refuse such housing or, if they accept it, they might become isolated, having been taken away from their communities and local relationships. I am hopeful that the development of affordable homes for rent, some of which I have visited with the minister, will mean that that will happen less often and that people will be able to stay where they are fae.

Over the past three years, constituents have come to me worried about making the next mortgage payment after being let go from their oil and gas job, with no notice—they can be at their desk at 8 am on a Friday and out in the car park with their belongings and no job by 8.20; or they might be told that they have no job over the phone, like my friend Neil, who worked for the same production company for more than 30 years. To add insult to injury, the phone call came on his 50th birthday.

Then there was the chap who asked for my help who had had to access food banks to feed himself after a year without pay, following years as an offshore medic. There was the family who gave a whole trolley of shopping in last year's collection for the Inverurie food bank. They told me that the year before they had been in temporary accommodation and had had to access food banks themselves. They had both lost their jobs at the same time and now they were back on their feet. I have asked the Oil and Gas Authority for a commitment that it will look into its members' employment practices, because that situation must not happen again.

It is important to remind ourselves that the need for better services comes as pressure on food banks increases and the number of people who are struggling with rent or mortgage arrears is on the rise. As is often mentioned in the chamber, we could all be two pay packets away from destitution. Those working in precarious employment live on that knife edge every day.

The Scottish Government is clearly committed to ending homelessness and rough sleeping for good. However, we must also tackle at source the causes of homelessness over which the Scottish Government has no power, including employment law, pensions and employment benefit support. If we miss out that part of the equation, "Cathy Come Home" will always be as relevant as it was in the 1960s.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move on, I note that a couple of members who had said that they intended to speak have not pressed their request-to-speak buttons. I ask you to please check whether you have—I thank Ms Robison for doing so.

15:20

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate. As others have said, how we help those most in need is a measure of our society's values, and I believe that, when it comes to ending homelessness, the people of Scotland are watching us and looking to us all to work together to end this crisis.

In this rich and developed country, there is absolutely no excuse for not tackling homelessness. It is an avoidable scourge on our society and, although it is possible to point the finger of political blame here, there and everywhere, doing so does not move the situation forward. We all know what needs to be done and there are some encouraging early signs of progress; however, we need to move faster, because every day of delay and inaction, and every day the right support is not in place, is another day lost to individuals and families who face the huge challenges that not having shelter or suitable accommodation brings. That cannot be tolerated or accepted.

I know from my own constituency mailbag and surgeries how challenging the issue is. It is easy to think of homelessness as something that happens only in big cities and urban areas, but there is also a huge problem with what many term hidden homelessness in rural communities. Many families are living in unsuitable or temporary accommodation or are couch surfing and, sadly, I have even heard of individuals asking to bunk down in agricultural buildings for want of a warm and safe place to stay. That is not good enough, and I remain concerned about families having to live long term in B and B accommodation without access to a washing machine or to facilities for cooking hot meals who, ultimately, feel that they have very little security. I accept that, in crisis situations, it is better than nothing, but it really falls short of what is acceptable.

More needs to be done to improve the quality of housing stock. I have written to the minister many times on that matter, because there are a number of housing associations that do not live up to the high standards that we expect of them and which are not always delivering.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Mundell has written to me on a number of occasions, and I would appreciate any member who is concerned about the suitability of social housing—whether it be council or housing association—letting us know about those concerns. I also urge members to look at the housing beyond 2021 discussion paper, because it is important for housing associations, councils and individuals—and, indeed, ourselves—to give us their vision of what they want beyond this session

of Parliament; and it is incumbent on all of us to listen to those views.

Oliver Mundell: I very much support that approach and welcome the minister's personal help and intervention in a number of cases. I know the focus that he puts on some of these issues.

Part of the picture is ensuring that people know their housing rights. A lot of people who live in social housing do not understand their landlord's responsibilities, and I think that we can do more to support that. Indeed, that, along with the other issues that I have mentioned, is why I was so pleased to see representatives of Shelter Scotland in Dumfries High Street a few weeks ago, highlighting the important work and support of that organisation and many others in the third sector.

On top of those issues, I am concerned about the number of people sleeping rough. I remember how, as a student here in Edinburgh, I helped out at the Grassmarket soup kitchen; we are now a number of years on and although that particular facility has had a makeover, we are still no closer to solving the problem. When I drive home from the Parliament past the Salvation Army hostel just a matter of metres away, I am saddened by regularly seeing people queuing up to secure a room for the night. It is something that we cannot just ignore. It is one of a number of charities that are carrying the burden of our collective failure to put in place the most basic rights for our citizens.

Although I agree with those on the Scottish Conservative front bench, and with party policy, that housing supply is very important—and I fully support the housing first initiative—this is about more than capacity and housing; it is about making sure that people have the support in place to help them to identify housing. A number of people in crisis, who are returning to homeless shelters night after night, have very immediate issues that need to be addressed.

I welcome the approach that has been taken in the debate and the Government's assurances that it will act on the priorities that we have outlined. I personally, along with others on the Scottish Conservative benches, stand ready to not only hold the Government to account, but to support the very considerable efforts and early actions that are already under way.

15:26

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I welcome the new measures that have been announced by the Scottish Government to help to eradicate the human rights issue that is homelessness.

Everyone in Scotland—regardless of their race, religion, background, gender and social

circumstance—must have a safe, warm and settled place to call home. Anyone who is made homeless is legally entitled to housing, so I am glad to hear that there is cross-party consensus that we should be tackling homelessness together. I recognise that more work has to be done to ensure that people who present as homeless are housed at the earliest possible time. That is a key issue that we need to pursue.

Last week, I attended a meeting in my South Scotland region with Dumfries and Galloway Council's financial wellbeing and revenues manager. She told me that, in 2017-18, 834 homelessness applications were received by Dumfries and Galloway Council, 76.7 per cent of which were from households of a single person with no children, and 18 per cent of which were from households with children. Nationally, there has been a 9 per cent rise in the number of children in temporary accommodation, which is concerning. Of the applications that were received by Dumfries and Galloway Council, 29.5 per cent were from people with mental health needs and 6 per cent—50 people—of the applicants said that they had slept rough the night before their application was submitted.

It is worth noting that the law currently requires local authorities to accept a homelessness application when the applicant is under immediate threat of homelessness within the next three months. That means that not all cases in which an application is taken will require emergency or temporary accommodation, such as a bed and breakfast.

I am a B and B owner; my husband runs the business. We have had people show up at 12 o'clock at night—young men and women, and families with young children. We can see the stress and anxiety on their faces when they show up at midnight. B and B accommodation is not ideal. The quality of accommodation is variable and, as Graham Simpson rightly highlighted, there are issues with curfews, visits from families and other restrictions. I tell members that there are no curfews or restrictions in my B and B and there is access to washing machines and kitchens.

As a stock-transfer authority, Dumfries and Galloway Council relies on registered social landlords to find permanent accommodation for people who present as homeless, which can be challenging. I am therefore pleased that the Government is building affordable housing, with more than 78,000 such homes having been built since the Scottish National Party came to power. Furthermore, the Government is assisting local authorities across Scotland—including Dumfries and Galloway Council and South Ayrshire Council in my South Scotland region—by investing more than £3 billion to deliver an additional minimum of

35,000 homes. That will allow local authorities to house, as soon as possible, people who present as homeless, and it will reduce the need for temporary B and B accommodation.

I will briefly highlight some of the work of the Loreburn Housing Association in my region. Like many housing associations, the last thing that Loreburn wants is to make people homeless, so the organisation focuses on the customer being at the heart of allocations and tenancy management. Loreburn ensures that properties are allocated appropriately both for the incoming customer and for the customers who are already housed at a development. Loreburn does not want to set people up to fail, so it considers people's circumstances and issues before allocating properties.

Loreburn assists people with a wide range of support measures, including helping them to get furniture, carpets and white goods for the property, either with their own resources or through the Scottish Government's Scottish welfare fund. Through the new great start initiative in partnership with Shax in Dumfries, Loreburn provides customers with a voucher to spend on items for their property. That supports the customer and a local charity.

Loreburn also assists people with starting, changing and maintaining a universal credit claim. Like those of my colleagues Gillian Martin and Shona Robison, my office's casework reflects the challenges of universal credit and how it has led to some people becoming homeless. Loreburn Housing Association has been extremely helpful with such casework, and in supporting my work on liaising and challenging on behalf of people who are having real difficulty making rent payments, and my work on allowing forgiving of rent arrears. We need to ensure that other local authorities and housing associations will take a lead from how our local authorities and the Loreburn Housing Association are addressing local challenges. I acknowledge also the Bethany Christian Trust for carrying out important work in supporting people who are affected by homelessness.

I welcome the Scottish Government's £50 million investment in the ending homelessness together fund, which aims to put an end to rough sleeping while funding homelessness-prevention initiatives. A total of £23.5 million has already been allocated from the fund and from the health portfolio for rapid rehousing and the housing first approach.

I welcome the positive work that has been proposed and already carried out by the Scottish Government and third sector bodies. I congratulate organisations across my South Scotland region for their work on homelessness,

and I agree that we must all work together to end homelessness.

15:31

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the chance to speak in the debate. There is no doubt that the report is laudable and that its recommendations are admirable. However, based on what I see in Edinburgh, I have to say to the cabinet secretary and the minister that much of the report is utterly fanciful.

I will talk specifically about the real experience of constituents in the city who are homeless right now. One of them came to my constituency surgery back in April. He was living in temporary accommodation with his baby. He is a recovering addict who has been clean for nine years, and he has custody of his child because the child's mother still has addictions. He had been living in a hostel for two months before he came to see me at my constituency surgery. He came only because he had had no hot water for three days and the microwave oven that he shared with the 89 other residents in the hostel was broken. Imagine trying to feed a baby with no hot water and one microwave oven between 90 residents in this city in 2018. That is happening now.

His room was filthy and his bed was infested with lice. When my office checked with him this morning to ask whether it was okay for me to share his experiences with members in the chamber, he asked me to tell you that he had slept in crack and heroin dens that were cleaner than the hostels and B and Bs in this city.

I got him out of that hostel and into a flat in Lochend—a private rented sector flat that he can barely afford. However, it is somehow considered to be a success story that he is no longer in the temporary hostel but in a flat that he will not be able to afford in two or three months.

I thought that his story was a one-off, until I read the report in *The Ferret* this week that told us about the situation in Edinburgh. In the past year, 600 families have been in temporary hostels or B and B accommodation, 466 of them for more than a week. My constituent and his baby were in a hostel for two months. The City of Edinburgh Council has been breaking the law 466 times in the past year. However, when we look at the detail of the law, we see that the council was not actually breaking it, because there is an exemption that states that people can be placed in temporary accommodation if there is nothing else that is suitable. There is nothing else that is suitable in this city; we are very far short of having the accommodation that we need for so many families such as my constituent and his baby.

I hope that the cabinet secretary can see just how angry I am at the idea that we have to wait until 2023 to get better standards for temporary accommodation in Edinburgh. I could write those standards now: a clean room, a kettle in the room and access to kitchen facilities for six people or fewer. Why does it have to take five years to produce a set of minimum standards for such people?

I have another constituent who had been sleeping rough for several weeks. The council would not give him a place in a hostel because it said that he had a tenancy and was intentionally homeless. He did have a flat, but the last time he was in it he was beaten to within an inch of his life. He cannot go back there. I have never met that constituent. I received all the information from a member of the public who cared enough to sit down on the street and ask him why he was sleeping there that night. That person then advocated on his behalf to me, at my surgery. Yesterday, she sent me flowers because I had managed to get the person into a new settled flat. I should be thanking her for speaking up on his behalf—for advocating for him when he had no voice.

Let us talk about advocates for a second. Before I was elected, I was an advocate for four people in this city who had multiple and complex needs. I was their advocate because their support packages were being cut. I spent years trying to convince the City of Edinburgh Council that they relied on that care support in order to hold down their tenancy, and that if the council took away their care hours, they would end up back in a police cell, the justice system or an A and E ward.

This week, I found out that two of those four people are now dead: I found that out from the local Unite branch for care workers in the city, which has just made a freedom of information request on the number of people who rely on care packages but do not receive them. Unite told me that there are 6,906 unmet hours for people who receive care packages in Edinburgh right now. They cannot get the support that they have been told they need, because there are not enough care workers.

A further 850 people in the city have been identified as needing care packages and are currently waiting for them—their care has not even started yet—and there are hundreds more waiting to be assessed for packages that they can only dream of ever receiving.

Yes—the report is laudable, but there is nowhere near enough resource to back it up. We have in Edinburgh a housing crisis and a social care crisis, and every time the Government cuts council budgets it makes the situation worse. Just yesterday, universal credit was rolled out in

Edinburgh. It will just compound the problems that already exist. I am angry at the Tories for that—of course I am, and I will fight it to the bitter end—but they are not solely responsible for it. I am talking about my eight years of experience of supporting homeless people in this city, and the state of temporary accommodation that my council tax has paid for, which keeps landlords rich, and keeps the poorest people in the most destitute situations. Please do not make me wait five years before we improve that temporary accommodation.

In his summing up speech, will the minister please tell me that he will do something about that before 2023?

15:38

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate. I acknowledge the work of the homelessness and rough sleeping action group in developing a report—which is informed by evidence and experiences from across Scotland—on how we can continue moving forward to stop homelessness and ensure that there is appropriate housing for all.

Based on the recommendations in that report, the Scottish Government has put together a strong response in the ending homelessness together action plan. I look forward to seeing that plan being implemented by the Scottish Government, and to reviewing the evaluation that will be done by the homelessness prevention and strategy group to ensure that the plans stay on track.

Over the past 10 years, the Scottish Government has demonstrated its commitment to ending homelessness by making available more than 78,000 affordable homes, by committing more than £3 billion to helping to reach the target of 50,000 new affordable homes by 2021 and, of course, by committing £50 million to the ending homelessness together fund.

Over the long term, we are seeing a reduction in homelessness applications, which is a good thing, but we are all aware that we must work hard to continue that trend. In his speech, Graham Simpson talked about his concern about the rise in homelessness over the past year. Surely, he must acknowledge that the situation is not helped by the UK Government's welfare policies, which I believe are responsible for last year's small rise in homelessness applications. He must acknowledge that many Scots have been hard hit by universal credit, with benefit cuts, sanctions and long waiting periods, all of which make it hard for people to get by, and which put pressure on many people to balance housing costs against other necessities, especially in the five-week period before they

receive universal credit. Many people are being forced into debt and are relying on food banks.

In Dundee, my constituents who are on universal credit owe an average of £200 more in rent arrears than those who are on other benefits. That will have a direct impact on homelessness.

I agree with Graham Simpson that tackling homelessness is complex, but to accept that universal credit is a contributing factor is a simple thing to do. It would do Graham Simpson and other Tory members good to at least acknowledge that in their speeches.

It is no wonder that at jobcentres people are being told—as I understand it—to look everywhere and to ask everyone they can ask for loans before they receive help when their budgets are tight. As we know, this year alone, the Scottish Government will spend £125 million to mitigate the effects of benefit cuts by the UK Government, and those resources have to come from other budgets.

Like many members in this chamber, I have called on the UK Government to halt the roll-out of universal credit before people who are on working tax credits are put into the already-failing system. Of course, I would like welfare powers to be devolved to Scotland. We have to listen to the overwhelming evidence that says that the failed system is pushing people out of their homes and into the houses of friends, into hostels, or on to the streets.

One of the biggest issues that affect women who are on universal credit is the lack of split payments. I know that the Scottish Government is planning on pursuing split payments as part of the Scottish option, and I look forward to participating in the Scottish Government's consultation on how to implement split payments. However, right now, the UK Government is responsible for split payments. For women who are in abusive relationships, all their benefits, including their housing benefit, being sent to one bank account can facilitate financial abuse. The UK Government has touted split payments in special circumstances as a viable alternative: they could be implemented if someone is in an abusive relationship. However, new Department for Work and Pensions statistics show that not a single person in Scotland has received split payments.

At the same time, domestic violence is the most common reason that women give for making applications in Scotland. The situation is a disgrace.

Oliver Mundell: Does Shona Robison accept that work could be done right now to make sure that people who experience domestic violence receive priority treatment when it comes to the allocation of housing and support?

Shona Robison: Of course people who are affected by domestic violence should receive priority treatment. However, surely Oliver Mundell cannot get away from the fact that a policy of his party's UK Government is exacerbating the situations of women who are in that position. He should join us in making sure that that is tackled. The UK Government could do that now. If the member is serious about the issue, he should join those of us who want to see that situation being addressed. Universal credit is harming women who are in that position: he would do well to acknowledge that.

As we move forward to prevent and stop homelessness, we must address the issue with the understanding that everyone's experience of homelessness is different. Already vulnerable people are more prone to homelessness and need to get targeted support.

I pay tribute to Scottish Women's Aid and the work that it has done. In Dundee and across Scotland, third sector organisations have been essential supports to people who face homelessness. Shelter Scotland is turning 50 this year. I met representatives of it in Dundee to discuss issues that still exist on its 50th anniversary. By providing advice and support, Shelter helps thousands of people across Scotland every year. That demonstrates how third sector organisations have contributed to the fight to stop homelessness. I know that its hope is that, eventually, there will be no reason for it to have to continue to fight homelessness, because homelessness will no longer be an issue. I hope for that, too.

The Scottish Government has set out a plan that will help in achieving that goal. There is more to be done, but by acknowledging and planning to address problems, we can start to work towards a better future in which everyone has a safe and affordable home.

15:44

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This is a vital debate, and many members have already set out the background and shared their skills and knowledge of how the issue affects their constituencies and regions. As we have heard, people become homeless for many reasons. Some leave because they are forced out of their home, others may have a dispute and others seek refuge because they are fleeing from domestic violence. However, for all of them, it is apparent that they are no longer able to live in that safe environment of a home. Although homeless people have a wide range of backgrounds, it is important to note that just under half cite that they have support needs. Some individuals have mental health problems, some have learning

disabilities and some have drug and alcohol dependency. They are in a complex situation. Some people are in crisis and live in an environment of situations and circumstances that are outwith their control.

The Local Government and Communities Committee saw that during our inquiry on the issue. We had the opportunity to meet individuals who were very frank and honest about why they got into their situation and who were looking for support and help. I pay tribute to the charities and other organisations that do immense work daily to ensure that people get the support that they need. The Government has a role but, without those charities, many more individuals would fall through the net.

Today, we are considering the personalised and person-centred approach, which is the right way to tackle homelessness. It is important that we look at each individual. That is one of the key elements in the Scottish Government's homelessness strategy, which aims to ensure that we end homelessness together. I am a real advocate of that, because that is exactly what we need to do. However, as we have heard from members, more needs to be done.

I commend the committee's report, which has been mentioned. The inquiry gave us an opportunity to see at first-hand what is going on, and we now have an opportunity to build on that work in the report. In fact, the themes from it are very much what we are considering today.

To reflect on my time as a councillor on Perth and Kinross Council, back in 2015, we introduced the home first initiative as part of the council's transformation strategy. The programme aimed to ensure that there was a direct route for homeless people into settled accommodation, thereby reducing the need for temporary accommodation. It was a real success, and it continues to be so. It is challenging and tackling homelessness and making a difference.

The approach has many benefits. It minimises the length, effects, stigma and financial impact of homelessness while delivering better outcomes for individuals. That is what we should think about—delivering outcomes for individuals. The results have been staggering. The Scottish Government has acknowledged it and charities have taken it on board.

To give some statistics from my patch of Perth and Kinross, the average length of time that individuals have to wait in temporary accommodation has dropped from 132 days to around 80. That is still not a good situation, but the figure has at least improved and it continues to improve. For people who have presented as homeless, the wait before they are offered

accommodation has also dropped dramatically. Unbelievably, people were waiting 441 days to get accommodation. We have heard from members about the situation of families with children, young people and individuals. How can they be in that situation for so long? The figure has reduced to 90 days but, once again, there is still a long way to go.

I welcome the fact that there are to be rapid rehousing transition plans, as that is the right way to go. The guidance on the development of those plans very much builds on the successful principles of Perth and Kinross's home first model, which is what we want. We in the Scottish Conservatives see reducing the amount of time that homeless individuals spend in temporary accommodation as a major priority and an issue that needs to be tackled.

Although the role of local authorities is crucial, we also have to talk about housing supply. There is a lot to talk about when we look at the pledges that various individuals and organisations have made and what the party of Government has put forward in manifestos on building new social rented homes. Its 2011 manifesto commitment was laudable, but it was not achieved. It talked about 30,000 homes and only 22,000 were built. If we continue as we are now, the Government will be 10,000 short of the 50,000 target in its current manifesto. Work requires to be managed and to be done. The ending homelessness together plan is right. It states:

"One of the most powerful tools in preventing homelessness across our population is to ... ensure a strong supply of affordable housing."

That is one of the main levers that we need to have. The Scottish Government requires to do that and more, and we have seen the right direction.

It is heartening to see broad consensus across the chamber when we talk about homelessness. We have all seen it. We have all identified it. We in the Scottish Conservatives will play our part to ensure that the Scottish Government is accountable, but also has the opportunity to progress, because that is the right way to tackle the issue. We welcome the plan because it gives opportunity, support and a real link to what is taking place. However, we still have a long way to go and I hope that today we can start that journey in a much stronger vein.

15:51

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am pleased to participate in the debate, and welcome the Government's action plan. I want to share the perspective that I gained during the Local Government and Communities Committee's

yearlong inquiry into the causes of, and long-term solutions to, homelessness in Scotland.

Since 2007 we have made significant strides towards eliminating homelessness in Scotland, with the number of people assessed as homeless falling by 6,690 between 2007-08 and 2017-18. That drop is due to a proactive approach to housing undertaken by this Government, which included ending the right to buy; delivering over 78,000 affordable homes; and in this parliamentary term alone, investing more than £3 billion to deliver at least 50,000 new homes, including 35,000 for social rent.

Yet we know that homelessness assessments offer only a narrow perspective of reality for many Scottish families, and this measure does not illustrate the extent to which people are living in temporary, inadequate, or precarious housing. We also know that an adequate supply of housing alone cannot solve the complex health and social factors that lead to so many vulnerable people ending up on our streets.

That is why the committee's work included hearing from people with lived experience of homelessness, those working in front-line services, and local and national policymakers who focus on addressing this complex issue. Their stories, which were shared with candour and courage, demonstrated that homelessness can arise from a wide range of issues, ranging from relationship breakdowns, to substance misuse, mental health issues, childhood trauma as well as—more recently and most sadly—Westminster welfare reform.

Although the Government's approach has produced a decline in homelessness applications, there are still local authorities where applications have increased, and our report therefore recommended ways to improve and expand the current housing options approach to deliver sustainable reductions. I am pleased to note that the Government's plan responds to many of the conclusions reached in our report, which, when implemented, will show Scotland as a leader in ending homelessness.

The evidence that we heard clearly made the case for a more collaborative approach among the wide range of organisations that are already performing outstanding work to help to end homelessness. A concerted, whole-system approach is key. The committee's visits included Streetwork in Edinburgh, which offers access to amenities, support and immediate advice, as well as outreach services; the Simon Community Scotland in Glasgow, offering emergency and temporary accommodation and 24/7 helpline support; the Legal Services Agency in Glasgow; and Churches Action for the Homeless in Perth. All those visits conveyed that there is, indeed, the

will and the ability to end homelessness in Scotland, provided that we have the right policy framework in place to support those services.

As part of our work programme, the Committee also travelled to Finland—as Graham Simpson mentioned—where we saw first-hand how the housing first approach is delivering long term sustainable reductions in homelessness. That approach not only provides housing, but addresses other issues that can lead to homelessness, including the need for medical and psychological support. It was therefore included as a key recommendation in our report. While we accept that housing first alone cannot end homelessness, it will lay the groundwork for a successful, person-centred approach to tackling it.

As we are in the midst of the United Nations 16 days of activism against gender-based violence campaign, I believe that it is important to highlight the written evidence from Scottish Women's Aid to the Local Government and Communities Committee. Their submission argued that gender-based violence is a major cause of homelessness in Scotland, citing the fact that, of the 34,662 homelessness applications made in 2015-16, a

“dispute within household: violent or abusive”

was the reason given by 4,135 applicants, some 13 per cent, as Shona Robison pointed out.

Research has highlighted that those figures might significantly underestimate the scale of the problem, as women do not always disclose that they are experiencing domestic abuse when they make a homelessness application. Domestic abuse is also closely linked with repeat homelessness, and families who experience domestic abuse are four times more likely to lose their home because of arrears. Such details reinforced to the committee how complex and multifaceted the causes of homelessness can be and underlined the need for a person-centred approach that meets the individual needs of each vulnerable person.

I am heartened that the plan responds to the themes and recommendations that are in the committee's report. There was a strong connection between the committee's conclusions and the recommendations that the homelessness and rough sleeping action group made. That provided a strong evidence base on which the high-level action plan was developed. With a significant shift towards the housing first model, which the committee explored, the plan will help to provide settled housing as a first response for people with multiple needs, and I look forward to local authorities agreeing their rapid rehousing transition plans by the end of this year.

Just as the committee's report was built around the experiences of people who have been

homeless, so the plan sets out a person-centred approach to improve lived experiences. To respond to the highlighted need for accessible and clear information for homeless people, the Scottish Government will work with local authorities next year to make homelessness assessments more flexible and to develop plans that make it as easy as possible for people to access their right to assistance. On preventative action, the Government will develop pathways for groups that are at the highest risk of rough sleeping and homelessness, such as people who are leaving prison, for whom the sustainable housing on release for everyone standards have already been designed.

I am pleased that the plan refers to the particular needs of women and children who are fleeing domestic abuse. I hope that that will go some way towards mitigating the desperately sad situation that Scottish Women's Aid outlined in its submission to the committee.

In the face of an issue that is as multifaceted and complex as homelessness, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and disheartened by the challenges that are presented, but the Government is not complacent when faced with such difficulties, and I am sure that it is heartened by the cross-party support for much of what it is doing. The plan has the potential to transform our response to homelessness and to improve the lives of thousands of the most vulnerable people in our society. I hope that colleagues across the chamber will join me in supporting the plan today and ensuring that it delivers in the months and years that are ahead.

15:57

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): As one of the very few members who have been here since 1999, I am—whether I like it or not—part of the Parliament's institutional memory. I therefore feel a responsibility to remind members of the past, particularly as I was the minister with responsibility for this policy area in the first Labour Scottish Government. I will take members back almost 20 years, because it is instructive to do so. As a politician once said, if we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it.

Homelessness and rough sleeping were issues that the Parliament engaged with early in its lifetime and on which substantial progress was made in legislative and resource terms. That mattered to the then Labour-Lib Dem coalition Government and, to be frank, it mattered to members of the Parliament as a whole, irrespective of party.

At its most extreme, we could see the manifestation of homelessness on our streets in

the form of rough sleepers not just across our cities but in our towns. Too many people were sofa surfing, and the level of homelessness applications was far too high. That spoke to a breakdown in the housing system, never mind a breakdown in society, which often meant that the most vulnerable people were suffering disproportionately. We could say exactly the same thing about the situation today.

Action is essential today, as it was then, and it needs to be swift. There was a commitment to end rough sleeping by 2003, which was backed by £63 million in resources. I cannot help but contrast that with the £50 million that the Scottish Government has announced for its ending homelessness together fund, which is not just for addressing rough sleeping.

A homelessness task force was established in 1999 to bring in those with expertise across the voluntary sector and local government, to ensure that we got the approach right. That sounds familiar, does it not? Groundbreaking legislation was backed by the Parliament in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. Significant resources were allocated to implement a suite of recommendations but, when the SNP removed ring fencing and rolled the money up into the general settlement, there were cuts—that has been the case especially in the past few years, when the SNP has cut local government funding.

I very much welcome the work of the homelessness and rough sleeping action group but, when we consider its report alongside that of the homelessness task force from some 16 years ago, they are remarkably similar.

The same set of challenges remain: the need for prevention and tackling the root cause of homelessness; the need to tackle the problems of those in transition from prison, the forces or care who do not have settled accommodation to go to; the need to address people's mental and physical health problems and addictions—the more I read, the more it echoes the past. The need to limit the use of temporary accommodation featured then, and it still features now. Shelter has campaigned for minimum standards for temporary accommodation since 2011, but the SNP wants us to wait until 2023.

In the intervening 16 years, homelessness and rough sleeping both fell initially. There were fewer rough sleepers on our streets and there was adequate emergency accommodation. Temporary accommodation became available to reduce and all but eliminate the use of bed and breakfasts. Priority need, intentionality and local connection were all legislated for. There was nothing short of a revolution in how we tackled homelessness in this country.

However, at some point, the eye was taken off the ball. Unfortunately, homelessness is now rising. So, too, is rough sleeping.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: No; I think that the member should listen.

Those issues were not a political priority any more. In fact, if we look closely, we can see that there is one mention of homelessness in the SNP's 2007 manifesto, and there is nothing at all in its 2011 manifesto—not one single, solitary word on the subject.

In that time, the SNP Government stopped funding homeless charities to help the many Scots who end up homeless on the streets of London. In 2014, the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee warned the Government about the inappropriate use of housing options for gatekeeping purposes, but it took a further two years for guidance to emerge. In 2015, the SNP Government repeatedly refused to do rough sleeping street counts to evidence the growing problem, even though we asked it to do so time and again. It is only when there is a massive public outcry and media attention that something gets done.

I bring all that up because I do not want to be back here in 20 years' time, debating the same thing all over again. If we think that the issue of individuals who are homeless now and who might find themselves homeless in the future is important, we need to find solutions and stick to them. The cabinet secretary says that her approach is groundbreaking. I am sorry, but it was groundbreaking before. The Government cannot adopt a year zero approach and take no responsibility for its actions over the past decade. The Government of the day, of whatever complexion, needs to commit to delivering on this agenda. We need resources, an action plan and targets, and the Parliament needs to hold the Government's feet to the fire.

We know what the problems are and we know what we need to do. Those in the voluntary sector constantly remind us of that. However, the Scottish Government has taken its eye off the ball, and we cannot let that happen again. If the Government had one iota of the passion that was demonstrated by Kezia Dugdale this afternoon, I might have more confidence in what it is proposing.

16:03

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate. The action plan that was published

on Tuesday points to the Scottish Government's commitment and ambition to eradicate homelessness in all its forms. On the same day, in the chamber, the Government acknowledged 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, and today we all wear our white ribbons in solidarity with the white ribbon campaign, which aims to end men's violence against women.

Women's experiences of homelessness are unique. As the homelessness and rough sleeping action group's recommendations note, groups with particular needs, such as women who have experienced domestic violence, are at particular risk of homelessness.

As a former member of the Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee, I will reflect on the inquiry into homelessness that the committee conducted. In written evidence to the committee, Scottish Women's Aid confirmed that domestic abuse continues to be a major cause of homelessness in Scotland. In 2015-16, 4,135 homelessness applicants gave

"Dispute within household: violent or abusive"

as the reason for their application. Some 72 per cent of applications were made by women, and women with children made up 36 per cent of applicants. A 2010 Government review of domestic abuse, housing and homelessness policy and research stated:

"The prevention or cessation of domestic abuse in a family context will almost always require the woman to leave that home."

Between 2013 and 2015, Scottish Women's Aid worked in my constituency, alongside Fife Council's community research team, in the production of the report "Change, Justice, Fairness: 'Why should we have to move everywhere and everything because of him?'" which focused on women's experiences of homelessness when they presented to the local authority. The report found that 58 per cent of Fife Council staff agreed that

"some women claim domestic ... abuse when they have not experienced it."

That narrative—the idea of not being believed—weaves its way throughout the report as women document their experiences of presenting to the council. The report says:

"One individual was advised by Fife Council to give up her tenancy because her abusive ex-partner had accrued substantial debt—in her name."

Women were asked whether they felt that they had a choice between remaining in their home or moving out, and 84 per cent of women said that they had no choice.

I was therefore glad to note in the Labour Party's amendment a specific reference to the

work that is being done by the Chartered Institute of Housing in that area. The ending homelessness action plan acknowledges that the

"prevention of homelessness must recognise the particular needs of people, mainly women and children, fleeing domestic abuse."

I turn to the root causes of homelessness and the Local Government and Communities Committee's report. Graham Simpson referred to the committee's inquiry as a "harrowing" experience, but I note that he did not make a single reference to the numerous representations on welfare reform that the committee received from third sector organisations. Let me remind him what they told us. Shelter told the committee that the roll-out of welfare reform and universal credit was creating a complicated landscape to navigate and was pushing people further into poverty. COSLA highlighted the fact that universal credit was squeezing local authorities' budgets as they were having to mitigate the impact of welfare reform. Fife Council has had to set aside £200,000 to cover the roll-out of universal credit and has spent more than £1 million on related costs. Scottish Women's Aid told the committee:

"Cuts to social security have had a grotesquely disproportionate impact on women, from 2010 to 2020, 86% of net 'savings' raised through cuts to social security and tax credits will come from women's incomes."

Across the United Kingdom, the number of homeless families has risen by more than 60 per cent, and that is

"likely to have been driven"

by the United Kingdom Government's welfare reforms, according to a National Audit Office report that was published last year. Graham Simpson is absolutely right to say that there is a "scandal", but perhaps the real scandal is that not a single Conservative MSP will admit to the damage that is being caused to homeless people in this country by Tory welfare policies.

There has been some debate recently on the purpose of this institution. The issue of mitigation was revisited consistently by the committee during our evidence sessions. On that point, the minister, Kevin Stewart, told the committee:

"The Scottish Government can mitigate a number of things—bedroom tax mitigation costs £47 million a year, we have talked a number of times today about using the Scottish welfare fund to ensure that 18 to 21-year-olds whose housing benefit is being withdrawn are still helped and we have put additional money into discretionary housing payments in recent times—but we cannot mitigate every aspect of the cuts that are being made."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 1 November 2017; c 10.]

That is the crux of the debate. The Scottish Parliament—irrespective of who holds political power—was never created to guard the people of

Scotland against Tory austerity. Much as I enjoyed Jackie Baillie's history lesson earlier, mitigation is not one of the Scottish Parliament's founding principles.

The argument that Labour advances is that, were there to be an alternative Government at Westminster, the problem would be solved, because, given that austerity is ideologically driven, without the Conservatives in power, the degrading welfare reforms would simply disappear and our homeless population would be saved. Forgive me, but I do not and cannot subscribe to that argument. We all heard Kezia Dugdale's palpable anger in her speech, but, just three short years ago, the Labour Party abstained on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The bill passed with a majority of 184—184 Labour MPs abstained.

I say to the Scottish Labour Party that we can have a nice, fluffy debate in which we discuss how terrible homelessness is, all commit to doing something about it and welcome the action plan; however, until the full welfare powers are devolved to this Parliament and put in the hands of the Scottish Government, we will never be able to tackle the root causes of homelessness.

Integrity, compassion, wisdom and truth are the principles that should guide us all in our work in the Parliament. I give the final word to one of the women who contributed to the report that was produced by Scottish Women's Aid. She said:

"You're destroyed. I mean yeah, you eat, you drink, you sleep, you talk but you're dead inside and you can feel it. You feel so down, so low, you wish the floorboards would open up and swallow you. It's so embarrassing. Yeah, you just think oh gosh, I should have let him kill me because that would have ended it. It's just agony, agony, agony."

I say to the Labour Party and to the Conservatives that they should help us to stop that agony, help their constituents and back the full devolution of welfare powers to really help Scotland's homeless people.

16:09

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Government is holding this debate, which is very important. I also welcome the minister's willingness to accept the Conservative amendment in my colleague's name.

I should declare that I am a director of a homeless charity in Edinburgh.

There is a real problem. Kezia Dugdale hit the nail on the head in her comments on short-term lets and B and Bs, particularly in Edinburgh. We must draw a distinction between those B and Bs and hostels that have no support services and those hostels and B and Bs that provide support. There is a real difference between the two, and I

would welcome clarification from the minister on his definition.

In Edinburgh and across central Scotland, there are many short-term B and Bs and other types of accommodation that provide support and help to those who stay in them. CrossReach, the Salvation Army, Four Square, Gowrie Care and Bethany Christian Trust all provide such accommodation. That accommodation provides short-term help and it comes with debt advice, counselling and other wraparound support. I would be concerned if the minister's good intentions meant that such accommodation and short-term lets were wrapped up altogether and we saw them end.

We need to make a difference. The minister referred to the Heriot-Watt report that came out earlier this week, which makes a helpful comment with regard to distinguishing between the different types of accommodation that we have across Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh. We want people to get the professional help that they require, whether in the short term or the long term. I hope that the definition in any new legislation will ensure that those groups are not affected.

The other area in which we need to be careful when introducing any new legislation is short-term night support. Glasgow City Mission, in Glasgow, and Bethany Christian Trust, in Edinburgh, offer accommodation for one night—or several nights—in church halls and provide a mattress, a hot meal and professional support. None of us wants there to be a need for that type of accommodation, but nor do we want to see it close—what would happen to the individuals that it supports? When we draft any new legislation, we must ensure that there are proper exemptions and proper categories.

I understand that, sadly, the night shelters are seeing an increase in numbers. So far, that is not necessarily due to welfare reform but is down to lots of other reasons. We need to ensure that those individuals are supported, and it still disappoints me that City of Edinburgh Council gives no financial support to the night shelter. I welcome the fact that the Government has helped out in that regard in previous years, and I hope that the minister will consider doing that again.

Finally, I turn to the Green amendment. It was pointed out by Mike Rumbles that the amendment would have unintended consequences if we were to support it. For example, if I were a person whose mother or father had died and left a house that I did not know what to do with, I might want to let it out for a short period. However, if I were to be told that, if I did so, I could never sell it for any reason, why should I let it out at all?

Andy Wightman: I take what the member says, but I point out that the amendment in my name refers to “reviewing” the current law and schedule 3 to the 2016 act in particular. The amendment says nothing about any changes that might be made, although I may have articulated some; it simply asks for a review. What is wrong with having a review?

Jeremy Balfour: The member has articulated what he would want to see. If we were to review something, we would have to review it for a purpose. If there was to be a change in the law, the only purpose that I can see is to prevent people bringing forward property for rent in Edinburgh, in particular, but also in other parts of Scotland. That would mean that there would be less and less rented accommodation available. We could end up with more and more homelessness and with people using their houses for holiday lets and other uses for which they would have protection. I simply think that the amendment has not been thought through properly.

Homelessness is an important issue and there is, by and large, a consensus in the Parliament that we need to do something. Although I welcome the Government’s moves so far, I agree with others that we cannot delay too long. It is an urgent issue, and if the Government seeks to work cross-party and quickly, it will get the support of other groups in the Parliament.

16:15

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Everyone needs a safe, warm place that they can call home. It is more than just a physical place to live; I am sure that, through their casework, MSPs will know full well the toll that the lack of such a place can take on folk. The security and roots that a home provides are absolutely essential to physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Indeed, under article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has a fundamental human right to housing.

Homeless people in Scotland already have some of the strongest rights in the world. Here, everybody who is found to be homeless is legally entitled to housing, and most people are provided with settled permanent accommodation. Huge progress in tackling homelessness has been made, but there is much more to do. I welcome the ending homelessness together action plan and the fact that the Scottish Government accepts all 70 recommendations. I thank the homelessness and rough sleeping action group for all its hard work.

The plan has people and prevention at its centre and contains a shift towards rapid rehousing,

which will see homeless people housed in long-term and settled accommodation solutions that meet their needs as soon as possible. The “together” part of the plan is important; ending homelessness will need the Scottish Government, COSLA, local authorities and third and public sector bodies to work together. Members will have received briefings from a number of organisations that will ultimately be part of the work to realise the aim of the plan, which is that

“everyone has a home that meets their needs and homelessness is ended.”

It is a measure of the quality of the work that has been done that the majority of stakeholders have warmly welcomed the proposed actions.

Scottish Women’s Aid strongly welcomes the Scottish Government’s renewed focus on prevention. However, it has highlighted its disappointment at what it sees as a missed opportunity to consider

“the distinct gendered differences and underlying causes of women’s homelessness.”

I agree with Scottish Women’s Aid when it says that

“while people experiencing homelessness will share common experiences ... an understanding of women’s, and their children’s, distinct experiences and the underlying causes of their risk of homelessness is essential.”

As Scottish Women’s Aid also states, women’s economically disadvantaged position in the labour market—they are often in part-time, low-paid and sometimes precarious work while managing childcare and other caring responsibilities—means that they are

“disproportionately dependent on the social housing sector.”

During these 16 days of action, when many members will wear white ribbons to show their support for the eradication of violence against women, it would seem ridiculous not to highlight that domestic abuse is a major cause of women’s homelessness in Scotland. Scottish Government homelessness statistics for 2017-18 tell us that

“Dispute within household: violent or abusive”

was given as the main reason for homelessness by 4,395 applicants, 78 per cent of whom were women and more than half of whom had children on their application. In fact, more women make a homelessness application under that category than make an application for any other reason.

The recent Equality and Human Rights Commission report on the state of equality and human rights in Scotland highlights:

“Evidence presented so far does not capture ‘hidden’ homelessness.”

As we know, the figures on women's homelessness will not show the full extent of the issue, as many women who are fleeing domestic abuse often stay in various insecure housing situations, or with family or friends, before making a homelessness application.

Domestic abuse is both a cause and a consequence of women's inequality. The Scottish Government's equally safe strategy recognises that, and it highlights homelessness as a factor that can keep women and girls trapped in an abusive home.

Earlier this week, the cabinet secretary responded positively to my question about the importance of embedding equality and human rights impact assessments in work to ensure that, unlike the UK Government's policies, which the United Nations rapporteur assessed as seeming to have been compiled by a roomful of misogynists who were tasked with making a system that worked better for men than for women, we, in Scotland, do better in addressing the structural inequalities that are faced by women and girls.

I welcome the aims and the proposed actions in the plan, but I ask the Government to reflect on whether embedding an equalities and human rights approach would have resulted in a plan that better recognised the existing inequalities that are experienced by women and girls, ensuring that they were not repeated and reinforced.

I ask the minister, in winding up the debate, to address the points that were raised by Scottish Women's Aid and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations on the need for greater understanding of the gendered nature of homelessness.

16:20

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): A couple of years ago, I had the dubious pleasure of sleeping rough in Hampden park. I did so for two reasons: to fundraise and to highlight the issue of homelessness and rough sleeping. For me, it was a cold, uncomfortable and difficult evening, but the truth is that I was never under any threat. Unlike many of the people who live on the streets, I did not have to worry about being assaulted or having any other criminal actions, violent or non-violent, taken against me.

Recently, I have spoken to many homeless people to find out why they have ended up in such a position, and the stories that they have told would break your heart. I spoke to one woman who told me that she was on the street because her husband had slashed her and stabbed her in the throat and she had had to run away. She was looking for a hostel for the evening. That was in Edinburgh.

Last night, I spoke to a guy who had come to Edinburgh to get work with a relative. The job had fallen through and he was trying to scrape together £20 to spend the night in a hostel. That is no way for anybody to live. Nobody should have to put up with that. It is a tragic situation, because we can do what we can—we can give homeless people a couple of pounds or something to eat—but, as individuals, we cannot solve the long-term problem. Ultimately, that is the responsibility of the Scottish Government and the rest of society. That is why I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate.

We are still in November, which is the month when we remember the people who spent time and sacrificed their lives in the army, the air force and the navy. I know that veterans are a group of people who are often affected by homelessness. When they come out of the services, they often have a number of conditions and find that they cannot easily reintegrate into civil society. They might go and stay with family, but having a condition such as PTSD makes that sort of living almost impossible. They often develop mental health issues and end up living on the street.

I contacted the housing associations in Glasgow on the issue. They were all very positive in their responses; some said that they would make improvements and some said that they would take additional action. Glasgow Housing Association of the Wheatley Group said that it would put aside 10 houses a year for veterans to make sure that they could get a house. The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, Graeme Dey, talked about that in the chamber. I cannot remember what he said—given that it was Graeme, it would not have been that important anyway. [*Laughter.*] I have it here—he said that that initiative

“will help achieve my ambition that Scotland should become the destination of choice for those leaving the Armed Forces”.

That will happen only if other people get behind the actions that organisations such as GHA have taken.

I spoke in the #HearMeToo debate on Tuesday, which, as anyone who was in the chamber will know, was an incredibly powerful and emotional debate. I told the story of one of my constituents. She was a repeat victim of domestic abuse. Time and again, she had to flee—which was a common theme—and she had to try and find somewhere else to start again. For that unfortunate young woman, there was no place of safe refuge to relax, even for a brief period. That added to the pressures that were being put on her, which probably, in some cases, led her to make more bad choices, which then led her to be abused again—the cycle goes on and on. Domestic violence has been talked about a lot recently. We

have had great contributions about it today, and it is important that it is at the centre of what the Scottish Government is looking to do in its ending homelessness together action plan.

I welcome the money—the £50 million—and the rapid rehousing, but we must make sure that we deal with the domestic violence issue. We cannot have people—in a situation that I cannot bear to think about—waking up every morning and not having the opportunity to escape from domestic violence, because they cannot think of anywhere to go or where they could get the advice that they require.

I will touch on Jackie Baillie's contribution. Jackie talked about the Scottish Government and how things have got worse over the past 10 years. It cannot just be me that remembers. I am confident that something happened about 10 years ago—there was a financial crash. There was a change of Government in 2010 and there was deliberate austerity. There have even been National Audit Office reports that put the blame exactly where it should go, which is with the Westminster Government. As our budgets are cut, and the need is growing stronger, we are doing everything that we can.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

James Dornan: I think that Jackie Baillie should listen.

The Scottish Government is doing what it can in extremely serious circumstances. It is a very good action plan. Everybody should be getting behind it, and we should be making sure that we do not have to have this conversation again in another five or six years' time, because we are now much closer to closing that gap than we ever have been before. Let us get behind the action plan and make life better for those people who are sleeping rough and homeless, and let us do that as soon as we possibly can.

16:27

Andy Wightman: I echo James Dornan's point about getting behind the action plan. Despite the differences in opinion that we have heard this afternoon, there is a lot in the action plan that is going to be helpful. I agree—and all members would agree—that we should get behind it.

We have heard some interesting contributions. I welcome Pauline McNeill's observation that homelessness is as much, if not more, a health issue. Homelessness is a sickness. Housing is a cure. Many people are thrown into homelessness because of health issues, and many people's health issues are tackled by their having that very basic human right—a home.

In June this year, Crisis published research showing that a spend of £965 million would deliver £2.65 billion of benefits across justice, health and other portfolios by fundamentally sorting out one of the key issues that leads to people ending up in prisons, in hospitals and on the streets.

Kezia Dugdale made a very powerful speech, articulating the direct lived experience of many people—far too many people—not just in Edinburgh, but across Scotland, the United Kingdom and Europe, including two people who tragically are now dead.

In her opening remarks, the cabinet secretary talked about housing being a human right, and that was echoed by one or two other members. However, it is fairly clear that people's human right to housing is being violated. It is not an easy job to hold governments or whomever else to account under the human right to housing, because that is not part of the European convention on human rights.

I welcome the establishment of the Government's homelessness prevention and strategy group. I understand that the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning chairs that group, and I invite him to make sure that there are some homelessness-experienced people on it.

Kevin Stewart: I co-chair the group with Councillor Elena Whitham of COSLA, who has lived experience of homelessness, as do a number of other folks on that group. I can assure Mr Wightman that we are not doing this in isolation; we have folk around that table who know what homelessness is like.

Andy Wightman: I very much welcome that commitment.

Jackie Baillie reviewed the history of this Parliament's efforts in the field of homelessness. It is not a happy story and it underscores how much work there is still to do.

Other members, including Gillian Martin, Oliver Mundell and Emma Harper, talked about hidden homelessness. Homelessness in rural areas is often hidden, particularly in areas such as Aberdeenshire that are otherwise regarded as being quite prosperous. I would echo that, based on my knowledge of communities in which I have worked in the past few years. In Applecross, for instance, more than 50 per cent of the houses are holiday or second homes, which is why it is fundamentally important that such uses are subject to planning constraints. Local folk cannot afford to live in places such as Applecross and the economies of those places are suffering. In parts of the west coast of Scotland, workers—people with jobs, and sometimes fairly decently paid jobs—are living under upturned boats.

The cabinet secretary talked about Scotland being at the global forefront. Page 395 of a report by Crisis, “Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain”, talks about what a “perfect homelessness system” in Great Britain would look like. There are 10 principles, and Crisis assesses England, Wales and Scotland against those principles according to a traffic-light system of red, amber and green. There are three green dots: Scotland has two and Wales has one. Of the three countries, Scotland is doing best. However, the “Third Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe 2018”, from the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, identified only one country in Europe that has successfully tackled the problem, and that is Finland. Even in a country such as Scotland, where we have seen a 40 per cent drop in homelessness applications, we still have extremely serious problems.

A key driver in that has been the long-term decline in public housing since the 1980s. I welcome the Government’s attempt to begin to reform that and turn it around. The 50,000 homes target is welcome. The action plan reminds us of the Government’s commitment to build “50,000 affordable homes”. In May 2018, at First Minister’s question time, Patrick Harvie asked the First Minister whether the SNP’s manifesto commitment to

“invest £3 billion to build at least 50,000 more affordable homes”

over the next five years still stands, and the First Minister said yes. However, the housing statistics show that although the Government claims to have delivered 15,870 of the 50,000 target in 2016-17 and 2017-18, only 9,942—or 62 per cent—of those homes were new build. The Government has abandoned its manifesto commitment.

Kevin Stewart: We will deliver 50,000 affordable homes, 35,000 of which will be for social rent. In a number of areas, it may not be possible to build new, so we have allowed local authorities the flexibility to buy back homes and take them back into social stock.

Andy Wightman: I welcome that intervention and remind the minister that the First Minister confirmed that the SNP manifesto commitment was to build those affordable homes rather than just deliver them.

The weighty tome from Crisis contains a quote from Claire in Edinburgh, who says:

“I was married for 18 years but it turned into a very abusive relationship. I went to the council and they put me in a hostel ... It was horrible. I went to the council to ask for somewhere else, but they said there was nothing available and if I didn’t go back I would be intentionally homeless. I was too scared. I didn’t want to be around those people. My

mental health was really struggling and I was beginning to turn to drink ... Now I just bid on council flats while trying to make enough money during the day to get a room in a backpackers’ hostel ... It’s sometimes in a shared room but it’s much safer and it’s usually with OK people. Otherwise I sleep on the street.

I still see my son every day. I go to StreetWork—a homeless charity here in Edinburgh—to clean up every morning. Then I pick him up from home and take him to his baby group just to spend time with him. I don’t know what will happen, I’m just trying to keep going ... I don’t want to live like this.”

Let us make sure stories such as Claire’s and those of the constituents that Kezia Dugdale referred to are no longer stories that we have to rehearse in this chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I remind members that if they have taken part in a debate, they should be in the chamber for the closing speeches.

16:34

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The inescapable fact emerging from today’s debate is that, for the first time in a number of years, homelessness is rising. We have heard from a number of members varying opinions and various theories about why that is but, at the end of the day, it just means that more people are going without the safety, warmth and comfort of a roof over their heads and the infrastructure for dealing with this humanitarian crisis simply cannot cope.

Kezia Dugdale called out the City of Edinburgh Council, which has left 466 families in the city suffering in temporary accommodation for longer than seven days. The examples that have been brought to light are heartbreaking, and the law is being broken in the process. Graham Simpson spoke of the need for Parliament to agree to limit the use of temporary accommodation to a maximum of seven days. That should go beyond the consultation that is offered in the plan, and I look forward to seeing the minister introduce urgent legislation on the matter.

My colleague Pauline McNeill talked about the gendered and sometimes intersexual nature of homelessness, which affects single people, women and children, those who have been victims of domestic abuse, those who have experienced relationship breakdown and young people in general. Underlining her comments is the call in our amendment for councils, registered social landlords and the third sector, to which these actions will fall, to get the resources to make the action plan a reality. Reannouncing small pot after small pot of cash will simply not cut it, and we will have to wait until the budget to see whether those organisations get the support that they need to carry the plan forward.

A thread that runs through the plan and the debate is prevention. Indeed, the Scottish ministers have said:

“Preventing homelessness ... is just as important as how we collectively respond if and when it does happen.

Prevention is always better than having to address a crisis situation, but we need action if it is to be worth while. Despite all the efforts of the chamber and successive Governments since 1999 to prevent homelessness, something has clearly failed if we are yet again revisiting the issue.

In North Lanarkshire, homelessness applications have shot up by almost 15 per cent in the past year, reversing a downward trend following changes to the allocation policy and housing options interventions. The onslaught of universal credit from the Tory Government and crippling budget cuts fly in the face of previous plans and efforts. The red flags—the financial crisis, Tory budgets and the roll-out of universal credit—should have been plain to see and should have been acted on, but it is the impact of universal credit, along with affordability issues in the private rented sector, that is an emerging cause of homelessness locally. Although North Lanarkshire Council is twice as likely to resolve someone’s homelessness application, the extent of the risk that is posed by universal credit is inescapable. In the four months of roll-out to August, the number of people in arrears with their rent almost tripled, North Lanarkshire Council’s rent deficit jumped by £1 million and a quarter of those on universal credit were in debt to the council.

I ask the chamber to think about how we act to help people who are in that situation. The chamber has acted in the past on matters such as the bedroom tax; we had to react to that and mitigate its effects, but we did so as a preventative measure to remove the risk of someone not sustaining a tenancy. Last week, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People to consider moving to automatic payment of universal credit to landlords. In April, the Parliament decided that split payments should be made automatically, coupled with an opt-out for those who did not choose that option, so why can we not do the same with landlord payments?

The first Scottish choices were proposed and passed to a lot of fanfare. At the time, we might have overlooked the submissions from Parkhead Housing Association, Aberdeen City Council, Highland Council and Prospect Community Housing, all of which called for such an opt-out. Highland Council said:

“The council believes the Scottish Government flexibilities provides the opportunity to deliver a more fundamental shift by enabling housing costs to be paid directly to social landlords as standard”.

At the moment, landlords can request direct payments, but only after eight weeks of arrears and debt has been built up by a household. Why not switch the choice around from an automatic payment to the tenant to an automatic payment to the landlord? The tenant then knows that their rent will go directly to the landlord and that their tenancy is secure.

Today, the Scottish Government published evidence from the social security experience panels explicitly about the issue of universal credit Scottish choices. I will close by reading out some of the comments that were made by the respondents on the evidence panels. One respondent said:

“I think direct to the landlord is the best way... people on the breadline will too easily dip into it if needs arise. It’s hard but protect your roof at all costs.”

Another said:

“Personally I would have preferred payments sent to my landlord as I ended up in debt, also being paid monthly left me in debt. I was never offered any other choice.”

A third said:

“I would prefer it paid straight to Landlord so that if there were issues it would come straight from DWP and I wouldn’t get into trouble.”

I ask the cabinet secretary and the minister to reflect on the evidence that has come from the experience panels and remain open to the option of making automatic payments through universal credit to a landlord in order to secure people’s tenancies in the first instance and prevent homelessness from occurring.

16:41

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): I direct members to my entry in the register of interests. As a trustee of an estate that was left to the people, I manage tenancies and holiday lets.

I am pleased to close the debate for the Scottish Conservatives; it is an important debate. As many in the chamber—Jackie Baillie not least of all—will know, homelessness is an issue that Governments have grappled with for a long time. Successive Governments and parties of all colours have talked about it and looked at it. We do not have a situation in which some members say that it is not an issue and others say that it is; we all agree that it is an issue and that we need to come together to sort it out. For that reason, we have come to a consensus on supporting the action plan that the Scottish Government has brought out; we want to assist in any way that we can to take the plan forward and reduce homelessness in future.

The issue is complex and I am not going to stand here and say that welfare benefits have

nothing to do with it—of course they contribute; but they are not the one and only reason. As we talk about the issues of homelessness, it is important that we consider all of the different reasons for it and that we address those reasons. The UK Government is engaging in the conversation and has released guidance today for vulnerable people and those suffering due to homelessness about how they can engage with the welfare benefits system and how they can get help to access what they are entitled to. Therefore, the UK Government has reacted to comments and the reports that have been produced and is working closely with many of the relevant agencies. We do ourselves and people who are homeless a disservice if we do not work together to resolve this.

Gillian Martin: Has the UK Government declared that it will engage with the agencies that others in the chamber have mentioned and which have been critical of universal credit? Will it ask those agencies what they think is so damaging about universal credit?

Michelle Ballantyne: The UK Government is reacting to comments made by Shelter, so it is doing exactly that. It is not correct to suggest that the UK Government is not listening and not talking to such agencies. The UK Government is being lobbied, as we in the Scottish Parliament are being lobbied, and it is engaging in those conversations.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Michelle Ballantyne: I will make a bit of progress, if the member does not mind.

The action plan enjoys support from all elements of the chamber. I thank my colleague Graham Simpson for his work on the issue. The charity Crisis highlighted in its recent report many of the issues facing people in unsuitable accommodation. Graham Simpson took that on board and has been working on the issue, and that forms the basis of the Conservative amendment. Like all the evidence that has been put forward, we could not ignore the evidence on that. I have certainly had a lot of representations on it in the past week or so.

Our amendment was lodged in good faith, because we do not want to see people sitting in unsuitable accommodation. In Kezia Dugdale's contribution on the issue, she was extremely passionate and angry, but for good reason. It is unthinkable that somebody should be sitting for weeks or months in accommodation that we would never dream of walking into nor of which we could say, "This is liveable and somebody should go in here." If people have to enter such accommodation because there is nowhere else for them to go to have a roof over their head, we still

need to get them out as soon as possible and into good accommodation.

I am delighted that the debate started with the minister saying that the Government was going to look at that accommodation issue and ensure that something is done about it. On that basis, we and our housing spokesperson, Graham Simpson, look forward to working with the Government to ensure that we address the whole issue of temporary accommodation. I think that we have made some real progress in the debate.

Pauline McNeill emphasised the key role that local government has to play in addressing homelessness and, as an ex-councillor, I agree with that point. Many homelessness issues come back to councils to be dealt with and the buck stops with the council for getting people the help that they need. Again, the minister confirmed earlier that he agrees with that and will ensure—he will correct me in his summing-up if I am wrong—that local government has the necessary resources. We look forward to hearing more about that as we go forward.

We have heard from a lot of members about the need to consider a gender dimension to homelessness. It is certainly particularly difficult if a woman with children is trying to get out of a situation, because having a roof over her children's heads is the most important thing to mothers. They cannot take their children on to the street, so they need to be able to move from wherever they are and whichever situation they are in to security—not just the security of having a roof over their head, but the security of knowing that their partner, who may be abusing them to the degree that they fear for their life, cannot get at them. It is important that we take heed of that aspect and work together to ensure that those women have the ability to move accommodation when they need to.

Ruth Maguire: Does the member acknowledge that finance is used as a way of coercing women and stopping them leaving, and does she support our calls for split payments to be made at source on universal credit to stop potential financial control and coercion?

Michelle Ballantyne: I agree that finance is often used in coercion and is a key issue. Split payments at source should certainly be an option. However, there is a complication because coercion still exists when the money is separated; if it is automatic, the partner will know about it anyway. There are some real difficulties that we will have to work through to ensure that women really do get the protection that they need.

Oliver Mundell discussed hidden homelessness and other members reiterated his points. Hidden homelessness is an important element. When I

headed up a drug and alcohol unit, hidden homelessness was a big issue. Many of my clients sofa surfed and bounced from place to place, not being registered as homeless. We need to ensure that we have a handle on that as we go through the action plan.

Oliver Mundell also said that it is important that tenants know their rights. That is true, because tenancy law changed with the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Act 2016. I heard Kezia Dugdale's strong comments about having to wait until 2023 to ensure that standards are implemented. That is interesting, because quality standards were implemented in 2015 for those in social housing or public authority rented accommodation but not for those in temporary accommodation. That was a real miss, because the people are the same. Whether it was done to stage the cost of doing it I do not know, but it was a miss and it is something that we should look at and try to do something about as quickly as possible.

Alexander Stewart and many others reminded us that a person-centred approach is important. Everybody's circumstances are different when they become, or are at risk of becoming, homeless, and it is important that we work with individuals and look at their needs.

I can see that I am going to run out of time; do you want me to wind up, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can have a few more seconds.

Michelle Ballantyne: Okay. As I have said a million times, it is important that we bring all that together. We cannot support Andy Wightman's amendment, but we will be supporting Labour's. I agree with what Jeremy Balfour said about the potential unintended consequences and I absolutely understand the argument, which is really important here in Edinburgh, but we might need different solutions for areas where there are difficulties, rather than a countrywide solution.

I want to mention one other tiny thing—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you cannot.

Michelle Ballantyne: —which is that making supported accommodation available is important, even when it is temporary.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Aileen Campbell to close. No I don't. You've changed. I call Kevin Stewart to close for the Government.

16:51

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): This has been a

good debate with some thoughtful contributions. There has been passion and sometimes anger—rightly so—but the level of commitment that has been shown to tackling and preventing homelessness, and to do more for those who experience it, is reassuring.

The Scottish Government wants Scotland to be a progressive and socially responsible nation, where people are treated with fairness, dignity and respect, and where there is no place for homelessness or rough sleeping. We want to build on the strong homelessness rights and the radical changes in respect of homelessness and affordable housing that our local government and national Government have delivered over the past decade, in partnership with housing providers, the third sector and others.

Everyone has been calling "Ending Homelessness Together: High Level Action Plan", which was published this week, a Scottish Government action plan, but it is a Scottish Government and COSLA document. Many others added to the work, and I am grateful to all of them for their efforts. It is an important milestone towards realisation of our vision that everyone has a safe and warm home that meets their needs, and that homelessness is ended.

The action plan is the culmination of two pieces of work. The first is the report and recommendations that were presented earlier this year by the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee, following its wide-ranging inquiry into homelessness. I repeat my thanks to the committee and everyone who participated in that inquiry for their valuable contribution.

The work of the committee complemented and informed the other significant piece of work, which was by the homelessness and rough sleeping action group. Its dedication and hard work during the short time that it existed produced actions for preventing rough sleeping in winter 2017-18—which made an immediate and tangible difference—and 70 bold recommendations, all of which we have accepted in principle.

I also repeat my thanks to the members of the action group for their commitment, and for the incredible pace at which they worked in producing a comprehensive set of well-informed and detailed recommendations. I thank all the partners who worked with HARSAG, including people with lived experience of homelessness who know better than any of us what needs to change. Beyond them, I pay tribute to my civil servants for all their hard work in getting us to this point.

Through the aye we can collaboration, HARSAG undertook a programme of engagement with 425 people across Scotland to gain insight into their

direct experience of homelessness and to hear about the issues that matter to them, what they wanted to change and what would have helped to support them better. Anyone who knows me knows how important it is to me that the views of those who have lived experience of homelessness should inform every step of the journey.

We heard from Kezia Dugdale examples of how the system has failed people. She is angry about that: I share her ire. I am more than willing to meet her and the gentleman whom she talked about, and his baby, to hear about his experiences. She can be assured that I will do all that I can to ensure that a situation like that never happens again.

Kezia Dugdale: I thank the minister for that offer, and I formally accept it. Will he also accept that there are systemic failures when it comes to temporary accommodation? Once again, I urge him to bring forward new national standards on temporary accommodation before 2023.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Kezia Dugdale for bringing that up again. What we can do by 2023 is deal with the legislation. I can commit, however, to dealing with guidance during the early to middle part of next year, and to getting it absolutely right. To go further than that will require consultation, as Kezia Dugdale knows. However, I commit to dealing with guidance long before 2023.

Others in the debate have mentioned various things, but I will go with two points about which we are not all entirely in agreement. Earlier this afternoon, we heard about what happened in the past. Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick was previously a member of the task force and of HARSAG, and she provided a useful link between the two. The majority of HARSAG members have had long and consistent experience of homelessness services, and they agree that the plan is different. First, there is a commitment to tackling all homelessness—not just rough sleeping. Secondly, this time there is consensus across all sectors about what needs to be done, and there is a commitment to doing it. That is what is different to what happened previously.

I do not want to go on at great length about it, but the other point of disagreement is welfare reform. If we are going to accept all 70 of HARSAG's recommendations, we have to consider its recommendations on welfare reform. I hope that members from across the chamber can come together to persuade the UK Government to change its mind in that regard.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): With more than 650 armed forces veterans in Scotland requiring housing, what is the minister doing to have local authorities address that urgent need?

Kevin Stewart: I am disappointed that Mr Corry has come in late today and asked that question. We have already invested a lot in housing for veterans in Scotland.

Maurice Corry: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Corry has a point of order, which I suspect will not be a point of order. We will find out.

Maurice Corry: I have been at the debate this afternoon on chamber duty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You were at the debate. You have made your point.

Kevin Stewart: I apologise; I did not spot Mr Corry earlier.

Graeme Dey and I recently met representatives of veterans bodies, and will continue to do so. I wish the Ministry of Defence would do more and deal with the folks for whom it has responsibility.

Many things have been talked about today: one was swift action. The homelessness prevention and strategy group has made clear its commitment to turn the actions in the plans into reality. We will meet on Tuesday; I assure members that we are scrutinised to a huge degree by that group.

Oliver Mundell and Gillian Martin mentioned the differences that exist in rural parts of Scotland. We will continue to look at those issues. This is not just an urban problem; it is also a problem in rural areas, where it is often hidden.

I will not be able to touch on every issue that members have spoken about, but I will look at the *Official Report* and will respond individually to members on points that they have made.

The action plan reinforces what has always been clear to the group of people whom we are talking about: that, in addition to homelessness and housing services, we need partners across services—health, education, social work, community support and justice—and the third sector to recognise and act when people whom they work with are at risk of homelessness. Although there are good examples of partnership working, we know that we need to go much further. If we are to achieve our ambition to end homelessness, we must all identify and break down the barriers that prevent a truly joined-up partnership approach within and across all sectors. Achieving that will be difficult, but I believe that it is possible if we work together.

We know that there are challenges as well as opportunities ahead. It is about culture, minds and behaviours, and we know that it will not be easy. However, the prize if we succeed is that we will transform lives for the better, which is more than worth the effort. I believe that the comprehensive

action plan for real change can and will help us to overcome the challenges, and that we will go on to end homelessness together.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that amendment S5M-14962.1, in the name of Graham Simpson, which seeks to amend motion S5M-14962, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on ending homelessness together, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-14962.3, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend the motion in the name of Kevin Stewart, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-14962.2, in the name of Andy Wightman, which seeks to amend the motion in the name of Kevin Stewart, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 20, Against 85, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-14962, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on ending homelessness together, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that everyone should have a safe, warm, settled home; notes the Scottish Government's commitment to end homelessness and rough sleeping and transform temporary accommodation; welcomes the comprehensive work of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group and the Local Government and Communities Committee to set out recommendations and actions to achieve this shared ambition; supports the publication of the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan, which addresses these recommendations and sets out the steps that the Scottish Government will take in partnership with COSLA, local authorities, the third and public sectors and others across housing, and welcomes the role of the cross-sector Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group in overseeing implementation of this action plan to deliver an end to homelessness and rough sleeping; urges the Scottish Government to announce legislation in its next Programme for Government to limit the time that a person has to spend in unsuitable temporary accommodation to no more than seven days; agrees that there are complex reasons why people become homeless, including mental and physical health reasons, and welcomes the government's commitment to embed homelessness as a priority for improving public health; recognises the gendered dynamics of homelessness and welcomes the work being done by Scottish Women's Aid and the Chartered Institute of Housing on the needs of women and children fleeing domestic abuse, and recognises the key role that frontline staff in local authorities will play in the successful delivery of the action plan, but believes that they need additional resources to reflect this.

Meeting closed at 17:03.

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