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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 6 February 2019

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:30]

Brexit (Preparations)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a statement by Michael Russell on Brexit preparations in the light of recent developments. I encourage all members who wish to ask a question of the cabinet secretary to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

The Cabinet Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations (Michael Russell): After today, there are only 19 sitting days in this Parliament before the United Kingdom is due to leave the European Union. Meeting the legislative pressures of a possible no-deal Brexit has been challenging, and I acknowledge the flexibility and diligence that this Parliament, its committees and their conveners have demonstrated in carrying out their scrutiny role. However, it is clear that there is a substantial backlog of Brexit legislation at Westminster. To date, only 73 of the 115 UK statutory instruments to which we have consented have been laid in the UK Parliament. No one to whom I have spoken in recent weeks, with the exception of the Prime Minister, believes that Westminster can complete the work that it has to finish on Brexit preparations in the time that is available.

Accordingly, the Scottish Government believes that it is essential that two things happen at the earliest possible date. First, the Prime Minister must seek an extension to the article 50 process, no matter what other tasks she has set herself. That is essential even in legislative terms, let alone in economic and political terms. Secondly, she or the House of Commons must take formal legal steps to rule out exiting with no deal, which would reduce the pressure on businesses and individuals as well as on the Parliaments of these islands.

In December, this Parliament voted decisively against the Prime Minister's EU withdrawal deal, and for very good reasons. Her deal would make Scotland poorer, place us at a serious competitive disadvantage and, combined with the UK Government's hostile immigration policy, make a fall in Scotland's working, tax-paying population inevitable. In addition, the proposed deal provides no certainty. It would mean years of difficult negotiations with no guarantee that a trade deal could, in the end, be achieved.

Last week, incredibly, the Prime Minister seemed to agree with us, voting against her own deal by backing the Brady amendment that sought "alternatives" to the backstop—a backstop that she negotiated and alternatives that she and her colleagues, including the ever-flexible Secretary of State for Scotland, just two weeks ago said did not exist. By the way, they still do not.

The Prime Minister's deal is not the solution to this problem; it is the problem. It represents the inevitable outcome of ill-conceived red lines, and it is those red lines that need to change.

Alternatives are possible. In fact, they are absolutely essential, and they are available. In 2016, the Scottish Government set out compromise plans that would keep both Scotland and the UK in the single market. Now, with the clock ticking down to exit day, the Scottish Government is working with others to try to obtain an extension to article 50 to avoid a catastrophic no-deal outcome and to allow time for a second referendum on EU membership.

However, as a responsible Government, we must act to minimise and mitigate the impact of a possible no-deal outcome in Scotland. We will do everything that we can in that regard, although I repeat the caveat that I added when I last updated the chamber about the matter: we cannot do everything.

Extensive preparation has been under way for some time, but, in the first weeks of this year, we have been steadily intensifying that work. Under the leadership of the Deputy First Minister and reporting to the First Minister, the Scottish Government's resilience committee continues to provide a clear co-ordinating structure, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, civil contingencies responders and Police Scotland participating in those arrangements alongside senior civil servants and cabinet secretaries. The resilience committee will meet again later today and next week, during the recess. The Cabinet will also meet during the recess to hear a further update, as we are now preparing for the potential need to operate those arrangements on a permanent basis in the event of a no-deal outcome and to activate public communications.

In recent weeks, I have also attended two special UK Government ministerial meetings that have considered no-deal planning, and we continue to engage on those matters with the UK Government at the highest levels. On Monday, the Deputy First Minister will attend another UK Cabinet sub-committee on EU exit.

The Scottish resilience partnership is co-ordinating work across Scotland to ensure that local resilience partnerships are fully engaged in planning, mitigation and the preparation of

arrangements in response to any of the civil contingency issues arising out of EU exit. A national EU exit civil contingencies plan is being developed on a multiagency basis, which will be tested and exercised shortly.

A no-deal Brexit would have the potential to generate a significant economic shock that could tip the Scottish economy into recession—potentially a deep one. It would also have a severe impact on the labour market, potentially resulting in job losses, business relocations and closures, underemployment and a reduction in recruitment. The small and medium-sized enterprise sector would likely be worst hit. Alongside the UK Government, we are trying to rectify that situation, and we would support measures to ensure that there is increased liquidity in the banking system should it be required. As part of our support for business, the prepare for Brexit campaign offers practical advice that can help to safeguard, as much as possible in the circumstances, a company's growth and that of the Scottish economy.

On transport, it remains our aim to secure the best flow of essential goods into Scotland, and we are concerned about the possibility of severe delays to freight traffic through Dover and the Channel tunnel. We are working with the Department for Transport to establish the extent to which its contingency plans are addressing Scotland's needs for critical goods and, in particular, how rurality can be factored into supply chain issues. Given my constituency experience, I am especially conscious of the position of the Scottish islands, and I discussed some of the issues when I was in Orkney earlier this week. Transport Scotland is working with transport providers and with ports and airports in Scotland to assess their existing capacity and to identify how they could mitigate disruption and ensure that Scotland's exporters continue to get their goods to market.

Uncertainty about future tariff arrangements provides another key demonstration of the potentially damaging consequences of a no-deal Brexit. Studies by the British Retail Consortium and others suggest that, in the absence of a trade agreement between the UK and the EU, reversion to World Trade Organization tariffs for imports and exports could lead to significant price increases, particularly for food and drink. The governor of the Bank of England has identified potential rises of 5 and 10 per cent. Our red meat industry and seafood sector would be severely impacted by punitive tariffs. The seafood sector would also be required to comply with a range of additional administrative burdens, the support for which does not currently exist.

We are seeking urgent clarity on updated UK Government technical advice on protected food names. The UK Government failed to consult us on—or even inform us of—the updated notice yesterday. The UK Government states that current protection holders—for example, Scottish salmon, beef and lamb—might need to reapply to the EU for protection in Europe and in other countries where there is mutual recognition.

It has long been clear that leaving the EU under any circumstances would have a negative impact on the health and social care sector. If the free movement of people was curtailed, that would have serious consequences for the recruitment and retention of health and social care workers.

On medicines, the Scottish Government is working with all other UK Administrations to make sure that patients get the medicines and other medical supplies that they need, as far as is possible. Many of the practical issues connected to medicine supply, such as entry and custom controls, are outwith devolved competency, but we continue to raise specific concerns directly with the Department of Health and Social Care. In addition, last week, the Scottish Government's chief pharmaceutical officer wrote to pharmacists and other health professionals, providing information and advice. One particular point that is being emphasised is that it is important that patients take a careful view, discuss issues with their general practitioner and pharmacist and do not rush to increase their own supplies.

A no-deal Brexit would also raise concerns in areas such as the supply of medical devices, clinical trials, access to future EU funding and the rights of Scottish citizens to secure state-provided healthcare across the EU. National health service boards in Scotland are taking forward their own planning to mitigate that situation, with Scottish Government support.

If there was a no-deal outcome, we would be denied access to many of the security and law enforcement co-operation measures that Police Scotland and the Crown Office use daily to keep people safe. We would lose membership of Europol, the use of the European arrest warrant and access to vital information-sharing arrangements. That would represent a significant downgrading of our policing and security capability at a time when cross-border crime and security threats are increasing. As the chief constable outlined to the Justice Sub-committee on Policing last week, Police Scotland is working closely with the Scottish Government to make extensive preparations for the loss of those measures. It is also making arrangements to ensure that officers are available for, and are trained for, civil contingencies demands and for mutual aid requests. Police Scotland has today announced

plans to put 360 officers on standby from mid-March to deal with any incidents that might arise across the country, such as disruption at ports.

Across the Scottish Government, we are aligning our existing financial and staff resources towards those areas with specific no-deal impacts, and we are ensuring that we have the right people with the right skills in the right places to respond quickly and effectively.

Across the public sector, resources are being directed to essential preparations. A decision to remain in the EU would allow those resources to be returned to the support of front-line services and the delivery of Scotland's priorities. Our basic principle is this: the Scottish Government believes that any costs relating to EU exit that are incurred by public bodies—be they in Government, local government or the public sector—should not have a detrimental impact on Scotland's public finances.

In concluding, I turn to communications. The Scottish Government does not intend to replicate the UK approach of publishing a myriad technical notices. Where those affect Scotland or Scottish issues, we are happy to see them distributed, and we have done our best to influence them. We will, however, do all that we can to ensure that the people of Scotland get a clear and consistent message about the work that is being done and what actions they need to take.

We have therefore launched a public information website that provides important advice on issues such as transport, food, medicines and citizens' rights—it is now available at mygov.scot/euexit. The website will be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that the latest information is made available. We are co-ordinating our message with the UK Government, where possible, and supplementing its message as we feel necessary. That is the right way forward in terms of resources and clarity.

We should not accept the suggestion that a no-deal Brexit is somehow inevitable; nor should we allow anyone to normalise it. There are elected members of the Conservative Party whose aim seems not to remove no deal as an option but to champion it. Instead of facing them down, the Prime Minister is indulging and pandering to their extreme views. Unless and until the UK Government takes the necessary steps to rule out a no-deal Brexit, the Scottish Government must go on with—and, indeed, intensify—our work to prepare as best we can, although Scotland did not vote for this and should not have to go through it.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the early sight of his statement.

Only in the through-the-looking-glass world of nationalist doublespeak could we have

condemnation of a no-deal Brexit coupled with condemnation of the only deal that is on the table that would avoid a no-deal Brexit. I agree with much of what the cabinet secretary said about the dangers of a no-deal Brexit. I do not support a no-deal Brexit and I cannot foresee the circumstances in which I would do so. The Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee has said that it is

"strongly of the view that a no-deal Brexit would be damaging to the Scottish economy and ... is clearly not in the national interest."

That was an all-party view in committee, and I agree with it.

The Prime Minister has opened all-party talks on seeking a solution that avoids a no-deal Brexit and that can command majority support in the House of Commons and the agreement of the European Union. Even that great statesman Jeremy Corbyn is now taking part in those talks, but Nicola Sturgeon is not. Last week, there was a meeting to which the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales were invited and that was chaired by the Prime Minister. The chancellor attended, as did the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Brexit secretary, the Secretary of State for International Trade and the secretaries of state for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The First Minister of Wales was there, but the First Minister of Scotland was not, and nor will she attend next week, we have just been told.

Does that not tell us all that we need to know? Nicola Sturgeon is not interested in negotiating an orderly Brexit. She is not interested in governing at all; she is interested only in grievance and grandstanding. Does the cabinet secretary not realise that Scotland has long since seen through it?

Michael Russell: When the story of this process is written, the inability of Adam Tomkins to respond to the serious circumstances and the reality of the situation will at least merit a footnote in that history.

Let me address the points that he has made, such as they are. I will start with the issue of the Lewis Carroll looking-glass world. I am not an expert on Lewis Carroll, but I think that the spectre of a Prime Minister who in the end votes against her own deal, as she did last week, would be seen as something in the looking glass. That is what has happened—the Prime Minister has walked away from the deal that she agreed, because she is afraid of the extreme Brexiteers.

I will move on to what is actually happening in the talks. I am always aware that Adam Tomkins, although he regards himself as being in the loop, is actually not even in the outer circle.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): He is loopy.

Michael Russell: I would not use the word “loopy”, as that is unparliamentary, but it is not a bad word.

The reality is that Adam Tomkins has confused two things—perhaps deliberately or perhaps because he simply does not know—so let me tell him what has happened. Nicola Sturgeon has sat down with the Prime Minister to talk about the issues surrounding Brexit and about how they might move forward. On two occasions in recent weeks, I have been present in Downing Street with the First Minister when those discussions have taken place. Adam Tomkins, of course, has not been present, so that probably explains why he does not understand the matter.

A different, and parallel, process is taking place to prepare for a no-deal Brexit. That is a technical process, which was established through a Cabinet sub-committee. The First Minister of Wales and the First Minister of Scotland were asked to attend the sub-committee or to send their appropriate representatives. In the structure of the Welsh Government, the First Minister has decided to attend. In the structure of the Scottish Government, the people who are responsible for the process are the Deputy First Minister and me. The Deputy First Minister chairs the Scottish Government resilience committee and I am doing work to implement some of the committee's decisions. Therefore, we were—and remain—the appropriate people to attend the Cabinet sub-committee.

The First Minister will continue to meet the Prime Minister. However, my experience of those discussions is that the Prime Minister is not trying to learn anything from anybody; she is simply trying to persuade people that she is right. I am afraid that she is not, and she will not succeed in persuading us.

Neil Findlay: I thank the cabinet secretary for the early sight of his statement.

I am delighted that Mr Tomkins recognises Jeremy Corbyn as a statesman, which is not a charge that could ever be levelled against Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Liam Fox or any of the others who got us into this mess in the first place.

As Brexit approaches, the anxieties of businesses, people in industry and workers grow. We have all tried our best to speak sense to the Prime Minister, but she is engaged in a 40-year Tory civil war over Europe and is uninterested in who gets caught up in the fallout. Just this week, Nissan has stated that it will no longer make its newest model of car in Sunderland. Such concerns are very serious. Jobs will be lost, and this was all, of course, avoidable.

I agree with the cabinet secretary on article 50. It is inconceivable that we simply march off the cliff

in a few weeks' time, which would be an outrageous act of self-harm. How can the UK Government go on telling people that everything will be all right when it clearly has no plan? How will the Tories deliver a deal that does not threaten living standards, jobs and our strong relationship with our European neighbours? We have waited in vain for more than two years for an answer.

On a practical level, the Scottish Government is right to plan for a no-deal Brexit—indeed, it has a duty to do so. In Parliament, we have raised the issue of preparations many times. I offer my party's full support to the cabinet secretary for the planning that is being done on business continuity, transport, medicines and so on.

The Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, please?

Neil Findlay: We will support the Government's actions to prevent chaos.

Communication is the key issue. Other than by referring people to a website, how will the Government ensure that businesses and communities can find out, through concise and non-confusing information, about the developments that might occur?

Michael Russell: I am grateful to the member for the support that he and his party are giving to the process. He is right to identify communication, particularly business communication, as a key issue.

It is clear that, throughout these islands, the take-up of information by businesses and other sectors has been alarmingly low. The UK Government has identified that point, too. In addition to the website, targeted work is being done through local and national media. The UK Government has started its press campaign. We believe that we should have our press campaign, but we want to see how the UK Government's campaign goes. That work needs to be done.

There also needs to be substantial word-of-mouth activity between businesses. I spend a lot of my time meeting organisations and I always ask them whether they have talked to businesses in their area or sector about, for example, the get ready for Brexit website, which is the best business resource that most people have seen. We will continue to make businesses aware of the resources, but we also need to say to them that they have an obligation—as everybody does—to find things out. There is the website as well as targeted information and publications. There are also the UK Government's no-deal notices, which I do not believe are very helpful in many regards, but they give some information.

The resources are all there, but if there is one message that each member of Parliament should

put out in their communities, it is that people, particularly those in small businesses, should get the information now. Every business—even those that do not export to the EU—will be affected if there is no deal, and they need to pick up the information as quickly as they can.

I will make one final point. Mr Findlay raises the issue of Nissan. That is a crucial issue that goes to the heart of the Brexit process. When the original Nissan row took place in 2016, the UK Government Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said:

“There is no chequebook.”

He said that there was no sweetener. We now know that the Government made a £80 million offer to Nissan. It is still necessary to have trust in public life. If a minister says what Greg Clark said and then is found not to be telling the truth, there must be consequences.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The Scottish Government’s website mentions that the availability of some medicines might be at risk, but it does not yet give advice to citizens on what they can do about that. When does the cabinet secretary expect to be able to add information to the website about what citizens should do about such medicines?

If no deal is to be avoided on the Prime Minister’s terms, it requires not only a meaningful vote at Westminster, but the passage of the withdrawal agreement bill, which will be novel, complex, controversial and amendable, but which has not yet been published in draft form. Has the UK Government shared a draft of that legislation with the Scottish Government? Or do we anticipate that, on that, the UK Government will treat Scotland with the same degree of contempt as it has done throughout this process?

Michael Russell: In any legislative process, it would be a recipe for disaster if the UK Government were to bring forward such huge and complex legislation in the way that it has said that it wants to do it. It cannot be done.

Adam Tomkins: Your continuity bill.

Michael Russell: Mr Tomkins is shouting, “Your continuity bill.” The Parliament has a procedure for emergency legislation, which was observed to the letter. Those of us who went through it in detail for 12 hours in this chamber knew that that was required. I see no such preparations at Westminster for a bill that is 10 times as complex.

People will find this surprising, but I pay tribute to a Brexiteer minister, Suella Braverman, who recently resigned. She was working on the withdrawal agreement bill and worked constructively with me and a number of others to show us as much as she could at the time. Since

she resigned, we have not seen much and we have certainly not seen that bill in its entirety. That is a concern.

In recent months, I have made it clear that I do not believe that, in the time available to it, the UK Government can complete its primary or secondary legislation programme. I was saying that two months ago; I am still saying it and it is still not moving forward. We have a complete crisis. Moreover, UK Government ministers accept and believe that, too; many of them are saying so. The only person who does not is the Prime Minister—she appears to be deaf to any entreaties.

On medicines, substantial work is being done by my colleague Jeane Freeman and her officials to ensure that the list is narrowed down to the lowest possible number of items that could be problematic. There will be a substantial role for GPs and other doctors to inform their patients in those circumstances. We should allow that process to move ahead in that way, rather than alarm people by publishing lists of medicines. That is the right way to do it and that is how we will continue to do it.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): On Monday, the UK Government published guidance on exporting and importing fish in the event of no-deal Brexit. It explains that Scottish businesses will have to provide a catch certificate, an export health certificate, a prior-notification form, a pre-landing declaration, a storage document and a processing statement—six separate forms. That is not so much a sea of opportunities as an ocean of red tape. Given how much white fish is exported by Scottish businesses to the European Union, what will the Scottish Government do to alter that disastrous economic and bureaucratic imposition?

Michael Russell: Tavish Scott is right. It would be great if, today, in this chamber, we were able to say, “Let us change those arrangements.” The easiest way to change them would be to be a member of something called the European Union, in which circumstance the six forms would not apply.

The only party that continues to support the process of Brexit is the Conservative Party. I hope that Conservative members will give account of themselves to the fishing communities of the north, east and west of Scotland—communities that Tavish Scott and I serve. Those communities have consistently been told things that are not true. For example, the argument was made that people will be able to land whatever catches they want to land, and to sell them anywhere they want to sell them. That is simply not true. It is revealing that the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation accepted this week that its members will have to reduce—

not increase—catches if there is no deal, because they will not be able to sell the fish that they catch.

That shows the extraordinary nature of the situation. A completely false prospectus has been sold by the Conservatives and taken up by members of the fishing community—who will, as usual, find themselves to have been betrayed by the Conservatives.

The Presiding Officer: All the parties have had a good opening go at this. However, there remain 10 members who wish to ask questions.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary just said that there is no longer time for the UK Parliament to pass the legislation that is required to prepare for Brexit. That is particularly the case for the withdrawal agreement bill. Is not that another reason why the UK Government should stop pretending that an extension to article 50 is not necessary, and should instead be honest with the UK Parliament and the people and seek that extension immediately?

Michael Russell: I entirely agree.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The UK Government has given the Scottish Government £92 million to prepare for Brexit. In the light of what the cabinet secretary said about security and law-enforcement measures, can he confirm that none of that money has yet been handed to Police Scotland?

Michael Russell: The idea that we are, in some sense, the recipients of generosity from the UK Government in the process of Brexit is utterly bizarre. It is a perversion of the truth [*Interruption.*] There are extraordinary requirements upon us and huge difficulties to be faced. We will take care of them in the competent way in which we always take care of them.

When we hear the Conservatives shouting about this, it proves two points. One point—as we heard earlier from Mr Tomkins—is that they do not understand anything about the situation. The second point is that they are seeking to exploit a situation that they were meant to be against: they were meant to be against Brexit, but they are now born-again Brexiteers who are leading the country to disaster.

Derek Mackay will give an accounting for Brexit. However, as far as I am concerned, the real accounting will, to be frank, come at the ballot box, when the Tories will be judged for the appalling thing that they have done.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the Forth Valley division of Police Scotland is no longer authorising new requests from police officers for annual leave

covering a period of about a month, starting on 29 March?

Can he also confirm that a number of officers who are trained in public order have been identified for deployment to Northern Ireland in the event of there being no deal? Does he agree that the potential disruption to the lives of the people who work in our emergency services, and the increased risks to communities across Scotland, demonstrate further the complete madness of refusing to rule out a no-deal Brexit and crashing out of the European Union?

Michael Russell: Unlike the question before it, that one showed some knowledge of what is happening in the police force, and some concern for it.

We note today's announcement that Police Scotland intends to put 360 officers on stand-by from mid-March. Decisions about police officer staffing, leave and deployment are operational matters, as are decisions about contingency planning and mutual aid. However, I think that we would all welcome Police Scotland's prudent and sensible approach to contingency planning, which is to ensure that it remains best placed to keep people safe.

Public order training is an operational matter: however, as the second-biggest force in the UK, Police Scotland has said that of course it will consider mutual-aid requests. That is up to the chief constable.

The situation is a reminder of the huge disruption that is being caused and the effort that is going into the matter. It has been caused by the Tory UK Government's chaotic approach to Brexit. There is no other reasoning. It has been caused by a Government that has been hell-bent on achieving something that should not be achieved, and which is being achieved very badly indeed. So, let us not have the Conservatives' crocodile tears about the police force. The Conservatives are the people who are responsible for where we are.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is critically important that ordinary people, who are frightened about Brexit, see that politicians and parties are working together to prevent the disaster of a no-deal Brexit? That is what the public expect. Can the cabinet secretary say whether the Scottish resilience partnership will do a city-by-city analysis of the impact on our economy? Does he recognise the importance of information that is coming back from businesses about how Brexit will affect them?

Michael Russell: We receive information, and work is done, on regional and sectoral analysis through, for example, the work of the chief

economist and Derek Mackay's team, so information is flowing in.

I agree with Pauline McNeill about working together. She and I, and members around the chamber, have differences of opinion on a range of matters, but with the exception of the Conservatives, the parties have managed to work together on this issue. Labour, the Scottish National Party, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats have worked and continue to work together. We would be given greater strength if the Conservatives were to revert to the position that they took on the withdrawal bill, and it would be even better if they were to revert to the position that they took at the time of the EU referendum, when they accepted that Brexit would be a disaster for which Scotland did not vote, and said that they spoke for Scotland. Alas, they now speak only for the Conservative Party, as is clear from votes in this chamber.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): There are 50 days to go until Brexit and there is still no deal and no plan. Instead of Tory MP workshops, should not the UK Prime Minister now step up to the plate and put the interests of the countries of the UK before the narrow interests of the Conservative Party?

Michael Russell: She should. She should have done that last year and the year before, but she has shown herself to be incapable of doing so. I am, as they say, aye hoping, but I do not think that it will happen.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Putting aside the predictable political rhetoric in the statement, I welcome some of the measures that the cabinet secretary proposes for improving connectivity into and out of the Scottish market, which we should be doing anyway. Will he elaborate on conversations that he has had on, specifically, our port, marine and rail freight capabilities? Bearing in mind that Scotland owns a publicly funded airport that is entirely suitable for freight operations, is he minded to invite members from around the chamber to participate in such conversations when there is an appropriate constituency or regional interest?

Michael Russell: I am always prepared to involve members who are willing to be involved, and whose contribution would be positive and constructive. That would include—let me pluck an example from the air—supporting the efforts that are being made by the First Minister to represent Scotland in the United States. Any member who visibly supports those efforts is supporting Scotland's international potential.

On improving connectivity, the resilience team will meet within half an hour. The key topic this afternoon will be connectivity at ports. I visited the

port of Zeebrugge just over two weeks ago in order to understand some of the issues that are arising there. I will be part of the discussion this afternoon and will, at an appropriate time, inform members of the discussion. I will also make sure that businesses and others are informed, because they are the ones that really matter. They might have been abandoned by the Conservatives, but they have not been abandoned by this Government.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): One of the key concerns for many of my constituents relates to medicines, which the cabinet secretary covered in his statement. Although many of the practical issues that are connected to medicine supply are outwith the control of the Scottish Government, will the cabinet secretary expand on the information and advice that has been provided by the Scottish Government's chief pharmaceutical officer in that regard? Will he provide advice ahead of March 29 for people who are living with long-term conditions?

Michael Russell: The first advice, which comes from my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, is that people make sure that a conversation is had with their GP, so that they understand.

There might be a case to be made for the health secretary—who is in the chamber—or others communicating with organisations that support people with long-term conditions, for example, so that they are reassured about the situation. We can examine whether that can happen.

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

14:04

Trauma-informed School Staff

1. **Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it can support schools to ensure that their staff and teachers are trauma informed. (S5O-02849)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Relationship-based approaches in schools are essential to preventing and mitigating the impact of childhood adversity. Education Scotland has developed guidance for schools on nurturing approaches and their links with adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practice. Education Scotland is also developing additional career-long professional learning resources on trauma-informed practices, in collaboration with stakeholders. That is in addition to the development of curricular resource to develop children and young people's resilience and their knowledge and understanding of attachment and trauma-informed supports.

Gail Ross: The University of Edinburgh recently published research that shows that two thirds of children in Scotland have suffered some sort of trauma. Does the cabinet secretary agree that schools play a pivotal role in addressing that? Will he reiterate his commitment to cross-portfolio working to address that public health emergency?

John Swinney: I agree with Gail Ross's point and I reiterate the importance across different aspects of Government that we work together to address the issues. As the member will know from my attendance at the cross-party group, I convened a cross-portfolio discussion at Bellahouston academy last spring that drew together public servants and ministers from a variety of disciplines to focus on the very important question of cross-portfolio working. We are progressing with the recommendations from that discussion and I will of course keep Parliament informed on the important work that has come from it, such as the Education Scotland guidance on "Nurture, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma informed practice", which is available for schools.

College Students (Numbers)

2. **Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is

on the trend in the number of college students since 2007. (S5O-02850)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): We have exceeded our target of 116,269 full-time equivalent college places and have exceeded the target every year since 2011. As recent Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council statistics show, in 2017-18, an estimated 95.5 per cent of learning hours were delivered on courses that led to a recognised qualification, which is a 6.8 percentage point increase since 2006-07.

Elaine Smith: Is the minister aware that Scotland's colleges have more than 120,000 fewer students since 2007, including many fewer disabled students, and that the sector has faced underinvestment to the tune of £1 billion over that period? Yesterday, college lecturers went on strike to protest about the fact that pay has failed to keep pace with the cost of living. With the lack of investment, a loss of student places and demotivated lecturers all impacting on student education and experience, will the minister admit that colleges have suffered under the Scottish National Party Government? Will he urge the employers to offer a fair settlement when they meet with the Educational Institute of Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Before the minister rises, I ask members for short supplementary questions, please. I know that this is an important topic, but I ask for shorter supplementaries.

Richard Lochhead: The current disputes between lecturers and their employers are, of course, a matter for those two parties to resolve. I will continue to urge them to do that, because it is in the interests of students. The strike this week was regrettable, given that I understand that the most recent talks, a few days ago, were quite positive. I hope that they continue in that spirit.

On how our colleges are faring under the SNP Government, as I have just explained, they are exceeding their targets, which is good news for learners and the Scottish economy. That is why there is an increased focus on full-time courses that deliver a positive destination and recognised qualifications for those who undertake them. That is the best solution for the future of our economy, and colleges are quite right to focus on it, because it is in the interests of the country. Under the SNP, the colleges are delivering for Scotland.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): What steps are being taken to increase the number of women who are studying college courses related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, in the light of recent trends that were identified in the Royal Society of Edinburgh's "Tapping all our Talents" report?

Richard Lochhead: The Royal Society of Edinburgh's report "Tapping all our Talents" is excellent; we spoke about that subject in a members' business debate a few days ago. The Scottish Government is looking very closely at a number of recommendations in the report, and our first annual report on the Scottish Government's strategy for STEM, which includes a number of measures to address gender-related issues, will be published this week—it will be publicised in the next 48 hours or so.

The Scottish Government is taking a number of steps; as Oliver Mundell knows, there are positive indicators, such as good news about the increase in the number of women and girls who are participating in STEM, but there are challenges in other areas as well.

Colleges (Capital Spending Plans)

3. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the impact will be of the college capital spending plans in the draft budget. (S5O-02851)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): The 2019-20 draft budget for college capital will continue to provide funding for the maintenance of the college sector estate and the completion of the new Forth Valley College campus in Falkirk.

The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council will allocate this year's funding for college maintenance with a view to meeting priority needs, and will publish indicative allocations for institutions by the end of February.

Mary Fee: The minister will know that the Scottish funding council has estimated that up to £360 million of investment is required over the next five years to make college campuses wind and watertight. Does the minister not accept that the draft budget delivers nowhere near the investment that the Government's own report says is needed?

Richard Lochhead: The Scottish Government, through the Scottish funding council, is working closely with our colleges and universities with regard to capital expenditure.

The member is quite right—of course there is huge pressure on our capital budget. That pressure is across the Scottish Government; it is not just an issue for further and higher education. We would like more United Kingdom funding to come to Scotland, to allow us to allocate higher levels of the necessary investment in our infrastructure for our colleges.

More than £47.6 million of the draft budget will be used for the sector's priority needs. We have been negotiating with the sector on that basis. We

would all love to have more money in the budget. Of course, the Labour Party had the opportunity to negotiate with the Scottish Government on the budget, but it did not take up that opportunity.

Pupil Equity Fund (Impact on Attainment in North Ayrshire)

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the pupil equity fund has had on attainment in North Ayrshire. (S5O-02852)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Since 2015-16, North Ayrshire Council has been allocated almost £25.5 million of funding from the attainment Scotland fund. That includes more than £16 million through the challenge authority programme and approximately £4.4 million pupil equity funding in each of the past two years.

In an inspection report published last year, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education reported that North Ayrshire is making very good progress with improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. It identified that strong leadership, effective partnership working and strong approaches to staff development are helping to drive improved outcomes for children and young people.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that headteachers are best placed to know the strengths and weaknesses of education provision in their schools? If so, what additional measures will be introduced to strengthen their autonomy further?

John Swinney: I hold that view, and that view lies at the heart of the empowerment agenda that the Government and local authorities are jointly progressing. Good progress is being made on establishing the approach to delivering the headteachers charter and to empowering individual professionals.

One key feature of the North Ayrshire inspection is the importance that the local authority attaches to professional learning. I welcome the fact that the professional learning academy in North Ayrshire contributes significantly to enhancing the education and learning opportunities for staff. That, of course, is the best means by which we can enhance learning and teaching for young people in our education system.

Pupils with Mental Health Issues (Support Training)

5. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken in the last year regarding the provision of training for teachers and staff to

support pupils with mental health issues. (S5O-02853)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): We have made clear this Government's commitment to promote and support children's mental health and wellbeing through wide-ranging commitments in our programme for government.

We are continuing to support local authorities to access mental health first aid training for key staff, which will complement the spectrum of mental health strategies that are in place in schools.

Mental health is covered in the General Teaching Council for Scotland's document, "The Standards for Full Registration", and coverage will be further enhanced in a new version of the standards, which is due to be published next year.

Edward Mountain: I welcome the positive steps that the Scottish Government is taking to deliver mental health first aid training to teachers. However, the programme for government is unclear as to whether training will be provided to all school staff, including teaching assistants and additional support needs staff. Will the cabinet secretary clarify the position?

John Swinney: We have set out in the programme for government a range of measures to ensure that we strengthen capacity in schools to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of young people. One key element is the training of individual staff members; another part is the commitment to invest in school counselling services across Scotland, which is a very important element of the package of support. That will put in place in individual schools the necessary measures to ensure that practitioners in the school system are able to support young people in a preventative way and on the basis of early intervention.

There has been extensive roll-out of training for staff in secondary school communities, to increase their confidence in approaching pupils who they think are struggling with mental health issues. Eighteen local authorities have now received such training, and we will continue to work with others to roll out the remaining steps in due course.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I appreciate that the cabinet secretary has touched on this point in his previous answer, but will he outline how the increased investment in recruitment of school counsellors will assist teachers in managing mental health issues?

John Swinney: The investment that we are making in mental health counselling will increase schools' capacity to support young people proactively. Analysis lies at the heart of the mental

health strategy that ministers have introduced, and all the analysis that has been undertaken points to the importance of intervention to support young people at the earliest possible moment at which they might be wrestling with mental health and wellbeing challenges. Such investment in capacity in schools is a key intervention to ensure that they are able to deal with circumstances that they may ordinarily or at the time find that they do not feel confident to handle. We hope that, as a consequence of the investment, such capacity will be increased so as to ensure that that happens.

"Towards a Cooperative University"

6. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the document "Towards a Cooperative University" by Queen Margaret University members of the University and College Union Scotland. (S5O-02854)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government welcomes all contributions on the future of the higher education sector in Scotland, and we have noted the content and views expressed in that particular document, which I thank Patrick Harvie for bringing to my attention.

Patrick Harvie: The institution and the union are currently in dispute; the institution does not agree with all the contents of the document, although it says that it agrees with many of the values expressed in it. Does the Government see merit in the general argument that is being advanced about a co-operative model for our educational institutions? Will the minister commit to ensuring that the Scottish Government takes a constructive approach to identifying any barriers that might exist to the pursuit of the model? What might the Government be able to do to remove such barriers?

Richard Lochhead: I read "Towards a Cooperative University" in preparation for answering Patrick Harvie's question, and I am thankful to him for lodging it. Like the principal of QMU, I agree with many of the sentiments in the document. The Scottish Government will always be constructive and look for new ideas in relation to the culture of our universities. However, they are, of course, autonomous institutions and therefore the matter is one that is primarily for the staff, students and management at QMU.

On the dispute that has been taking place in response to the handling of the deficit at QMU, I know that Patrick Harvie will welcome the fact that the university has made an announcement to staff that no compulsory redundancies will be required as a result of the transformation project. Such redundancies were one of the biggest fears but do

not now appear to be happening, which is good news.

Haulage Industry (Skills Shortage)

7. Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress the transition training fund has made in addressing the reported skills shortage in the heavy goods vehicle industry and increasing the number of drivers. (S5O-02855)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): The latest figures show that more than 4,000 people have had applications approved through the transition training fund, surpassing the initial aim of supporting 1,000 participants each year over its three-year period of operation. The fund has supported more than 500 individuals in undertaking training in the road haulage sector.

Angus MacDonald: I welcome the progress that the transition training fund has helped to bring to the haulage industry. However, the minister will be aware that there is still an estimated shortage of 11,000 HGV drivers in Scotland, which must be addressed. An added problem is that because approximately 15 per cent of truck drivers come from other European Union countries there will be added pressure post-Brexit. Will the minister undertake to encourage Skills Development Scotland to look at other incentives to attract young people into the logistics industry and, just as important, ways to ensure that they are retained for the longer term?

Jamie Hepburn: I agree with the point that the fund cannot be the entirety of our efforts. Skills Development Scotland is already active in ensuring that there is wider activity. To that end, it is working with industry, through the development of a road haulage skills group, to focus on the skills that are needed in the transport network. On bringing others into the industry through the modern apprenticeship programme, as of quarter 2 this year, 1,243 modern apprentices were in training through freight logistics-related frameworks.

On a wider point, Skills Development Scotland supports bespoke large goods vehicles driver training requests that have been made by individuals with up to £4,000 to cover the costs of training.

I recognise that the issue is important for Mr MacDonald in particular, as Grangemouth is in his constituency. If he wants to speak to me further about it, I would be very happy to speak to him.

Employment Support

8. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish

Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding partnership working to help communities access employment support. (S5O-02856)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish Government has on-going discussions with the UK Government on employment support in Scotland. That includes regular ministerial discussions in the joint ministerial working group on welfare and involves a joint operating framework for employability at the official level to ensure smooth interaction and referral between reserved and devolved services and responsibilities in employability support.

Bob Doris: Today, the Parliament's Social Security Committee, which I convene, called for a review of local access to jobcentres. We believe that jobcentre closures have had a detrimental impact on employment support, and we have significant concerns about staff workload levels, which make staff particularly ill prepared for the migration of tax credits to universal credit systems. Does the minister agree that any review should consider working with the Scottish Government and others to develop a new community-based, well-resourced and person-centred employment support service that does not operate under the threat of sanctions, but on the basis of support, dignity and respect?

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Doris will know that I share his and the committee's concerns about the Jobcentre Plus closures process that we have seen in the past few years. Indeed, the Parliament shared those concerns. With the exception of the Conservative Party, we voted across the Parliament to express our concern about those closures.

Our devolved employability programme, fair start Scotland, is already leading the way in offering people the opportunity of support to find work free from the threat of sanctions, and I will continue to urge the United Kingdom Government to follow that lead. We will, of course, continue to explore those matters through the framework that I have laid out. I assure Mr Doris and other members that we will continue to do that.

Early Learning and Childcare Provision (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)

9. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact its commitment to invest £500 million to expand early learning and childcare provision will have on demand for skilled staff and infrastructure investment opportunities in the Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley constituency. (S5O-02857)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government and local authorities have committed to an unprecedented level of investment in early learning and childcare through the near doubling of the funded entitlement to 1,140 hours per year from August 2020. The multiyear funding package will mean that East Ayrshire will receive capital funding of £21.6 million from 2017-18 to 2020-21, with revenue funding to support the expansion increasing to £13.6 million by 2021-22. That will support investment in 15 sites in the Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley area, and 1,140 hours are currently being delivered in six settings in the area as part of phasing. More settings will offer the expanded hours later this year. It is estimated that 162 full-time equivalent posts will be created in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley through the expansion.

Willie Coffey: I welcome the minister's answer. Does she intend to expand the number of modern apprenticeships in early learning and childcare and in foundation apprenticeships, to encourage new recruits to the sector and perhaps to offer young people work experience while they are still at school?

Maree Todd: Modern apprenticeships are popular and very fruitful in training, recruitment and retention in the sector. That is why Skills Development Scotland has committed, through its skills investment plan for the early learning and childcare expansion, to increasing ELC modern apprenticeships by 10 per cent each year to 2020. Figures that relate to the 2017-18 academic year indicated that that target was exceeded, with an increase of 21 per cent in uptake in those modern apprenticeships compared with the figure for 2016-17. We fully expect that growth to continue as we move towards 2020.

For the foundation apprenticeships, the framework on social services, children and young people saw an increase in the number of starts from 57 in cohort 1, in 2016-18, to 466 in cohort 2, in 2017-19. The information for cohort 3, which is due early this year, is expected to show a further increase.

This morning, I had the pleasure of visiting Kidstore Childcare, which is a partner provider in North Lanarkshire that benefits from over half of its staff having joined as apprentices and from five foundation apprentices attending from school. They were absolutely full of the benefits of that way of entering the profession.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Thousands of qualified and highly trained staff are required in order to meet the ambition of the Government's childcare expansion. Can the minister tell me what progress has been made to recruit the required

staff and how many people are currently working in the sector?

Maree Todd: Absolutely. At the moment, we have about 35,000 people working in the sector and just over 25,000 people delivering the funded entitlement. This morning, we had a meeting of the joint delivery board, which is where Government and local authority representatives monitor progress. The data and the intelligence both show that we are broadly on target to meet the forecasts.

In recent months, another comforting fact has been that the Scottish Social Services Council's report, which was published just before Christmas, showed that day care children's services—a category that includes the ELC provision—reported a level of vacancies that was significantly below the national average. The proportion of services that reported vacancies that were hard to fill was also significantly below the national average, which is very comforting at this stage of the expansion.

University Students from Deprived Areas

10. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Higher Education Statistics Agency recording a record number of students from deprived areas enrolling at university in Scotland. (S5O-02858)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): I welcome the latest statistics, which show a record increase in the number of entrants from our most deprived areas. That demonstrates significant progress on access and the continued strength of our university sector. The figures provide the first official update on progress against the Government's widening access targets since the publication of the commission on widening access's final report, in 2016.

Stewart Stevenson: I am particularly interested in the issue because one of the top 10 areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland is in my constituency. I therefore welcome the 8 per cent rise in the number of students from the most deprived 20 per cent of communities. What more can we expect to see, in the years to come, that will build on those early and encouraging numbers?

Richard Lochhead: As Stewart Stevenson says, the progress has been excellent. Indeed, in 2017-18, 15.6 per cent of Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities were from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas. That represents an increase of 1.8 percentage points compared to the figure for the previous year, and it is only 0.4 percentage points short of

the Government's interim target of 16 per cent by 2021. I pay tribute to all the institutions that have delivered that progress.

We clearly still have to achieve our interim target, and we have a long-term target of 20 per cent of students coming from the most deprived 20 per cent of wards by 2030. Only this morning, I convened the latest meeting of the widening access delivery group. The commissioner for fair access, Sir Peter Scott, was there as well, and he said that he very much welcomed the progress shown by the latest statistics, which vindicated the fact that we have free higher education in Scotland.

We are making good progress, but there is much more to be done and we must keep our foot on the pedal.

Pupils with Additional Support Needs (Almond Valley)

11. Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that pupils with additional support needs in the Almond Valley constituency have their needs and right to an education met. (S5O-02859)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 requires education authorities to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils. West Lothian Council has the responsibility for ensuring that the additional support needs of pupils in the Almond Valley constituency are met. The Scottish Government supports education authorities in fulfilling those duties through the provision of statutory guidance to inform local policy and practice.

Angela Constance: On behalf of the parents and children whom I represent whose additional support needs are not being met or not being met in full, will the cabinet secretary give an update on his consideration of the report "Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved", particularly on issues of resources and practice, and say how we will ensure that our laws are put into practice in our classrooms?

John Swinney: I welcome the report "Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved", which was produced by Children in Scotland, the National Autistic Society and Scottish Autism. I have met all the organisations involved and I have responded in writing to each of the calls for action that they put to me in that report.

I have committed to hosting a round-table discussion with the authors of the report and other key stakeholders, which will take place later this month. In the light of that conversation, I will

identify what further steps are required to improve the consistency of support across Scotland, perhaps through improved guidance, through building capacity to assist in the delivery of effective additional support and through improving the career pathways that are in place, to ensure that we have the right skills to support young people so that they can be included in education in Scotland.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome Parliament's unanimous backing of last week's Scottish Conservative motion in favour of the review of a presumption to mainstream. When does the cabinet secretary think that the review will be complete, and when will it be published?

John Swinney: We have to be really clear in our language on this issue. What Parliament approved last week was a commitment to review the implementation of the principle of the presumption of mainstreaming. By supporting the amendment that I lodged, the Parliament reaffirmed its support for the principle and the presumption of mainstreaming. It is important that we are clear in what we say about the issue.

I will engage in dialogue with local authorities about how we will look at that implementation, which lies very much at the heart of the question that was put to me by Angela Constance. I will do that in the light of the discussion that I will have with the stakeholders later this month, and I will be happy to update the Parliament. I also gave a commitment to the Parliament and to Johann Lamont that I would look at the possibility of holding further debates on the issue in Government time, and I will consider that in the light of the round table that I will host.

Disclosure Scotland (Information Technology System)

12. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether the processing of applications to the protecting vulnerable groups scheme for people working in schools will change as a result of Disclosure Scotland's new IT system, and what progress has been made on this. (S5O-02860)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): Disclosure Scotland's new IT system is being designed based on extensive research with users. Applying for a disclosure certificate using the new service will be simpler and faster. The system is being developed on the basis of the existing law, the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 and the Police Act 1997. The new IT system is being delivered iteratively in incremental improvements. It will handle all types of disclosure applications under both the 1997 and 2007 acts, and it is

currently handling basic and standard disclosures under the 1997 act.

Jeremy Balfour: Responses to freedom of information requests show that the new disclosure IT system was delayed at the last minute in August last year. As a result, Disclosure Scotland had to pay a higher price to return to the old BT system, which was called “ageing” and “obsolete” by Disclosure Scotland’s chief executive. Has there been any disruption to the PVG scheme as a result of that, and can the minister confirm that Disclosure Scotland will definitely exit the BT contract at the next available opportunity?

Maree Todd: The programme has proven to be more complex than was originally understood, both technically and functionally. However, over the past 18 months Disclosure Scotland has overcome many hurdles, such as the core cloud platform, with security accreditation and completion of the basic build. Safeguarding has not been compromised at all during the transition and the investment in the new system is a spend to save. We expect to regain the investment within a short pay-back period of less than three years.

College to University Articulation

13. **Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the rate of articulation from college to university. (S5O-02861)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish funding council is working on developing the national articulation database in order to provide a more comprehensive resource that will allow the identification of students articulating from college to university. That work is nearing completion, and the SFC is actively engaging with colleges and universities in order to quality assure the data. It is anticipated that statistics from the database will be available in the spring.

Gillian Martin: The articulation route from higher national diplomas to the second and third years at university has long been a key component in the Government’s widening access ambitions. It is my experience as a former further education lecturer that many of my HND graduates went on to achieve very good degree results. Will the minister indicate how the success of articulation is being measured in terms of degree results and whether an analysis has been made of how articulation is widening access for people from families that have not previously gained access to university?

Richard Lochhead: I am confident that Ms Martin’s students did so well because they had such an outstanding lecturer, but of course there

are other issues that are relevant to the question as well. The latest release of articulation data, which covers 2014-15, shows that 8,402 higher national certificate and higher national diploma students progressed to university.

On the widening access debate, the report “A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access”, which was published in March 2016, says:

“it is important that all institutions engage strongly with articulation. Most standard routes into university depend upon achieving good results at Higher.”

It says that there is therefore

“a significant cohort of disadvantaged learners who leave school with few, if any, formal qualifications”,

and it adds:

“For these learners, articulation is a crucial alternative route into university.”

It is a very important issue for widening access, as Gillian Martin highlights. We are doing a lot of work on it through the forum that exists to promote the issue, and we will keep Parliament updated.

Primary School Teachers (Supply Staff)

14. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what percentage of primary school teachers are supply staff. (S5O-02862)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The information requested is not held centrally. The recruitment of supply teachers is a matter for local authorities and it is for them to determine what best suits their local needs. Primary teacher numbers are at their highest since 1980.

Jamie Greene: I take it from that that the cabinet secretary does not know the answer to my original question. It is a fact, however, that in the past year Scottish schools have spent over £60 million on supply teachers. In North Ayrshire alone, the amount spent has increased by 60 per cent year on year. Does the cabinet secretary recognise and accept that workforce planning has to improve if the bill is to reduce?

John Swinney: The first words in my answer were, “The information requested is not held centrally.” That is what I meant. We do not hold that information in the Government—I do not possess it in order to answer Mr Greene’s question. If I had the answer, I would have given him it, but we do not have that information. That explains it clearly to him—if he has managed to understand the answer that I have now given him.

In relation to workforce planning, primary teacher numbers are at their highest since 1980.

The latest statistics that we published showed an increase in teacher numbers of 447 in 2018. I hope that that reassures Mr Greene that the Government is taking every step, including by having new routes into teaching, to ensure that we can boost recruitment to the teaching profession. Of course, we have to use supply teachers, because supply teachers have to fill vacancies of a short-term nature that crop up from time to time at local authority level, but that is a matter for local authorities to handle and report upon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 15 has not been lodged and question 16 has been withdrawn.

Suicide (School Pupils)

17. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many school pupils have died by suicide in the last five years and what action it has taken in response to this. (S5O-02865)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Information is collected from death registration records on the number of children and young people who have committed suicide, and that is published as part of national statistics. It is not, however, possible to accurately confirm from that information the number of school pupils who have committed suicide. Our programme for government and our suicide prevention action plan set out the actions that we will take with our partners to deliver improved services for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. That includes the provision of counselling support for pupils and mental health first aid training for school staff.

Monica Lennon: In my region, there have sadly been recent instances of school pupils who have died by suicide. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on what cross-portfolio work is on-going with schools to ensure that they are fully aware of and engaged in the Government's suicide prevention strategy?

John Swinney: As I said in my earlier answer, the programme for government and the suicide prevention action plan set out the actions that we are taking. They involve a lot of work across the education service and the health service and the work on counselling that is undertaken, and that work is co-ordinated by ministers on a collaborative basis.

Key workstreams support us, including the workstreams of the children and young people's mental health task force, which is chaired by Dr Dame Denise Coia. A significant amount of work is emerging from that, on which ministers will reflect as we take forward our priorities.

I assure Monica Lennon and parents and families around the country that the issue is taken very seriously in Government. We understand—we try to understand—the enormity of the trauma of such terrible instances for families and we try to provide as much support as we can in all circumstances. I am sure that out of the work that is being undertaken will come recommendations on how we can strengthen practice; the Government will embark on that seriously.

Childcare Providers (Inverclyde)

18. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it gives to childcare providers in Inverclyde. (S5O-02866)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have committed to an unprecedented level of investment in early learning and childcare. Inverclyde will receive nearly £6 million of capital funding over the period from 2017-18 to 2020-21, with revenue expenditure to support the expansion of early learning and childcare increasing to £9 million by 2021-22.

Providers from all parts of the sector are vital to the expansion. In December, we published a delivery support plan to build on the support that is already available to providers, including 100 per cent rates relief for day nurseries and more ELC modern apprenticeships. Our delivery support plan will support the financial sustainability of providers, strengthen partnership working, support workforce recruitment and training and improve communications with parents and carers.

Stuart McMillan: Will the minister guarantee that social enterprise childcare providers working with children aged nought to three will still be able to deliver services on at least a cost-neutral basis?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government's approach to delivering the funded early learning and childcare entitlement to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds is provider neutral.

Much of the provision for nought to three-year-olds falls into the proportion of funded providers' business that is outwith the funded entitlement. The funding agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA provides the funding to allow local authorities to set sustainable rates for funded places, which will reflect the cost of delivery for all providers that deliver the funded entitlement, including social enterprises, which will be an important part of the success of the venture.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. I apologise to Clare Adamson and Alexander Stewart for failing to get to their questions on this occasion.

Salmon Farming

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-15677, in the name of Edward Mountain, on behalf of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, on the committee's inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland. I call the committee's convener to speak to and move the motion.

14:43

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Before I open the debate on behalf of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, specifically my interests in a wild salmon fishery. I also give special thanks to the committee's clerking team and the team from the Scottish Parliament information centre who supported us during the inquiry. They responded to the particular challenges of the inquiry with a professionalism that has enabled the production of a detailed report.

During 2018, the committee conducted an in-depth inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland. Our inquiry was prompted by a public petition on the impact of the farmed salmon sector on wild salmon stocks. It was clear that the problem went beyond that, so our inquiry looked at further matters: we looked at the current state of the salmon farming industry in Scotland; we identified opportunities for its future development; and we explored how the various fish health and environmental challenges could be addressed.

We took oral evidence from industry representatives, research bodies, environmental organisations, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and all the regulatory bodies. We were also extremely grateful to those organisations and individuals who took the time to submit detailed and often technical written submissions to inform our deliberations.

The committee's inquiry was also informed by an important piece of work that was carried out in advance of our wider inquiry by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee on the impact of salmon farming on the marine environment. We were extremely grateful for that valuable contribution, which demonstrated the benefit of two committees working jointly together.

The committee was also aware of a range of relevant activity by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the salmon industry that occurred after we had finished taking evidence and which included: publication of the Scottish Government's "Scotland's 10 Year Farmed Fish Health: strategic

framework" in May 2018; the announcement in June 2018 of a salmon interactions working group, which will examine and provide advice on the interactions between wild and farmed salmon; and the publication of a "Finfish Aquaculture Sector Plan" by SEPA in November 2018. Both the Scottish Government and SEPA also provided responses to the committee's report just last week.

There are some key messages and recommendations in the report that I would like to highlight. First, I should make it clear that the committee acknowledges both the economic and the social value that the salmon farming industry brings to Scotland. It provides jobs in rural areas, brings investment and spend into local communities and stimulates economic activity in the wider supply chain. However, the committee believes that the contribution made by the industry to the Scottish economy should not be allowed to mask any negative impact on the environment. I will touch on some of those specific issues later.

It is clear to the committee that those in the industry wish it to expand. However, the committee strongly agrees with the view of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee that until they can demonstrate that they can truly be good neighbours, it is not appropriate for it to do so. The industry needs to rise to the challenges that it faces on fish health and the environment and the committee feels that in order to do so, the status quo in terms of regulation and enforcement is not acceptable. That view was shared by the majority of stakeholders, including industry representatives and, importantly, the Scottish Government, in its response to our report.

The committee is, therefore, of the view that urgent and meaningful action needs to be taken to address regulatory deficiencies in order to raise the bar for the industry and thus protect our environment and the industry's future. The committee is also firmly of the view that a stricter regulatory and consent regime, which is also fair and proportionate, can only benefit the sector, helping to drive improvement and giving it confidence that it is meeting its environmental responsibilities.

Let us be clear: the reputation of Scottish salmon as a premium product must be maintained. The committee is in no doubt that consumers and markets see Scotland as a producer that meets the highest international production, fish health and environmental standards. We must ensure that that continues. Therefore, the committee welcomes the recognition by some key producers of the benefits that enhanced regulation would bring to their product and their support for the recommendations that we have made.

On sea lice, the industry must accept that currently neither chemicals nor cleaner fish can totally solve the issue. We strongly believe that there should be a mandatory and timely approach to the reporting of sea lice infestations. We recommend a compliance policy that is robust and enforceable with appropriate penalties. I note from the Scottish Government's response that it is already reviewing the farmed fish sea lice compliance policy and expects to complete that by the spring.

Although that exercise considers the mandatory reporting of sea lice levels from March 2019, it will be done only monthly in arrears. In other countries in which our key producers operate, it is done weekly in arrears. One has to ask why the Government is content to achieve less. Overall, the work on sea lice is positive, but there can be no halfway house in what it delivers. Although we acknowledge the work that the industry is doing, there is a great deal of work still to be undertaken to tackle the sea lice problem.

On farmed salmon mortalities, the committee and the industry believe that the current level of farmed fish mortality is too high. Losing between 20 per cent to 25 per cent of all fish put to sea is not acceptable. The committee believes that until health issues are addressed to the satisfaction of regulators, no expansion should be permitted at sites that report high or significantly increased levels of mortalities. The Scottish Government has said that it will publish mortality reports monthly in arrears and will consider options around web-based and real-time site reporting on mortality. It has also said that it will consider a broader review of the transportation and disposal of dead fish. Again, that is a welcome step forward on reporting, but Scotland is again setting a lower bar than that set by our key producers elsewhere, and it is disappointing that the Scottish Government does not consider that there should be restrictions on expansion at sites with high levels of mortalities.

Turning to environmental regulation, the committee shares the view of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee that the regulatory tools that are currently available to SEPA are neither adequate nor effective. The Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee recognised that SEPA has not been performing well on monitoring or enforcing the regulations, and that is our view as well. The sector has shown poor rates of compliance with SEPA's current standards. That is borne out by the results of SEPA's compliance assessment process for 2017, which showed an increase in the number of salmon farms that had failed to meet the required standards. The committee is clear that SEPA must respond to its failures. I am sure

that the committee will want to monitor progress in that area with interest.

On the location of salmon farms, the committee made several important recommendations. It said that there should be a precautionary approach to applications for new sites and the expansion of existing sites; that there is a need to locate new farms in more suitable areas, away from wild salmon migratory routes; that there should be a more strategic approach to identifying areas across Scotland that are either suitable or unsuitable for the siting of salmon farms; and that work should be done to move existing poorly sited farms to suitable sites.

We called on the Scottish Government to provide strong and clear leadership to ensure that those actions are taken. However, it is concerning that, in its response, the Scottish Government suggests that the precautionary principle has been applied and

"will continue to be applied in a meaningful and effective manner".

That is not what we heard in evidence.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does the committee convener accept that although we heard evidence that the precautionary principle was not being applied, some people said that it was?

Edward Mountain: I absolutely accept that some people said that the precautionary principle was being followed. However, as a generality, more people said that it was not than that it was.

Our report does not support a business-as-usual approach, and I do not believe that that is what the Government or industry should be promoting.

Before I finish, I feel that it is incumbent on me, as convener, to highlight the committee's concerns about the leaks to the media that occurred as we were considering our draft report. Those leaks were clearly identified by the media outlet concerned as having come from a member of the committee, and they were sustained over several weeks; indeed, a journalist showed me private papers from a committee meeting that had been circulated to members only an hour or so before I was approached. The member who leaked the papers and made comment did so knowing that it was unlikely that they would be identified. Their actions significantly delayed the committee's consideration of the draft report. However, worse still, they caused a level of mistrust within the committee regarding private papers and private discussions.

Although leaks are, of course, a matter for the code of conduct, unless a member is identified, no action can be taken. As convener of the committee, and as a firm believer in the

importance of the integrity of the Parliament, I believe that the incident was totally unacceptable. Therefore, I suggest that the Parliament should consider strengthening the code of conduct in this area.

I have made no public comment on the unsubstantiated personal attacks that were made as a result of the leaks, and I will not do so now, but I want to say something directly to the person who leaked the private papers and made the comments to the press: you should reflect carefully on what you have done, because I believe that you have let the Parliament down, you have let the committee down and, perhaps more importantly, you have let yourself down.

I have mentioned some of the key points in the report. There are many other issues that I am sure will be picked up and discussed by other members. We have a real opportunity to build on the broad support that the committee's report received, but we need to be clear that it and the ECCLR Committee report do not support business as usual, therefore neither should the Government or the industry. To do so would be to disadvantage Scotland and our salmon producers, damage our reputation as a quality food producer and potentially harm the environment.

I look forward to what I hope will be a lively and progressive debate.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's 9th Report, 2018 (Session 5), *Report on Salmon Farming in Scotland* (SP Paper 432).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Martin to speak on behalf of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, as its convener.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, I take this opportunity to apologise for arriving late. I got my timings wrong. Sorry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is kind of you to do that in public, Mr Chapman, although a note to me would have been sufficient—but there you are.

Do not look at me like that, Ms Martin—I will not take that off your time.

14:56

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. You can read my mind.

I feel a slight uneasiness in speaking about an inquiry report that was published before I took on the post of convener of the Environment, Climate

Change and Land Reform Committee. I record my thanks to Graeme Dey, who was convener at the time of the inquiry and report, and to the committee clerks for the work that they did then and the work that they have done more recently in bringing me up to speed on developments since the report was published.

Against a background of plans to extend production in the aquaculture industry to between 300,000 and 400,000 tonnes by 2030, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee jointly commissioned a review of the scientific evidence on the environmental effects of salmon farming in Scotland. I pay tribute to the REC Committee, which took many of the recommendations in our report and did a great deal of further work on the topic, from its perspective. I echo Edward Mountain's comments on the merits of joint committee working.

A year has passed since the ECCLR Committee's report, and it is fair to say that a lot has happened since then. However, before I go on to talk specifically about our findings and recommendations, I want to say that salmon farming has done three very important things for this country. First, it has made salmon affordable for households. When I was growing up, salmon was something that came in a tin and was mashed up and spread thinly on sandwiches at christenings. Now, that rich source of protein and omega 3 oil is an affordable, healthy and fresh alternative option that is no longer the preserve of special occasions.

Secondly, salmon farming is a massive contributor to Scotland's economy—particularly to our worldwide exports and in relation to job creation in rural areas, as has been mentioned—and its quality is respected the world over.

Thirdly, and most pertinently to the portfolio of my committee, salmon farming is one of the lowest-emissions farming methods, which is a point that is often missed when we discuss the industry.

The industry's importance is why inquiries such as those that were done by the two committees are so important, as we move forward to expand the sector while enhancing and protecting our global reputation, and protecting the environment that supports the sector. The Scottish Government commissioned a report in 2002 that addressed six main areas of environmental impact. They were disease impacts on wild and farmed stocks, including the impact of sea lice; discharge of waste nutrients and their interaction in the wider marine environment; the effects of discharges of medicines and chemicals from salmon farming; escapes from fish farms and the potential effects

on wild populations; the sustainability of feed supplies; and the emerging environmental impacts, including on wild wrasse and marine mammals.

The ECCLR Committee heard from the industry, regulators, communities and non-governmental organisations before reporting to the REC Committee ahead of its inquiry. It was mindful that rapid development and growth of the sector could not take place without a full understanding of the environmental impacts, and aimed to shine a light on them in order to open up a debate on identifying areas for improvement and action. It is clear that current concerns regarding the environmental impacts of salmon farming are the same as the concerns in 2002.

Many of our stakeholders pointed to the lack of a focus on application of the precautionary principle in the development and expansion of the sector. Scotland is at a critical point in terms of considering how salmon farming can develop in an environmentally sustainable way, while at the same time delivering the substantial benefits that I outlined at the beginning of my speech.

Our inquiry found that there are significant gaps in knowledge, data and research on, and in monitoring of, the potential risk that the sector poses to ecosystem functions, their resilience and the supply of ecosystem services. Further information is necessary in order that we can set for the industry realistic targets that fall within environmental limits. We recommended a requirement that the industry fund the independent and independently verified research and development that are needed.

The role, responsibilities and interaction of agencies require review, and agencies need to be funded and resourced appropriately in order fully to meet their environmental duties and obligations. Scotland's public bodies have a duty to protect biodiversity. That thinking must be to the fore when we consider expansion of the sector. The ECCLR Committee saw that there is a need to progress on the basis of the precautionary principle, and asked the relevant agencies to work together more effectively in that regard.

The committee identified a need for the salmon farming industry to demonstrate that it can effectively manage and mitigate its impacts on the environment. In particular, adaptive management that takes account of the precautionary principle, through use of real-time farm-by-farm data, has the potential to reduce environmental impacts. We called for an ecosystems-based approach to planning the industry's growth and development in marine and freshwater environments. Such an approach would include identifying where salmon farming can take place and the carrying capacity of that environment.

The ECCLR Committee wanted independent research to be commissioned, including a full cost-benefit analysis of recirculating aquaculture systems, and a comparative analysis of the sector as it currently operates in Scotland. Alongside that work, further development and implementation of alternative technical solutions should be supported by use of incentives.

The committee found that the current consenting and regulatory framework is inadequate to address environmental issues, particularly in relation to sanctions and enforcement. That will not affect the responsible majority of farmers, but a better approach would tackle the few operators that might damage their sector's reputation if they are not dealt with appropriately.

The ECCLR Committee recognises that there has been considerable further discussion on many of those issues since it reported last year, and that there has been a great deal of Government-led action. We welcome the conclusions of the REC Committee, which supports our findings, and the continuing work that Government agencies are doing to address them. Both committees would like a full commitment—with the necessary urgency across the industry, agencies and the Government—to addressing the complex challenges that we have jointly highlighted. Immediate mandatory reporting on sea lice is still under review, and we look forward to strategic guidance on siting of fish farms, and to revisions to the consenting and regulatory framework.

The Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, alongside the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, will continue to examine with great interest the actions of the industry, the agencies and the Scottish Government in responding to the challenges, in order to ensure that our marine and freshwater environments are afforded the necessary protections amid the growth of a hugely important sector for Scotland.

15:03

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): I hope that I have never stood here ill-prepared for the debate ahead, but I feel particularly well prepared today, having enjoyed a lunch of prime Scottish salmon.

Members: Hear, hear.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): How have you got time for that? [*Laughter.*]

Fergus Ewing: I have to say that I had lunch in my office: it was not a posh affair.

Let me put on the record that my Cabinet colleague Roseanna Cunningham—who is here, listening to the debate—and I appreciate the diligence of the members of both committees during their inquiries into the salmon farming sector. As indicated in our response to the lead committee, we acknowledge and accept many of its conclusions and recommendations. I make absolutely clear the Government's support for the farmed salmon and wider aquaculture sectors, and for their sustainable growth. We need to do more to get the balance right in order to protect the environment, and we acknowledge that the status quo is not an option.

Salmon farming is one of Scotland's success stories. As the world's third-largest salmon producer, the sector is a global player.

According to Highland and Islands Enterprise analysis in 2017, 10,340 jobs across Scotland were dependent on salmon farming and its supply chain, which generated £540 million in gross value added, and provided wages worth some £271 million.

Those are the macrostatistics. On a local level, in constituencies including those of my colleagues Kate Forbes and Gail Ross, Tavish Scott in Shetland and Liam McArthur in Orkney, a great many people's livelihoods are sustained by this modern Scottish industry. All members will acknowledge its importance.

Scottish farmed salmon has become a key contributor to Scotland's food and drink success. From Boston to Brussels, it attracts a premium. With sales in 2017 of £600 million to more than 50 countries worldwide, it is Scotland's biggest food export.

The industry has reinvigorated and re-energised many of our coastal and remote rural communities, which has been a catalyst for vital improvements in social infrastructure, housing, transport and broadband.

Having recognised that continuous improvements in fish health and environmental impact are a win-win for aquaculture and other marine and coastal industries, the sector has constantly innovated in husbandry and farm management. Indeed, aquaculture is responsible for some of the biggest infrastructure investments in Scotland in recent times, thereby creating a broader supply chain that is of significant value.

Annual capital investment by the sector is about £63 million. Recently, there has been a significant amount of investment, including by Mowi—formerly Marine Harvest—in its feed plant at Kyleakin on Skye, and by Scottish Sea Farms in its hatchery near Oban, which had a cumulative price tag of more than £150 million. Incidentally, those investments contribute to improved fish

health by increasing the length of time that salmon spend in the hatchery and reducing the amount of time that they spend at sea, so that they are stronger when they enter the cages at sea. Moreover, the salmon sector has created supply-chain and processing opportunities and jobs elsewhere in Scotland, from Stornoway to Rosyth.

There is no doubt that salmon farming plays a key role in our ambitions for our nation. It is a low-carbon industry with a small carbon footprint. As Gillian Martin said, it produces high-protein, healthy food products that are increasingly affordable to domestic consumers, including—through school meals—children. Through investment and innovation in research and development in our higher education institutions, the industry also helps to deliver our science, technology, engineering and mathematics strategy objectives.

The Government wants to support the key role that aquaculture plays in attracting more young people to live and work in rural and remote rural areas. Therefore, I am pleased to announce today that we are, with the aquaculture industry leadership group, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, Lantra and other bodies, working to develop an aquaculture skills plan that will support young people to enter the sector.

We can be proud of the global nature of our role in this industry. Heather Jones, who is the chief executive of the SAIC, recently contributed to an expert group in Canada that was looking at how to address the industry's challenges.

As members alluded to in their addresses on behalf of the committees, we must learn from other countries' approaches to sustainable farming. I am pleased to announce that, in March, Scotland will host a meeting of European Union and northern European fish health inspectors and experts. We want the sector's economic contribution to grow, but we recognise that it must develop sustainably, with appropriate regulatory frameworks that minimise and address environmental impacts. We are already taking steps to ensure that an appropriate balance is struck.

First, under an independent chair—John Goodlad—we have established a wild salmon interactions workstream, which will consider the relationship between farmed and wild salmon and the impact of farmed salmon on wild salmon. The group has been tasked with proposing an improved set of arrangements, and we expect to receive the group's recommendations later this year.

Of course, we must keep it in mind that there is no single cause of the decline in wild salmon

numbers around all parts of Scotland and in the north-east Atlantic. Therefore, the group will eventually explore other pressures that bear down on wild salmon, including climate change, predation, angling and man-made barriers in our rivers.

Secondly, we have published “Scotland's 10 Year Farmed Fish Health: strategic framework”, with four working groups, which have been up and running since autumn last year and are making good progress. In particular, we recognise the concerns that have been expressed about mortality and the links to sea lice, which is why that is one of the key workstreams. Control of sea lice on farms has improved. The most recent analysis that is available from Marine Scotland's science division shows a decline over the four years 2014-17. However, we are not complacent. There is more to do.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):

I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for taking an intervention on that point. Of course, there is a lot of good news and that is welcome. However, if any other industry had such a level of mortality, there would be significant interventions. Does the cabinet secretary believe that the Scottish Government has made robust enough interventions to address the issue?

Fergus Ewing: I will come to mortality in a minute. I was dealing with sea lice and want to finish the point, which is important.

I can advise today that we will complete a review of our sea lice compliance regime this spring. I will not prejudge the outcome of that review, which will be conducted by experts and will be evidence based, as is absolutely appropriate and right. However, it is important to say that I expect that the regime will be tightened, which will provide assurance to all interests—including fish farm businesses—that our fish health inspectorate is working effectively to tackle sea lice infestations.

Finally, independent of the Government, SEPA has published its draft “Finfish Aquaculture Sectoral Plan” and its response to the REC Committee.

John Finnie asked about mortality. I am pleased to say that mortalities are reducing in many instances, as are sea lice numbers. However, again, we are not complacent and more needs to be done. That is precisely why the fish health framework and the four groups that I mentioned, which have been doing a huge amount of work, are also considering the matter. We will also take interim steps to produce an environmental monitoring plan to be delivered as a condition of consents for marine aquaculture planning applications.

Going forward, it is key that everyone has confidence in a regulatory framework that encompasses the principles of adaptive management, best use of scientific evidence and clear advice to decision-makers, which stands up to scrutiny.

I see that my time is running dry. I will therefore skip three pages of my speech out of consideration for the Presiding Officer and, perhaps, others.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I am terribly sorry, cabinet secretary. I am sure that everyone was desperate to hear it.

Fergus Ewing: I will just say that I look forward to the debate with great interest and enjoyment, and will be very happy and keen to reply to points that members make in the course of it.

15:13

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests with regard to both fish farming and wild fishing. I also state at the start that I was on the ECCLR Committee when it authored its report on salmon farming, and I was the ECCLR Committee's rapporteur to the REC Committee during its evidence sessions.

It was an honour to work on the ECCLR Committee report. Although the work was at times challenging, I emerged with great respect for other MSP colleagues—many of whom are in the chamber today—as we combined collectively to produce that report. I mention in particular the departed Graeme Dey [*Laughter.*] “Departed” as in departed from the committee—he is hale and hearty nevertheless. Gillian Martin has hit the ground running, as she showed in her speech.

Usually, for obvious reasons, I do not like to dwell on my entry in the register of members' interests. However, I will make an exception to that today, not least because I hope to use my personal experience to explain one of the tensions at the heart of this debate.

My family business has a financial interest in a salmon farm on Loch Arkaig in Lochaber—Mr Finnie will know it well. It is a freshwater farm and is a relatively small operation. However, it has been there since the 1980s and has been a consistent local employer for several decades. It is owned and managed by the company formerly known as Marine Harvest, which is of course a major employer across the Highlands and Islands. From those who work on site on fish farms to those who process and package the end product, nobody can doubt the economic importance of the industry to a fragile area of Scotland. The cabinet secretary is quite right to highlight those points.

I also have an interest in the wild fishery side of life, in terms of the Arkaig, Spean and Lochy catchment areas. Wild salmon and sea trout numbers in those rivers, as in many other rivers on the western seaboard, have been in serious and severe decline over the past 20 to 30 years. The reasons for the decline are complex and not fully understood, but, undoubtedly, the increase in the number of fish farms in the west Highlands has had some detrimental effect on wild fisheries.

John Mason: How does Donald Cameron respond to the argument that wild fish numbers have been declining since the 1960s, which was 50 years before the fish farms started?

Donald Cameron: I have no issue with that. We can all agree that there has been a severe decline over a number of years and whether that has been over 30 or 50 years is beside the point. The real issue is that it is incredibly important—the cabinet secretary hinted at this—that a piece of work is done outside aquaculture that looks specifically at the decline of our wild fisheries.

Stepping away from my personal circumstances, I recall one of the first visits that I made as an MSP, which was to the Argyll Fisheries Trust in Inveraray, where, from a map on the wall, I saw that a salmon going to sea at the top of Loch Fyne was required to pass at least 10 fish farms before it reached the open sea. There was a sense of the negative effect of those farms on wild fish.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will Donald Cameron take an intervention?

Donald Cameron: I would like to carry on. I do not have long and I have a lot to cover.

With that as background, I will set out the Scottish Conservatives' position in the debate. We are committed to the fish farming industry in Scotland, but recognise that it must operate to the highest environmental standards. That commitment to the highest environmental standards is even more critical if the industry's ambition to double production by 2030 is to be realised. I am heartened by the more constructive approach of the industry recently, notably from bodies such as the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation and the SAIC, which recognise the challenge before them.

I turn to the REC Committee report, which is the subject of the debate. We welcome its findings. As I said at the start of my speech, I have observed the process on both committees—REC and ECCLR—and I appreciate the work of the clerks and many witnesses, as well as the contribution of MSPs.

It is a balanced report, which takes a reasonable and measured approach to the challenges that the salmon industry faces, and also acknowledges what the industry has to offer. As other members have said, there are huge direct, indirect and induced impacts from salmon farming, which creates thousands of jobs in Scotland. Figures from 2016 show that Scotland is the largest producer of farmed Atlantic salmon in the EU, with production worth around £765 million.

Nevertheless, the ECCLR Committee and REC Committee reports both highlighted significant failings that we on the Conservative benches feel need to be addressed in order to strengthen the industry. It is particularly pertinent that the very first recommendation of the REC Committee report states that, although

“The Committee acknowledges both the economic and social value that the salmon farming industry brings to Scotland”,

it is

“essential that it addresses and identifies solutions to the environmental and fish health challenges it faces as a priority.”

There is a welcome acceptance by the industry that those changes have to happen. The Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation said:

“the salmon sector supports many of the overall aims and ambitions of the RECC report and seeks to co-operate with the Scottish Government and the regulators to find the best way of ensuring the sustainable growth of this key Scottish industry”.

Of course, new growth must come with a view to reducing many of the concerns that exist, which the report highlighted. As other members mentioned, the REC Committee said:

“the current level of mortalities”

is

“too high in general across the sector and it is very concerned to note the extremely high mortality rates at particular sites.”

In one example in the Highlands and Islands in 2017, 125,000 salmon died in Lewis following a bacterial outbreak. Instances such as that can be avoided, and the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation said that there has been investment and a small improvement in salmon mortality rates, so steps are slowly beginning to achieve results.

There is much more to do, and I welcome the series of recommendations on, for example, tackling sea lice and the fact that the REC Committee report agreed with the ECCLR Committee report that the use of cleaner fish should be explored further. Ensuring that we quickly improve our regulatory approach is vital, but there also needs to be clarity on who will

enforce what. As the REC Committee report indicates, concerns were

“expressed in evidence that none of the existing regulatory bodies currently has responsibility for the impact of salmon farms on wild salmon stocks.”

I note that Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland felt that there has been a “general lack of urgency” from the Scottish Government. It is clear that that must change.

I end where I began, and on a positive note. In Lochaber, we have collaboration between the local salmon fishery board trust and the industry, which has invested in a number of wild fish restocking projects. There is collaboration and shared scientific and environmental expertise and a genuine hope that both sectors can assist each other.

We support the industry. It has to improve: it knows that and it is in its interest to improve. If it can grow sustainably and operate to the highest environmental standards, the salmon farming industry can continue to play a key role in the Scottish rural economy.

15:20

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Scottish farmed salmon enjoys an excellent international reputation for quality and we should never take that for granted. It is important that an industry with exports that are worth £600 million continues to thrive—that point is lost in the committee report but it must be recognised, and I am glad that Edward Mountain emphasised it today.

Therefore, it is in all our interests to get salmon farming right in Scotland. To fail would damage the Scottish economy and put at risk high-quality jobs in remote rural areas. Some of those areas are barely surviving and the last thing that we want to preside over is dying communities. If we are to see the repopulation of rural Scotland, we need to ensure that those areas have thriving economies. Fish farming is part of that mix.

We need to skill our rural workforce for jobs in fish farming, and we need schools and colleges to get involved in attracting young people into the industry. Young people need to have their horizons broadened. No one says that they must all stay in the communities that they were brought up in but, far too often, young people are forced away from remote rural communities because of the lack of careers and opportunities. When we have an industry that can provide young people with that future and a career, we need to make sure that they know about it and that they have the opportunity to gain the skills that will allow them to work in it. I welcome the cabinet secretary's

announcement today. We really need to capitalise on the opportunities that fish farming provides.

However, that does not mean that we accept or condone bad practice—we do not. Government, producers and agencies have to ensure that our reputation is not further damaged in order to allow the maximisation of the economic impact of fish farming. We need to aspire to be the best fish farming industry in the world—an industry that is sustainable and that has animal welfare at its heart.

For many years, the industry has said to me that the bureaucracy that surrounds fish farming is huge: there is a myriad of organisations, each pulling in different directions. When I read the committee report, and the Government's response, that really came home to me. The report listed stakeholders and regulatory bodies, the Scottish Government, local government, SEPA, Scottish Natural Heritage, the EU, the Prince of Wales's sustainability group, the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, fish health inspectors from Marine Scotland, Crown Estate Scotland—my list had many more and a number are not on that list, but, frankly, I gave up counting them all.

We need to streamline the system for regulating, planning and managing fish farming. I wonder whether the complexity leads to some of the problems that we have seen; it certainly does not help with finding solutions. We need an industry that is well regulated and which meets the highest possible standards. However, in such a cluttered landscape, it is impossible to see how that can be done. I urge the Government to look at that. I do not think that the committee looked in depth at the Norwegian system of management and regulation, but I understand that it is much more streamlined and, because of that, its industry is much better regulated than ours.

Ensuring that fish farming thrives is not just an economic argument; it is also a health issue. We need to eat more oily fish, which is important to our health. We are not eating enough fish. The recommended amount is two servings a week, with at least one being oily fish. Obviously, vegetarians and vegans need to find those nutrients elsewhere, but those of us who eat fish should follow those guidelines.

Recently, I listened on the radio to a health specialist who recommended that people take supplements to get those nutrients. They were clear that that was not what they would normally recommend, given that our diet could easily provide what we need. However, their view was that, because there is such a shortage of oily fish in our diet, we need to consider taking supplements.

Farmed salmon is part of the solution. Salmon is rich in long-chain omega 3 fatty acids, which are crucial to the fight against heart disease. It is simply not right that people need to rely on supplements when we can produce an abundance of a food that would help our nation to fight heart disease.

As others have mentioned, the report also touches on the tensions between wild and farmed salmon. Those tensions are long running. To be frank, the science has not reached a conclusion. Wild stocks ebb and flow throughout Scotland. That tends to happen in the same way on the west and east coasts, despite the fact that there are no fish farms on the east coast. It simply does not add up that salmon farming is to blame. I welcome the further research that is being carried out into that issue, because it is extremely important. We need to protect wild stocks and we need much more research into what is leading to the changes. Is it climate change, or is it something that is happening further out to sea?

The salmon farming industry and those who fish wild salmon have an interest in the species and in what helps the fish to thrive. Working together to find out more about the species and what is impacting them is the way forward for both industries.

The report mentions concerns about escapes. It is strange that it suggests siting fish farms in rougher water as part of the solution to the problem. Rougher water risks more escapes because of higher seas and worse conditions. If that is the way forward, we need to ensure that the science and the engineering of cages allow them to withstand those conditions.

Our salmon farming industry faces many challenges, including from those who wish that it did not exist at all. There are also natural disasters, some of which have been mentioned. Brexit poses a threat to fish farming, because it has been dragged into the backstop issue. All fish exports will be subject to controls and levies, which could damage the industry. I understand why the EU would want to have sea fish imports in the same bargaining space as access to United Kingdom waters, but that approach makes no sense for farmed fish.

We have to get it right for fish farming. There are huge health, social and economic benefits from the industry. We do not have to ignore the threats in order to get those benefits; we need to face up to them and get our house in order.

15:27

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The cabinet secretary mentioned lunch. I commend the Parliament canteen for its fishcakes

today. I am sure that they had salmon in them; they were very tasty.

I, too, commend parliamentary staff and the witnesses for their assistance in compiling the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's report and for providing briefings.

The debate has been very polarised. I am often asked whether I am for or against wind farms, which is a very peculiar question, and people have now moved on to asking me whether I am for or against fish farms. That is like asking me whether I am for or against houses. I like the right things to be in the right place in the right way.

The committee gave the issue a lot of detailed consideration in producing the report. I am a bit concerned about the criticism that has been voiced that we had not given due regard to the industry's view, given that the first three lines of the report say:

"The Committee acknowledges both the economic and social value that the salmon farming industry brings to Scotland. It provides jobs to rural areas, investment and spend into communities and stimulates economic activity in the wider supply chain."

I very much recognise and agree with that statement in the report. We have heard what the figures amount to. I am from the Highlands, and I may, indeed, have a relative who worked on the farm to which Donald Cameron referred.

It is important to mention recommendation 1, which says:

"the industry also creates a number of economic, environmental and social challenges for other businesses".

Among our briefing papers for the debate is a copy of letter from the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation to the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy. I know that he wants to be transparent, so it would be good if the reply to that letter were made available, although it may well be that he has not seen the letter yet. It raises a number of concerns about

"the expansion of salmon aquaculture."

The Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee agrees very strongly with the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee's view that

"The status quo is not an option."

That is, the status quo in relation to the current regulation of the industry and the approach to enforcement is not acceptable. The ECCLR Committee has called for "urgent and meaningful action" in relation to issues that many members have already talked about, such as sea lice, mortality rates and the challenges of close confinement.

Recommendation 3 in the REC Committee's report touches on the issue of a moratorium. The committee formed the view that there was "insufficient evidence" to support one, but in a very rare break from consensus on the committee, my colleague Colin Smyth and I dissented from that position. Perhaps there was a marked reluctance to call it a moratorium, but if we are saying that all these challenges exist, that the status quo is not acceptable and that producers can expand only if they resolve the issues, in effect a moratorium is what the committee discussed—and it is most certainly what should happen.

The aim is not to destroy an industry: we want to get things right. I have mentioned mortality rates. A number of members who are in the chamber today are farmers and would not tolerate or countenance a fraction of such mortality rates in their livestock. Therefore, a number of challenges remain.

In response to my intervention, the cabinet secretary was very open in saying that, as far as he was concerned, the Scottish Government had applied the precautionary principle. If that principle has genuinely been applied, why would we not have a moratorium? There is one very good reason why a moratorium would not be as challenging as it sounds. Given that the planning process in general is extremely onerous, I am told by industry representatives that the lead-in time for planning applications means that there is the potential for many such issues to be resolved satisfactorily prior to the granting of any permission.

Often, the effect of a single fish farm is not the problem. I spoke to someone in the tourism industry who operates a diving facility and who was unconcerned about a fish farm opening in their locality. They were not so happy about a second, but the third fish farm—and the deposits from them all—has had a significant impact on their business, to the point at which they are now asking themselves whether they should buy another boat for their business. When we discussed the impact on others, someone used the term "good neighbour", which is precisely what we should be talking about.

The industry has provided a briefing paper, for which I am grateful. For the avoidance of doubt, I am referring to the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation's briefing. It is very concise, with a few bullet points, from which I will quote.

The briefing says that

"The salmon sector supports many of the overall aims",
so it does not support them all.

The sector also supports

"the quicker publication of data"

although

"The exact timeframe and the details of this have yet to be worked out",

so that has not happened.

On seals, of which there has been recent coverage, the sector is

"committed to moving to the situation where no seals are shot by farmers under licence. However"—

I am sorry, but that "However" is not acceptable, because such challenges are not new to the industry.

The briefing goes on to say:

"On sea lice, the salmon sector in Scotland is ready to move to a tighter action level".

The sector has not moved yet, so that remains an issue. It also wants to establish better relations with the wild farming sector. We have heard from Mr Cameron that that is possible. If we are talking about being good neighbours, that should be about talking with everyone and not having a disproportionate impact on everyone else.

The briefing also talks about relocating fish farms further offshore. I am sorry, but that is simply rewarding failure. If something is not working effectively, the idea that we should put it further away, out of sight and therefore out of mind, is not the way to deal with it, particularly given the challenges of climate change and access.

As I have said, a number of challenges remain. Certainly, I have not been able to cover all that ground in the time that is available to me. The report was compiled in good faith and I hope that it will be accepted in good faith. However, that will be established, in the long term rather than the short term, by the Government's actions. We need more urgency in the debate; quite frankly, I do not believe that that urgency is there at the moment. A lot remains to be done. We should have a moratorium pending resolution of the issues.

15:33

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): As we have already heard, farmed salmon is Scotland's largest food export and our country is the third-largest farmed salmon producer in the world. The industry provides, directly and indirectly, more than 10,000 full-time equivalent jobs. According to the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, farmed salmon is worth more than £540 million to the Scottish economy. In itself, that is why it is in everyone's interest to ensure that our industry operates to the very highest standards and that nothing is done to damage its reputation. If its reputation takes a hit, everyone will lose.

To be fair, the major producers in the industry recognise that, which is why, in its briefing for members, its trade body, the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, supports many of the overall aims and ambitions of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's report. I read the briefing quite differently from how John Finnie read it. The SSPO supports many of the committee's recommendations, and I thought that John Finnie was a little unkind to it.

I want to highlight what I consider to be the main points of the committee's report.

In recommendation 2, we say that we agree

"with the view of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee (ECCLR) Committee that if the industry is to grow, the 'status quo' in terms of regulation and enforcement is not acceptable."

Everybody who has spoken in the debate so far seems to have referred to that quote, but we have done so for obvious reasons. It is the key to the whole issue. I am pleased that the Scottish Government agrees with that. In its response to the committee, the Government says:

"if salmon farming is to continue to grow sustainably then effective procedures need to be in place to address and pre-empt, where possible, environmental and fish health challenges."

I welcome that.

John Finnie: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: I will if I have time. I know that I have mentioned John Finnie, and I will give way to him if I have a chance to do so. However, there are a number of things that I want to say.

The committee identified a solution to what we see as a lack of effective regulation so far. In recommendation 59, we say:

"The Committee recommends that Marine Scotland should be tasked with taking responsibility in delivering the necessary improvements and in taking on an overarching co-ordinating role."

It was clear in the evidence that was given to the committee that, although many different organisations are involved in the regulation of the industry, each body takes an almost silo view of its responsibilities and looks after its own aspect of the regulatory process. Although it is obvious that each regulatory body needs to do its work—of course it does—there is no one body that takes an overview of the whole process, leading to what the committee described as a "light touch" regulation and enforcement regime. That is the key to the issue. That approach has not helped anyone, and it certainly has not helped the important industry of salmon farming.

In its response, the Scottish Government says:

"SEPA, Marine Scotland, local authorities and SNH are currently working together in a new technical working group to develop proposals for strengthening protection".

Of course that is good, but it seems to me to miss the real point that the committee makes, which is that there needs to be one body with overall responsibility for ensuring that all our regulatory bodies work in a co-ordinated and effective way and move out of their silos.

John Finnie: What timeframe would Mike Rumbles allow for that single body to resolve the issues that are at play?

Mike Rumbles: That is a very interesting question, and I wish that I knew the answer to it. I will not be prescriptive. It is the job of Fergus Ewing, who is sitting in front of us, to answer that question. That is a very important and responsible task, and I am prepared to listen to what he says. I hope that he will answer it.

On planning applications for fish farms, the committee believes that a more strategic approach is needed. A strategy seems to be missing. The Scottish Government should develop guidance for local authorities on which areas across Scotland are suitable for new fish farms and which areas are not, so that, instead of local authorities judging specific applications that they receive relating to a specific place at a specific time—the law requires them to look at specific applications—they should be able to take a strategic view of an application in the round. That is really important.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government says in its response that it will meet the local authorities

"to discuss a more strategic approach to sustainable aquaculture across their areas of accountability",

but official guidance from the Scottish Government is needed.

Another important point is that members of the committee worked well together across party-political divides to produce the report. I hope that the Scottish Government has got the message about robust, effective and co-ordinated regulation to ensure that the very highest standards underpin a hugely important industry for Scotland.

We all want the industry to continue to succeed. The way to ensure success is to maintain the very highest standards of fish health and environmental protection. Those are what will underpin consumer confidence, and it is consumer confidence that will secure the success of this important industry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. We are a bit pushed for time, so I ask for speeches of strictly no more than five minutes, please.

15:39

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

We certainly worked long and hard on the report. However, after finishing taking evidence last June, the committee got to work on the report only after the summer recess and it took quite a number of weeks. That time included delays, to which the convener referred, as we discussed leaks along the way. It is public knowledge that I clashed somewhat with the convener as to how those leaks were dealt with, but I agree with him that such leaks are not acceptable. Perhaps it was not surprising that, during that long period while we considered the report, the ground shifted as SEPA announced its new thinking on the way forward, which meant that we had to further amend our report.

Nevertheless, here we are, and I think we can say that we agreed on the bulk of the issues. Yes, farmed salmon is a huge export that provides jobs in fragile areas and has other economic and wider benefits. Yes, we agreed that there are problems in salmon farming with lice, pollution and the possible impact on wild fish and other wildlife. When we disagreed, it was more about the scale of benefits and disadvantages, respectively. The key disagreement was about whether there should be a moratorium, to which John Finnie referred, on new developments until regulation improves or whether improving regulation and industry expansion should go hand in hand. That is where my esteemed colleague John Finnie and some of the rest of us disagreed somewhat. The majority of the committee were not convinced that there should be a moratorium on expansion.

Unsurprisingly, we spent a lot of time focusing on problems rather than on all the good things that are going fine. That is human nature, and it applies in politics, football and most areas of life. Clearly, public trust in any food product is important, which is why we need to be particularly protective of our environment, our food production methods and our regulation. We need only think back to the BSE crisis to remember that it was not only the reputation of beef that was damaged at that time; the crisis reflected badly on the whole Scottish brand.

It can take a long time to recover trust after an individual product or country has lost it. That is why we need to be particularly careful of our environment and perhaps be more wary about taking risks, even if other countries do. Fracking is another example of how our food exports could be damaged through giving the impression that we are lax on environmental standards, which is why the recommendations that we made around transparency are important. Recommendations 11 to 13, 19 to 25 and 31 and 33 all touch on transparency. The issue of transparency also

featured in our recommendations on wild and farmed fish interactions—for example, recommendation 39.

We were repeatedly told that there is a lack of data on many issues around the subject. There were strong claims that farmed fish are damaging wild stocks, but we also heard that wild fish numbers were falling before farms were introduced and that some rivers on the east coast have fewer wild fish despite having no salmon farms. It seems that salmon are not as keen as ospreys and golden eagles to carry around tracking devices so that we know where they are and what they do.

The level of feeling on the question of interaction became apparent to the committee as emails containing claims and counter-claims flooded in. The committee was subjected to repeated freedom of information requests as one side sought to find out what the other was doing. Prior to this debate, there were yet more emails and briefings. It was therefore refreshing to visit Lochaber and see a better relationship there in which there is at least some attempt by both sides to work together and understand each other.

There was broad agreement among witnesses that a precautionary approach should be taken on the location of farms and on other areas of planning and regulation. However, there was no agreement on whether such an approach is, in fact, taking place at present. Some members argued that the industry and the Government are being cautious, whereas others argued that they are not but need to be.

I will spend a bit of time on the positive aspects of salmon farming, which is a sector in which Scotland is a world leader. We and Norway are seen as the two leading countries, and Scottish salmon fetches a premium price on the world markets. I agree that everything is not perfect and that we should not be complacent, but we should not go to the other extreme and run ourselves down. We have a fabulous product in a fabulous environment. Yes, we can improve and develop each of those and we can learn from others, but we should be proud of both our environment and our product.

Salmon used to be a food that was so common and readily available in Glasgow that employers were restricted in how often they could feed it to their workers. Times changed and, like Gillian Martin, I grew up thinking of salmon as a luxury product that we would not see on the family table. Now that things have changed again, Scottish salmon appears in most of our supermarkets and I eat it regularly. It is widely seen as one of our healthiest foods, and I hope that other members support the industry by buying and eating Scottish salmon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind everyone that they have up to five minutes, please.

15:45

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I believe that the debate marks an important milestone in the future of salmon farming in Scotland. Although it is centred on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's inquiry into salmon farming, much of the report highlights the work of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee for its report on the environmental impacts of salmon farming.

Fish farming is the fastest growing form of animal food production on the planet, with around half of the fish that are consumed globally being raised in artificial environments. The importance of aquaculture to the Scottish rural economy cannot be overstated. The industry is a mainstay of many rural economies, particularly along the west and north-west coasts of Scotland. It supports more than 12,000 jobs and the supply chain companies, and it boosts exports from Scotland and the UK.

The 2016 Scottish Government strategy predicts an increase in salmon production to about 350,000 tonnes per year, which will potentially be worth in the region of £3.6 billion by 2030. The industry has huge potential to expand in the future, but it depends above all else on the health of the environment in which it operates. Whether or not the sector expands, it is clear that, with regard to its impact on the marine environment, the status quo is not an option. The REC Committee's report clearly indicates that expansion will be possible only with more effective regulatory standards that ensure both that fish health issues are properly managed and that the impacts on our environment are minimised to absolutely ensure an economically and environmentally sustainable industry.

One reason why the inquiry was undertaken is the growing body of evidence of negative environmental impacts despite the fact that the aquaculture industry in Scotland invests heavily in innovation to solve environmental and fish health challenges. The ECCLR Committee highlighted the fact that the same issues that existed in 2002 around the environmental impact of salmon farming exist now, including concerns about high rates of sea lice, outbreaks of disease and escapes. Indeed, some of those issues have grown in scale and impact since 2002.

The ECCLR Committee concluded that we are at a critical point in considering how salmon farming develops in a sustainable way in relation to the environment, highlighting concerns that expansion is being developed without a full

understanding of the environmental impact. With that in mind, I agree that an independent assessment of the industry's environmental sustainability is necessary. However, I welcome the committee's conclusion that there is insufficient evidence for introducing a moratorium on further expansion. I believe that that would be devastating for the industry, which we must seek to grow, albeit with the right safeguards in place.

I am pleased that the ECCLR Committee's recommendation in relation to wild salmon populations—in particular, around the interactions between farmed and wild salmon—was included. Although it may be difficult to deliver in practice, the sharing of data must be encouraged across the sector in order to ensure that there is best practice across the industry.

Unfortunately, there is too little time to consider all of the report, so I will look particularly at the challenge of sea lice infestation. The ECCLR Committee's position is that a precautionary approach must be taken to address any potential impact of sea lice infestation in salmon farms on our iconic wild salmon population. However, sea lice are only one of many factors affecting the wild salmon population; I look forward to the committee doing further work in exploring the fall in numbers in our rivers.

It is important to note that, since reporting began in 2013, the numbers of sea lice recorded at salmon farms were at their lowest in September 2018. Without question, the industry has invested considerably in an attempt to address the impacts of sea lice infestation on both farmed fish health and wild salmon populations. However, it is clear that the industry has yet to identify an effective means to deal with the parasite.

There are growing concerns about the use of emamectin benzoate and other anti-parasitic chemical treatments, which SEPA research concluded

"is significantly impacting local marine environments".

Recommendation 26 of the REC Committee's report

"endorses the ECCLR recommendations on"

the use of cleaner fish species such as wrasse and the

"urgent need for an assessment of future demand",

given the growing concern that the current unregulated fishery is wiping out local stocks completely.

Inshore fisheries and conservation authorities in England have introduced statutory regulation for the wrasse fishery. Will the minister consider replicating that best practice for Scottish waters? The industry talks about a shift to farmed cleaner

fish, but the most recent data shows production of just 58,000 wrasse when projections show that the industry would need about 10 million a year by 2020. If the wild fishery collapses and farming cannot fill the gap, what is the future for alternatives to chemical lice control?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Finlay Carson: With the additional safeguards recommended by the committee, coupled with Scotland's enviable history of innovation, I am confident that the salmon farming industry can continue to grow while taking into account the needs of our natural environment.

15:50

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): As I am a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, it gives me great pleasure to take part in the debate.

I support salmon farming in Scotland because it has potential for growth, because it is, in my opinion, sustainable and because of the contribution that it makes to our local communities. It is a Scottish industry that I want to see continue to grow and prosper. Salmon farming will bring increased benefits to Scotland, local communities and local economies.

The growth of the Scottish salmon farming industry started in the 1970s. According to Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the industry has come to be dominated by operators who have companies in several countries, including many productions and job opportunities in Scotland. Aside from jobs growth, it provides 17.5 billion meals each year worldwide, which speaks volumes for its success. It is a leader in the salmon sector along with Norway, Canada and Chile, and Scotland's salmon is of superior quality.

We have come a long way since the start of the industry. I want it to expand to be a global leader in production, but it must tackle some problems along the way. That is what being a good food provider means. In order to become a European and world leader in the production of salmon, the industry has declared its ambition to double the value of its salmon by 2030. Furthermore, it is currently spending about £400 million a year in Scotland on goods and services. As the industry continues to grow and reinvest, there is clearly an opportunity for Scotland-based businesses, and it is an opportunity not to be missed.

I fully support the industry because it aligns itself with our values. The sustainability report documents that salmon is a sustainable source of protein that leaves less of a carbon footprint than chicken, pork and beef. I did not know that. At

present, 20 times more chicken, pork and beef is produced than salmon, but salmon farming in Scotland can contribute to reducing that statistic if it has the support of all who are present here today, which I believe it has.

I am proud that we will continue to support an industry that enriches the lives of the people of Scotland. Following the publication of the two reports by the committees, I suggest that protecting the environment is now one of the top priorities of the industry. SEPA has reported that over 87 per cent of the farms that produce salmon have been categorised as good or excellent. Salmon farms are rightly committed to protecting the health and wellbeing of marine life. With the advance of technology, they should be improving, with new ways of minimising factors that could result in any damage to the sea bed. Technology has reached new heights and it should be used by firms to resolve any local issues.

However, I am here not only to talk about what we can accomplish or what we have accomplished but to present to members the things that we have successfully executed. What the industry has done for our country and what it can do in the future will reflect the best of Scotland. It plays a vital role in enhancing the lives of people in our communities and it creates job opportunities for the people of Scotland, with salaries that tend to be higher than the Scottish average. It not only directly supports local employment but aids indirect jobs across the industry's supply chain. The industry is vital to Scotland's growth and must be supported as it continues to grow.

The industry's ambition is well summarised by what it has done, what it is doing and what it is committed to doing for Scotland, and I would encourage it in that regard. A key element of that is the industry's social and economic impact. Salmon farming directly employs 1,772 people at freshwater and seawater farms, and aquaculture contributes enormously to the rural economy by supporting 12,000 jobs. More than 1 million salmon meals are consumed in the UK every day—including the cabinet secretary's meal today. The industry exports to more than 60 countries, and overseas sales are worth £600 million, making Scottish farmed salmon the UK's most valuable export. Many of the jobs in the industry are helping to support and sustain rural economies, which helps to keep rural schools, post offices, shops and community halls open.

I could go on and on, Presiding Officer, but you are gesturing to me that I cannot do that. My support for the salmon industry is now on the record. I wish it well.

15:55

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):

Sustainable development must be at the core of the way forward for all activity in our precious marine environment. Such an approach underpins our national marine plan and is essential to the future of everyone who works in the salmon farming industry.

In our letter to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee said:

“Scotland is at a critical point in considering how salmon farming develops in a sustainable way in relation to the environment ... If the current issues are not addressed this expansion will be unsustainable and may cause irrecoverable damage to the environment.”

In view of the evidence in the committee’s scientific report and evidence that has come to light since we wrote that letter, if I were writing the letter today I would change the word “may” to “will”. In the short time that I have for this speech, I will set out some of the reasons why I would do so.

In the previous session of Parliament, I had responsibility for scrutinising and contributing to the bill that became the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013. The purpose of the act is to ensure that fisheries are managed to support

“sustainable economic growth with due regard to the wider marine environment.”

Let me start by talking about sea lice, which are a continuing, serious animal welfare issue that risks denting consumer confidence if it is not properly tackled. During our scrutiny of the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Bill, the Rural Affairs, Environment and Climate Change Committee had to ask stakeholders to stop sending evidence about sea lice, because in our judgment a tit-for-tat situation had arisen. This time, we were a little wiser: the ECCLR Committee started by commissioning a peer-reviewed scientific report.

Back in 2013, I lodged an amendment that would have required farm-by-farm sea lice reporting in real time. My proposal was rejected by the Scottish Government and by the industry body, the SSPO. The latter rejected the proposal principally on the ground of commercial confidentiality. I found it extraordinary that the SSPO waited until it was giving evidence to the ECCLR Committee last year to announce the measures to tackle the issue to which it had agreed; that just does not wash.

I note that the cabinet secretary’s review of the farmed fish sea lice compliance policy will include consideration of mandatory reporting. “Consideration” can be a disappointing word, so I seek reassurance in that regard from the cabinet

secretary in his closing remarks, without wanting to pre-empt the review group’s conclusions.

When I visited a Marine Harvest fish farm during the scrutiny of the aquaculture bill, the wonders of wrasse as a cleaner fish for sea lice were extolled. There are now serious questions about the sustainability of wild stocks, as we heard from Finlay Carson, and as it says in our briefing from the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust. Can it be acceptable for the aquaculture industry to self-regulate in relation to the wrasse fishery through voluntary measures? The industry still has a lot to do to prove its sustainable development credentials, as I very much hope it will do.

Colin Smyth and I will attend the opening of the salmon fishing season on the Nith, with the Nith District Salmon Fishery Board. Will the cabinet secretary update the Parliament on the timelines for the salmon interactions working group? There are fundamentally important issues, in relation to sea trout as well as salmon, for the fragile rural communities that depend in part on rod-fishing tourism, and for local people who fish.

As Fisheries Management Scotland has pointed out, both committees recommended urgent research into the development of closed-containment facilities. I hope that the cabinet secretary will take that on board.

Will the cabinet secretary today also update the Parliament on the reporting timescales for the welcome sub-groups of the strategic farmed fish health framework working group?

As we have heard many times in the debate, and as both committees said, the status quo is not an option. We all get that now—in the chamber, in the industry and in the agencies. The sustainable future of our fish farming industry must be a collective effort.

Further research is essential, and must be funded, in part, by the industry. However, how can that research be independent? That can be achieved if there is a charging regime that enables groups representing the industry, local authorities, community and concern groups and regulatory bodies to commission independent research into fish welfare and mortality, appropriate sitings of future applications and the effects of medicines on the sea bed, to name but some of the issues that we have to get right. I welcome the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, which will have a strong to play, and its briefing.

The provenance of our farmed salmon and its reputation, affordable food both here and for export, and the maintenance and development of work in our fragile coastal communities are all at stake. I hope that today the Scottish Government will unequivocally commit to the precautionary principle.

16:00

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank members of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for their detailed work on the report. I am very pleased to hear from its convener that the earlier work that we did in the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee helped it to focus on the environmental issues. That is how the Parliament should be working—more collaboratively.

Both committees have recognised that the status quo is unacceptable and that fundamental change is needed. In many ways, this report marks a crossroads in the way we regulate the salmon farming industry in Scotland. In one direction, we can continue with weak regulation and an industry growing well beyond the limits of the environment that sustains it. In the other direction, we can drive high quality through regulation that demands that industry innovates to address problems before it can expand any further. We could call the latter direction a moratorium, but I believe that it is a way of delivering future growth and jobs in communities while addressing the problems head on.

Last year, I attended the Arctic Circle forum in Reykjavik with the convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, Gillian Martin, and I heard from those who are planning the future of the global salmon farming industry. It was an eye-opener because, although it is clear that we are not alone in Scotland in highlighting the problems, we are slipping behind in delivering the solutions by failing to adopt Nordic approaches to regulation and licensing.

The Norwegians in particular have recognised that they have reached a peak. The footprint of the industry in the fjords has got far too big. However, instead of seeking sticking-plaster solutions, they have driven transformative innovation through competitive licensing. This is a profitable industry, and the market price of farmed salmon has nearly trebled in the past 20 years, but the coastlines to rear salmon on are globally scarce, and listed companies are keen to show stock markets that they have a strong future. There can be no leakage of salmon farming to other countries, because every country faces similar problems. Limitless capacity does not exist, and the only way to survive is to innovate harder and faster.

The Norwegians have allowed companies to expand further, but only if they invest in innovation. Companies have come forward with an incredible array of closed or semi-closed systems, based in the sea, that address the issues of disease, parasitism, fish escapes and pollution from waste and chemicals. Many of those solutions are offshore and borrow technology from the oil and gas industry. Sites for new and

expanded farms are auctioned off to the highest bidder. Last year's licensing round in Norway generated over €300 million from just 23 auctioned sites, releasing a combined production capacity increase of 15,000 tonnes.

The auction of sites at high value creates the wealth that can be reinvested back into research. I recently visited the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre at the University of Stirling, which has already been mentioned by a number of members. It is doing excellent work that is focused on understanding and managing the problems that are associated with open-cage salmon farming. That work would be transformative if it was applied to the kind of sea-based, closed systems that are already being developed in Norway, so why does Scotland remain a dumping ground for old open-pen technology that Norwegian companies would not get away with using on new sites at home?

Meanwhile, the search for solutions to old problems is getting ever more desperate. For example, why are we compounding salmon farming's destructive impact by allowing the use of an unregulated wrasse fishery that could drive species to extinction, to solve a parasite problem that could be largely avoidable by using contained systems? The wrasse fishery has no reliable stock monitoring, no statutory closure to allow recovery during the breeding season and poor regulation of landing sizes. As other members have said, the Government has in effect signed over control of the fishery to the salmon farming industry and, in so doing, is failing in its statutory duties under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004. Without those safeguards, there is a clear case for a catching moratorium until the regulation has caught up.

Once again, we are caught in a calamity in which industry tries to externalise all its damages on to the public purse while we are left studying the impacts and scratching our heads about how to deal with them. Meanwhile, the industry is more than capable of innovating out of the problems, if only it had the right incentives.

We are at a crossroads. SEPA's aquaculture review falls woefully short of the kind of transformative regulation that we are beginning to see in Norway. The conclusions of its review need to come back to the Parliament so that they can be scrutinised by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. We cannot strike a cheap compromise between the environment and the economy when it comes to salmon farming, because we need both, and the prize is there if the Government can start thinking in a more Norwegian manner.

16:05

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): The office window of Dennis and Katrine Johnson at Uyeasound in Unst looks out over a pristine marine landscape. They have been working in this industry for many years, for a variety of companies, and they would not recognise some of the things that have been said in the debate—they certainly would not recognise that last speech and the allegations of deliberate malpractice by people in the industry.

A lot of people do not seem to know the history of salmon farming. It started as a small crofting business in lots of part of Scotland, including on the west coast, and the industry is now owned largely by international companies. It has changed overwhelmingly. However, what has not changed is the number of people who are employed by the industry in parts of Scotland who simply would not have jobs if salmon farming did not exist. Unst, Yell and Fetlar are the best examples of that that I know of anywhere in Scotland. Salmon farming accounts for 110 direct jobs on those islands and any number of hundreds of indirect jobs. Those jobs and the communities on those islands would not exist were it not for that industry. The idea that those people deliberately pollute and deliberately do nothing about the issues of sea lice, mortality and so on is a line of argument that I simply do not recognise.

Mark Ruskell: Will the member take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: No, we have heard from you; we have absolutely heard the Green position. By gosh, was it clear. I assure you that that speech will go to every one of my constituents, so that they know where you are.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that you should speak through the chair and not to each other.

Tavish Scott: Presiding Officer, salmon farming provides 110 direct jobs in the north isles of Shetland; 23 per cent of Scottish production of farmed salmon is in Shetland; the industry employs 421 people in the islands that I represent; and the activity is worth £14 million to the local economy—such facts are never mentioned in that kind of speech from members on those benches.

There is another side to the report that I find puzzling. The minister rightly mentioned the food and drink strategy, but there is no mention of that in the committee report. There would be no food and drink sector in Scotland without the salmon farming industry which, as the minister said, exports to 50 countries, nor would there be the range of people who now work in the industry. In evidence to the committee, Ben Hadfield of Marine Harvest said:

“It used to be a job with a farm manager and farm hands; now it has become more technical, and we are employing a lot of scientists, veterinarians, people with information technology skills and so on.”—[*Official Report, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee*, 2 May 2018; c 24.]

In its submission to members in advance of the debate, Scottish Sea Farms pointed out with regard to fish welfare, which has not been mentioned by many other members today, that there are now 36 farm-based fish health specialists, three in-house vets, two fish welfare auditors, two fish welfare officers and one head of fish health. That is a huge number of incredibly able people.

John Finnie: Will the member take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: No, I am going to make these arguments—you did not, so I will.

John Finnie: Well, I would—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Finnie, please sit down.

Tavish Scott: Men and women with degrees and huge numbers of very precise qualifications are now working in this industry all over Scotland. That is something that we should champion and support, not run down, as some people have chosen to do today.

Claudia Beamish: Will the member take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: I want to make some points about innovation and investment. We have heard Claudia Beamish’s take on those issues already.

Scottish Sea Farms is trialling an innovative new device to convert wave energy to power—a green measure that I would have thought would have been worth mentioning by some in this place. The MANTA converter has been introduced on a farm in Shetland and it is hoped that it will produce enough electricity to power feeding systems, underwater lighting and acoustic predator deterrents, which will reduce the company’s reliance on diesel and, indeed, will do something about the predator issue as well. In Shetland, we do not expect to need any licences at all for seals this year, because of the work that the industry is doing and the investment that it is making. I wish that a few more members had mentioned that.

Many things are being invested in but have not been mentioned, although a number of members rightly mentioned the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, which does strong work in conjunction with the industry. The centre’s briefing for the debate points out that, in the first phase of funding, the centre

“turned its £5.4 million project spend into a total applied R&D investment programme of £39 million across

Scotland, of which £14.2m has been direct industry contributions.”

That is the industry investing in exactly the kind of measures in relation to the environment and the future that are desperately needed.

The issue is not just about the direct jobs in the industry; it is about the indirect jobs that go with it. It is about the well boats and haulage companies. If people drive down the M74 and happen to look out on the right-hand side as they go past Larkhall, they will see a bunch of logistics centres, all of which employ people from constituencies in the central belt of Scotland who work supporting the salmon farming industry. The issue is not just about rural areas; it goes right across Scotland.

On sea lice—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will have to come to a close, please.

Tavish Scott: Maybe this is the point that Claudia Beamish wanted to make, but Scottish Sea Farms is investing in sea lice shields to deal with that issue, which I recognise must be dealt with. Thirteen farms already have measures to deal with the issue, and the number is growing.

I will finish by making just one observation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very quickly, Mr Scott.

Tavish Scott: Mr Ewing and I have been in Parliament for a long time and, over the years, the industry has been attacked by big landed interests with fishing rivers and by the Greens. I hope that he stands up to them for a few more years.

16:11

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I joined the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee after it had taken its evidence on the salmon industry, so I had to start by reading the ECCLR Committee’s report, all the written evidence and the *Official Report* of the meetings in which the committee took oral evidence, so that I could contribute to the report as it was being written.

It is important that the REC Committee framed its report around the significance of the industry to the rural economy and that it did not produce an environment committee report mark 2. As others have said, in 2017, the salmon farming industry harvested 189,000 tonnes, which was the sector’s highest-ever output. Exports reached an all-time high and were worth £600 million, going to 50 countries worldwide, with the US, France and China being the top three countries. Interestingly, salmon sales to the EU account for 40 per cent of export value. As the cabinet secretary said, according to HIE, employment in the industry and

its wider supply chain has topped 10,000 full-time equivalent jobs, with direct and indirect earnings valued at around £271 million. As Tavish Scott said, the jobs are well paid with good promotion prospects. Salmon farming has a gross value added for Scotland of £540 million. In 2016, salmon farming companies spent £164 million on suppliers and services in the Highlands and Islands alone.

The importance of this relatively new industry to rural and remote communities and their sustainability cannot be overstated, but the industry’s importance to other parts of Scotland, such as Rosyth and Bellshill, should also be recognised. As others have mentioned, it is also important to Stirling, through the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre. I, too, recognise that a huge amount—almost half—of the money that is provided to the centre for innovation and research and development comes from the industry.

As Gillian Martin said, the industry has transformed our population’s access to a healthy source of food and protein. It is now an affordable source of food and is on school dinner menus and in supermarkets. However, in relation to the supermarkets, the sector is only as strong as its weakest link. That is why in my view, in the view of everyone connected with the industry, and as Heather Jones, the chief executive of the SAIC has said, the industry needs to be

“stable, well-regulated, animal-friendly, and scientifically robust.”

She went on to say:

“That’s why we welcomed”

the report’s

“publication and focus on how aquaculture can deliver benefits to the Scottish economy and local communities.”

I have not come across anyone in the industry who believes that the industry should continue to grow in anything other than a sustainable way. The industry recognises the problems of mortalities, gill disease and sea lice, and it is already taking action to address those issues. It is not in the industry’s interest, in terms of its markets or profitability, not to deal with such issues. We know that the business is highly competitive and how hugely competitive the industries are in Norway, Chile and Canada.

In my remaining time, I will address the role of the regulatory bodies, particularly SEPA, in improving the industry. On 7 November last year, members will know that SEPA published its draft “Finfish Aquaculture Sector Plan”. SEPA held a drop-in event in Parliament to allow members to discuss the plan, and it has consulted widely with the sector, NGOs and partner public bodies. By

my calculation, I think that 14 of the recommendations in the committee's report on salmon farming are directed at SEPA. In its briefing, SEPA goes through the recommendations and outlines how it is addressing them. Recommendation 2 addresses

"regulatory deficiencies as well as fish health and environmental issues".

SEPA believes that its "Finfish Aquaculture Sector Plan" deals with that.

Other recommendations relate to medicines, and the UK technical advisory committee, of which SEPA is a member, is dealing with that issue. Recommendations 40 to 42, which relate to the protection of wild salmon, are addressed by the interactions working group. It is important that regulatory regimes are co-ordinated, enhanced and robust, and that they effectively enforce compliance with high environmental standards.

In order to meet all the recommendations in the committee reports, I am sure that everybody is engaged in the continuous improvement of the industry. As legislators, we must enhance this exciting industry.

16:17

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Can we imagine any farm in Scotland on which the animals are covered in flesh-eating parasites that cause disease, and on which up to a third of its livestock dies before reaching market? Such a farm would surely be the subject of many questions from politicians, its peers and the media, and it would feel the full weight of our regulatory regimes. Such a farm would make no environmental or moral sense, and it would make no commercial sense, even to the farmer. Why is a farm in water any different from a farm on land? One is an established form of practice, which we have been doing for hundreds—arguably thousands—of years, and the other is a fledgling industry in which there has been monumental growth in demand for its product during its relatively short lifespan.

That is the conundrum that I faced from day 1 of the salmon farming inquiry. How do we strike the balance between supporting what is undoubtedly and undeniably a proud Scottish industry of great importance to our economy, and, equally, being bold enough to say that the status quo is simply not good enough?

We spent months taking evidence—often in the face of hyperbolic and apocalyptic headlines—with emotions running high on all sides of the debate, as today has shown. From day 1, we were expected to assume one side of the argument or the other. Are we in favour of, or against, fish farms? Do we favour a moratorium, or are we

against it? Are fish farms the reason for stock reductions in wild salmon, or are they not? Against that backdrop, it seemed as though the committee had an impossible task.

The role of the REC Committee's report was partially, but not exclusively, to examine the environmental aspects of salmon farming. We also had a duty to consider the social, financial, employment and export aspects of the industry.

Recommendation 1 set the scene. It said:

"if the industry is to grow",

it must identify solutions to the "challenges" that it faces. Recommendation 2 went on to say that

"if the industry is to grow ... meaningful action needs to be taken to address regulatory deficiencies".

What is the difference between those two statements? The first shines a light on the need for the industry to tackle its own problems and the second says that we also need to sort out the regulatory environment in which it operates. Both are necessary.

The 2030 vision of growing the industry is admirable and, as a Parliament, we should be positive about it. The industry supports up to 10,000 jobs in Scotland and brings nearly £2 billion to our economy. A lot has been achieved and I want the industry to grow, but growth cannot and must not come at any cost.

Over the course of our deliberations, I have not met anyone who is blind to or ignorant of the massive challenges that the industry faces, but I, too, have stood in the cold waters of Scottish rivers—none of them my own—rod in hand, with nothing to catch but the cold. I believe that if we get salmon farming right, and with the right partnerships in place, we should and could work collectively to get to a place where we are proud of our product and the industry can grow in a responsible and regulated manner.

I will share some further thoughts. First, a recurring theme in the debate and from the report is that the current regulatory framework meets the needs of neither producers, nor those with serious concerns about the industry. Only a robust and enforceable approach to regulation will be acceptable in order to address the concerns that many have about animal welfare and about the environmental effects of the rapid growth that we have seen.

Secondly, the same goes for the planning and consent process. It relies on subjective interpretation of what is in the public good.

Thirdly, grow the industry, but do not grow for growing's sake; salmon producers accept that. We must compete with Chile, Norway and Canada, but it is not a race to the bottom. Farmed Scottish

salmon should enjoy the highest quality standards. Let us be world leading in every respect.

Last and more important is the siting of fish farms. My view is that we should give serious consideration to closed containment or onshore sites; moving sites that are in sensitive areas; and potentially closing those sites where everyone agrees that mortality levels are unsustainable or that are repeat offenders. Let us also have an informed and sensible debate about offshore farms; they are not the great panacea that some people believe them to be.

We should give serious consideration to the traffic light system that exists in Norway; it would allow the different parts of Scotland to do what it is right for their region and environment.

There is so much more that I wish I had time to cover. Debate is certainly not over. I support the growth of the Scottish salmon industry, but let the message also be heard: we are watching and we will act.

16:22

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate on the conclusions of the "Salmon farming in Scotland" report by the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee.

I have a particular interest in the report, as I sat on the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee during its inquiry into the environmental impacts of salmon farming in Scotland. While listening to evidence and reading up on the issues, I found myself shocked by some of the concerns that were raised. As someone who ate salmon on a regular basis, the levels of disease, mortality and the use of harmful chemicals in the treatment of disease left me concerned.

Given that farmed Atlantic salmon is Scotland's and the UK's largest food export, and that Scotland is the largest producer in the whole of the EU, addressing failings in the industry should be a priority. That is not to be negative about the industry; it is surely common sense if we want the industry to grow. In truth, the industry has shown that it cannot self-regulate. That is why we need and must demand much stronger regulation and action from the Scottish Government. The ECCLR Committee's report makes that point when it says that

"the same set of concerns regarding the environmental impact of salmon farming exist now as in 2002 but the scale and impact of these has expanded since 2002. There has been a lack of progress in tackling many of the key issues previously identified and unacceptable levels of mortality persist."

It is clear that something is not right if the problems in the industry are still present nearly 20 years later and are, in fact, getting worse. That is why it is incredibly important that the Scottish Government takes note of the recommendations of the REC Committee's report as well as those of the ECCLR Committee's report, both of which highlight a desperate need for urgency in tackling the problems of intensive farming, sea lice, disease and escapes of farmed fish.

Those problems mean that questions need to be raised about transparency and the publication of data, which are mentioned in both committee reports. By making data on mortalities, sea lice, disease and escapes more transparent, we will be able to get a much clearer picture of what is actually going on in the industry. The public has a right to know what chemicals are being used in those farms and what the impact of those chemicals is in lochs across Scotland as well as in our food.

The committee reports also highlight action that can be taken now to address and alleviate those problems. The Scottish Government could commit to the development and introduction of full closed containment farming. I recognise that that would need further research, but by outlining a realistic target, the Scottish Government would be taking a bold step and showing a commitment to addressing the negative effects of salmon farming on wild stocks.

Questions around the pace of growth in the salmon industry mean that there remain very real concerns and that the industry must get its act together before any major expansion takes place. Again, that would show commitment to tackling the issues so that, 20 years from now, we are not simply talking about the problems that exist now.

With regard to the concerns that have been raised about the impact of salmon farms on wild stocks, it is clear that

"the Scottish Government has not understood and appreciated the urgency of the situation in merely talking about 'a mechanism to inform the longer term determination of a regulatory framework in this area and ... a staged approach to building a long-term set of arrangements to fill the current regulatory gap'."

Those are not my words, but those of Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland, which is clear that the Scottish Government's response shows a general lack of urgency in key areas. Urgent action and enforcement are required to control the negative impacts of the salmon farming industry. There is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to show leadership by taking on board the recommendations of both committee reports.

Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland also states that

“MSPs should be suspicious of announcements of further working groups on fish health or further repeat reviews of existing licencing and permitting, designed to kick the Committees’ concerns into the long grass. We have been there before. This time we need action, not words.”

I hope that the Scottish Government will realise the seriousness of the situation and take the action that is necessary.

16:28

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I start by thanking Tavish Scott’s constituents for the excellent products that they produce at their salmon farms; indeed, I thank constituents all round Scotland for that. That produce supports industries in my constituency—Sutherlands Of Portsoy, for example, has been smoking salmon for a hundred years. It originally smoked wild salmon, but now we have the salted salmon being smoked with shavings from whisky casks to produce that marriage made in heaven that is the taste of whisky on smoked salmon, which I so enjoy—particularly if it is anCnoc, Glen Deveron or Glenglassaugh whisky from my constituency.

Fiction has been running through the debate a lot—the fiction that the producers of farmed salmon like sea lice on their fish. No: if there are lice on the fish, its commercial value goes down because it looks ugly in the fishmonger’s display. There is a fiction that the fish farmers are indifferent to mortality, but every time a salmon dies on a fish farm, that is income lost to the salmon farmer. We must not pretend that the industry does not want to engage on the genuine and properly expressed challenges that it meets.

Donald Cameron referred to Loch Fyne in an attempt to show a link between fish farms and reduced salmon runs. Martin Jaffa’s book refers to Loch Fyne in relation to sea trout, which is essentially the same species. Of the three rivers that run into Loch Fyne, the one in which there has been the greatest reduction is the one in which the fish have not swum past the fish farms. The river in which the fish have to swim past all the fish farms has had the smallest reduction.

There are many causes of reductions in numbers of salmon in the wild environment, and many things affect both salmon farms and the wild environment. When my brother and I were water bailiffs for the Tay District Salmon Fisheries Board in 1968, the talk of that and previous seasons was the reduction in fish. Why did it happen? There was illegal exploitation: as bailiffs, we experienced dynamiting, hangnets and sniggering. I arrested somebody for sniggering, which is an illegal method of catching fish, on the island in Perth.

We had the Klondikers from Russia sitting in their vessels in Loch Broom catching salmon offshore. That was when the limits were 3 miles and 12 miles, rather than the 200 miles that we have today. We had predation from, for example, seals. The closure in the 1970s of Wee Bankie, which was a sprat fishery out in the North Sea, caused quadrupling of the number of seals in the North Sea. Guess what? Seals like eating salmon.

It is not just one thing that causes reductions in salmon numbers, but a complex environment of different things. I first saw sea lice in the 1950s. While standing on the bank trying to catch salmon with rod and line, I, unlike Jamie Greene, look in the mirror when trying to find the cause for my failures. I am an indifferent fisherman; my failure is not because there are no fish in the river. I have never seen Jamie Greene fishing, so I cannot judge his confidence. However, I saw sea lice in the 1950s.

In our rivers, we have crayfish that consume almost anything in the river, and there are some rivers in which there is nothing left but crayfish. We have acidification of rivers from the artificial fertilisers that run off our farm land. We have rising temperatures in rivers. We have the clearing of vegetation from the edge of rivers, which allows pollution and cattle—and what they produce—to go into the rivers. There is dredging of rivers, which makes it more difficult for salmon.

There are good examples, too; there are dams and weirs. There is the Pitlochry fish ladder, which is famous for supporting proper up-river passage of salmon. There are other examples elsewhere.

Let us not turn this into a simple-minded battle between the fish farms and the wild fish industry, because the issue is much more complex than that.

I wish our industry every success in the future. I will continue to enjoy eating the industry’s products and I will watch with interest as we regulate in an appropriate way.

16:33

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Today’s debate has shown that business as usual is not an option for salmon farming in Scotland. The industry has been encouraged by the Scottish Government to hit ambitious growth targets, but the Government has not yet put in place the necessary regulatory framework to manage that expansion in a way that properly protects our environment and animal welfare. As a result, environmental and welfare shortcomings are in danger of adversely impacting on the economic and social benefits of salmon farming that many members have highlighted in the debate.

The committee also highlighted those benefits. The very first sentence of the report states:

“The Committee acknowledges both the economic and social value that the salmon farming industry brings to Scotland.”

The report goes on to highlight that aquaculture is worth £620 million a year. It supports 12,000 jobs—many of which are high skilled—that are of huge importance to peripheral rural communities, which can be fragile, with limited alternative employment markets. In its public evidence to the committee, Grieg Seafood Shetland Ltd set out the broader social and community benefits that the jobs provide. It stated that they help

“to support sustainable rural communities by providing year-round stable employment. This in turn helps to keep rural schools, post offices, shops and community halls open.”

The economic and social contributions of salmon farming were well aired during the committee’s inquiry. However, despite the importance of those contributions, unless the Government and industry tackle the environmental and animal welfare issues that are highlighted in the report, the industry will not grow sustainably and the economic and social benefits will be at risk.

It is not just salmon farming that is at risk of being undermined by the type of poor practice that is highlighted in the RECC report and in the earlier report by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. Fin and creel fishers told the committee that salmon farms can make their work more difficult and potentially dangerous by pushing them out of the most productive areas. Others mentioned the environmental damage that is being done in respect of marine tourism and wild salmon.

What are the issues that could undermine salmon farming that we need to tackle? As several members have highlighted in the debate, farmed salmon has exceptionally high mortality rates. OneKind’s written evidence to the committee stated:

“Mortality rates are estimated to be over 20%. In 2016, over 10 million salmon died on Scottish salmon farms. Recent data published by the Scottish Government on the Scotland’s Aquaculture website suggests that this figure increased to over 11 million in 2017.”

The RECC highlighted that particular sites had especially high mortality rates and made it clear that we believe that expansion should not be permitted at such sites. There were recommendations on the need to collect more up-to-date data on mortality rates, and the committee rightly called for more tangible enforcement powers, including the ability to prevent expansion at sites at which there are high mortality rates, and

a mechanism to limit or to close down production when particularly severe events occur.

Enforcement also needs to be strengthened through a revised compliance policy that includes appropriate penalties. I appreciate that the strategic farmed fish health framework working group is looking at a number of the issues, but after years of problems—and not one, but two, damning committee reports—there is still no commitment from the Government to make in full the changes that are needed.

The changes are not just about placing more requirements on the sector, but about how we support the industry to make improvements. The RECC received evidence on the frustration that is felt by many people in the sector about the disjointed and inconsistent nature of the regulatory systems. Local authorities, Marine Scotland, Crown Estate Scotland, SEPA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency are all involved in decision making in the industry, which has created a confusing and fragmented regulatory landscape.

Dr Richard Luxmoore from Scottish Environment LINK called for

“a single streamlined process in which a person submits a single application for a fish farm and all the impacts are considered together.”—[*Official Report, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee*, 14 March 2018; c 27.]

Although the feasibility of such a system remains to be seen, it is undeniable that we need a more integrated process. The committee’s report reflected that important point. It noted that the system is

“spread across several regulatory bodies”

and described the current situation as

“confusing and ... poorly coordinated”.

The committee highlighted the need for significant improvements to the

“co-ordination of and interaction between the various elements of the regulatory regime”.

I appreciate that work is under way to address some of those issues, in particular with regard to SEPA’s responsibilities, but further bold action is needed.

If there is one aspect of the report that I am disappointed by, it is the committee’s decision to dismiss calls for a moratorium, on which it stated in its recommendations that there is “insufficient evidence”. The committee set out the changes that we need the industry and Government to make: I agree that it is only fair that they have an opportunity to make those changes. However, I believe that if significant improvements are not made, a moratorium should at the very least remain an option, which is why I dissented from the committee’s recommendation to rule it out

completely. In many ways, the committee agreed with me and somewhat contradicted itself by going on to state in the report that there should be no expansion in the industry until some of the serious problems have been sorted out. Frankly, that sounds a bit like a moratorium to me.

Salmon farming is too important to our economy and to communities to be managed unsustainably. The future of the sector requires that we hold the industry to the highest environmental standards, and that we ensure that it takes animal welfare in aquaculture more seriously. The Government needs to put in place the regulatory framework to achieve that. Work on that has begun, and there have been a number of initiatives and announcements in recent months.

We should be in no doubt that that is in no small part thanks to the work of the ECCLR and REC committees, which have shone a light on the environmental and animal welfare failings of the industry. The recommendations of both committees provide a strong starting point for developing solutions to those failings, and the Government and industry should ensure that the recommendations are fully delivered.

16:40

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):

It has been a long process from the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee's agreeing to conduct the inquiry in June 2017 to our getting to this point. I, too, thank everyone who helped us to produce the report, and who worked so well with the committee throughout the consultation process and during our evidence sessions. I also thank everyone who hosted the committee on site visits last April. We also received 160 written submissions and met Norway's Minister of Fisheries, Per Sandberg. It has been a big job, and that thorough process has delivered an important report.

Two things have been made abundantly clear by all parties across the chamber today. First, we all recognise the huge importance of the salmon farming industry for Scotland. It provides economic prosperity, and good well-paid job opportunities in some of our most remote and disadvantaged areas. In those remote areas, as my colleague Donald Cameron mentioned, the industry provides huge social benefit through sustaining rural schools, shops and local businesses.

Salmon farming has created an estimated 12,000 jobs. Farmed salmon has become our biggest food export, having an estimated value of £600 million in 2017. We are the top producer in the EU and one of the top three producers globally. There is no doubt that the economic benefits are huge.

Farming has made salmon affordable. It is no longer a luxury food, as Gillian Martin said. As she does, I remember well when it was a luxury food.

As the cabinet secretary said, salmon is sold in 50 countries worldwide, so it is a huge export success story. Rhoda Grant said that we should all be eating more oily fish. It is good for our health. Despite what the vegans and vegetarians might say, I believe that it is good for us.

The second thing that became clear during our inquiry, and which has been expressed multiple times by members across the chamber, is that the status quo is not acceptable. More enhanced and effective standards of production and environmental sustainability must be introduced. We need to ensure that the regulatory deficiencies that exist in the industry are addressed in order to improve fish health and to reduce environmental impacts.

There is no doubt that rates of compliance have, in the past, been poor, as the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's convener, Edward Mountain, mentioned. He also said that we must locate farms in more suitable areas. Some farms are in the wrong places; we need to be able to move them. I totally disagree with John Finnie: there are right places for fish farms, and there can be wrong places, too.

We also need to understand better the effect that salmon farming has on the wild salmon population. That is a hugely difficult subject. Stewart Stevenson addressed many of the issues in that regard and highlighted just how difficult the problems are: they are multifaceted.

I agree that mortality levels on salmon farms are often too high, but there is no doubt that the industry takes the issue very seriously, so I am pleased that mortality levels are beginning to fall.

Rhoda Grant spoke about escaped fish. Thankfully, that does not seem to be a big issue right now, but moving to more exposed sites could make escapes more likely.

Mike Rumbles made the important point that no single body takes responsibility for regulating the industry, which he considers to be a huge failing. I agree.

There are many issues to consider. The industry should expand only with care until those issues are addressed. With the Scottish Government's target to grow our food and drink industry to be worth £30 billion by 2030, it is vital that we grow our biggest food producer—the salmon industry.

I welcome SEPA's "Finfish Aquaculture Sector Plan", which was published in November 2018. The consultation on the plan referred to the proposed world-leading framework for regulating

marine cage fish farms. It is vital work, and I look forward to hearing its results.

The focus on the necessary environmental improvements for the industry has resulted in significant improvements in sea lice numbers. As Finlay Carson pointed out, numbers in Scottish salmon farms in September 2018 were the lowest for that month in five years. That has been achieved by various methods, and certainly not only by using chemicals. The use of cleaner fish is a new and important way to tackle the issue. Finlay Carson and Mark Ruskell highlighted the dangers to wild wrasse stocks, but the increasing numbers of such fish being grown on farms rather than being caught in the wild will help to keep that method of control sustainable.

I also want to say how much I agree with Tavish Scott's comments on Mark Ruskell's entirely negative speech, which I, too, do not recognise as being fair comment on the industry.

Mark Ruskell: Will the member give way?

Peter Chapman: No. I have no time.

Such improvements are only the beginning. I welcome SEPA's efforts so far, and I look forward to seeing its implementing what is in the "Finfish Aquaculture Sector Plan" in order to continue the improvement in standards and regulation. I also welcome the Scottish Government's fish health framework, which is expected to lead not only to a huge reduction in fish mortality, but to much-needed improvement in transparency in reporting of mortality rates, lice levels and disease outbreaks at salmon farms.

I conclude by saying that I support the industry and want to see it grow. However, that must be done sustainably, with high welfare and environmental standards at its heart.

16:46

Fergus Ewing: I again thank the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for calling the debate, which has provided an opportunity to discuss issues that are of great import to a sector that, in a short period, has become a cornerstone of this country's rural economy. I have been heartened by the support from across the chamber—or most of it—for the industry, which is qualified by the need for it to meet the challenges that it currently faces. It was very fair of Mr Chapman to point out that some of those challenges, such as sea lice and the use of cleaner fish, are already being tackled successfully, but there is more to be done.

I hope that those few short sentences sum up where the Parliament is—or most of it, because, plainly, not everyone is in that place. I very much welcome the consensus that exists in support of a

sustainable industry. For my part, given the responsibilities that fall to me, as Mr Rumbles said, I will do my best to ensure that the direction of travel of Government policy and its implementation reflect the overall tone of the debate.

I thought that those words would be a useful way in which to start my speech, because, in the short time that I have available, I will not be able to reply to every one of the many questions that have been asked.

It is fair to say that the sector is investing heavily to improve fish health. It has been doing so for some considerable time and, in some cases, with success. For example, Scottish Sea Farms Ltd's sustainability report points to an £11.8 million investment in fish health in 2017. Some 85 per cent of that was spent on non-medicinal measures, while 91.3 per cent was spent on fish survival at sea in 2018. There was also a 50 per cent reduction in the use of medicinal treatments and a 25 per cent reduction in the need for sea lice treatments. Surely, all of us welcome such results.

Interactions is a vital area that we are working on—we will not be kicking that particular can down the road. Claudia Beamish sought assurances about time limits. I will resist the temptation to respond too specifically to that request, which is generally a prudent course for a minister to take, but I reiterate my determination that we will act swiftly. However, members should bear in mind that each of the groups that we have set up—some of them some time ago—requires to do its work, which involves considering the evidence, and that, as we know from the committee's reports, considering the evidence takes time. It is a long time since the committee's inquiries began, and we need similarly to allow the groups—the interactions group, in particular—time to do their work. John Goodlad's leadership and the technical expertise of those on the interactions group are a big advantage for us.

Jamie Greene: The REC Committee came to the view that we should not go so far as to say that there should be compulsory arrangements between salmon producers and wild fisheries. Does the cabinet secretary have any views on the nature of those relationships and whether the arrangements should remain voluntary or be stronger than that?

Fergus Ewing: That is a very important and relevant question. I am not trying to dodge it, but the primary issue is what the impacts are. One needs to establish those first, evidentially. Many members have referred to the fact that the issue is multifactorial—I think that Stewart Stevenson referred to that. I believe that there are 12 factors, at least, that can contribute to the mortality of wild

salmon. That needs to be considered first, and then the appropriate action should be taken. Whether that should be done on a voluntary or a compulsory basis falls to be considered sequentially at that stage.

I do not want members in any way to gain the impression that we wish to delay action or seek to interpret what I am saying in that way. I am saying quite the opposite, but the approach must be evidence based, orderly, thoughtful and considered. In the interim, we will take steps to ensure that environmental monitoring takes place. We will be able to do that ad interim without waiting for the outcomes from the various groups that we have set up.

I welcome the fact that many members have recognised that the setting up of those groups is a serious piece of work. It is a serious way in which to address the concerns—actually, it is the only way in which to address them. Few—if any—of us are experts, so we must reach out to those who have the experience and knowledge, gain the benefit of their work, which is provided pro bono in most cases, thank them and appreciate and value their work. We will take that approach.

We have touched on the importance of the sector to rural Scotland, and I cannot emphasise enough the reach and significance of the investments that are being made. In my constituency, Gael Force Group is investing £914,000 to develop new fish farming pens. The Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre has overseen 14 projects worth £11.4 million, £7 million of which the industry has contributed. Substantial sums of money are being deployed in seeking solutions to the problems that we have discussed.

Mark Ruskell: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fergus Ewing: I cannot, because I have very little time.

There are also substantial community benefits. I have all the figures with me, but I do not have time to go through them. Some major companies are contributing to the communities in which they are based, and that is appreciated, although we encourage them to do more, of course. When I visited Orkney some months ago, Scottish Sea Farms was celebrating 10 years of operating there. I learned that the average wage of its employees in Orkney is £37,000. Let me repeat that figure: £37,000. I met several of those employees. They are hard working and young—at least in comparison with me—and they are all at the heart of rural communities. Tavish Scott made that point trenchantly and effectively.

I am afraid that the cloud of Brexit is hanging over the sector, and it is clear that the approach of

continuing to be in the single market, which we recommend, is one that the sector would recognise.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The cabinet secretary should conclude.

Fergus Ewing: I wish that I had time to say more, but I do not. I very much welcome the support for a sustainable aquaculture sector in Scotland and pledge to do my bit to ensure that that is precisely what we will continue to achieve and deliver.

The Presiding Officer: I call Gail Ross, the deputy convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, to conclude on behalf of the committee.

16:54

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): This has been an extremely interesting and worthwhile debate. It is clear that there is broad recognition across the Parliament of the economic and social value of the salmon farming industry. However, at the same time, there is a clear acknowledgement that action must be taken to address the fish health and environmental challenges that the industry faces if we are to grow it sustainably. As Mark Ruskell said, we are at a crossroads.

The debate has involved members not only of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee but of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. I thank them, the clerks, SPICe and everyone who gave evidence for both reports.

We have heard that the status quo is not an option. That was the conclusion of the ECCLR Committee, and we agree with that view. The cabinet secretary also stated that view in his opening statement, and many other members expressed it. The salmon farming industry is only as strong as its weakest link. As we heard from Maureen Watt, the farms that are underperforming need support and guidance to perform better. One of our asks is for Marine Scotland to take responsibility for improvements and to assume the overarching role of regulator, as Mike Rumbles suggested. It is a multimillion-pound industry, and everyone needs it to succeed. It is also a big employer in constituencies such as mine. In uniquely fragile communities, even one or two jobs could be the difference between the local school closing and its staying open, as Peter Chapman and Colin Smyth said.

Nearly every member who spoke in the debate, including the conveners of both committees and the committee members who spoke, managed to state the benefits of salmon farming. Even Jamie

Greene managed to say something nice. Tavish Scott gave a robust defence of the industry, and he was right to talk about Scotland's food and drink strategy. Richard Lyle said that Scotland's salmon is of superior quality. In the short time that I have left, I will not go over the stated benefits of the industry but will turn to members' contributions to the debate.

Gill disease is one of the serious challenges that the industry faces. The fish health framework will take action on that disease to understand the underlying factors, support more research, establish good practice and formulate a long-term approach. As Maureen Watt stated, the industry recognises those issues. Sea lice are another challenge, as we heard from John Mason, Finlay Carson and—I do not know whether I am allowed to say this—the queen of sea lice herself, Claudia Beamish.

Members: Oh!

Gail Ross: That title is based on her past experience and nothing else.

The committee took quite a bit of evidence on sea lice and heard differing opinions on how the challenge is being dealt with. We even heard disagreement about whether the numbers are decreasing or increasing. We made a number of recommendations, including on the creation of an easily accessible information source and on compliance and reporting being mandatory and effectively monitored. Alex Rowley talked about the reporting issue. As Stewart Stevenson stated, producers do not want sea lice on their fish.

The issue of cleaner fish was mentioned by Finlay Carson, Peter Chapman and Mark Ruskell. The Scottish Government has confirmed that Marine Scotland and the industry have agreed a range of voluntary measures for wild wrasse fishing and there are positive moves towards increasing the number of hatchery-reared cleaner fish, although Finlay Carson said that we will need more and more, and Mark Ruskell stated that we might not need cleaner fish at all if we move to a closed containment system.

Most members spoke about the interaction between farmed and wild salmon. However, as Stewart Stevenson rightly pointed out, there are many reasons for the decline in wild salmon. A lot of members noted that fish farms are only a small contributory factor in that decline and that wild salmon stocks are also declining on the east coast, where there are no fish farms. I believe that Rhoda Grant stated that. I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of the setting up of a group to look at the issue, which Claudia Beamish mentioned.

Members talked about other matters including planning, the role of local authorities, poorly sited

fish farms and how we can support the industry in ensuring that farms are sited in the right places. Further, we had good news recently on the shooting of seals—again, that is an animal welfare issue. Nobody wants to see seals shot. By using new types of netting, Scottish Sea Farms managed to reduce the number of seals that were shot by 31 per cent last year. Tavish Scott referred to that.

We must support the industry to strive. I heard and read a lot in the run-up to the debate, and I take this opportunity to thank every person who has been involved. As John Mason rightly said, a lot of people got in touch. It is not about right and wrong or about winning and losing. We have heard about the range of activity that is being undertaken by the Scottish Government, via its farmed fish health framework and its salmon interaction working group, and we know that SEPA intends to introduce proposals to strengthen regulation, driving operators towards full compliance and improving environmental protection.

The REC Committee believes that it is critical that those proposals result in meaningful and tangible action that will allow the salmon industry to continue to be an economic success story while ensuring that it operates to the highest possible health and environmental standards. I am sure that I speak for the members of both committees in saying that we hope that our inquiry reports have made a worthwhile contribution to achieving that ambition.

Business Motion

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-15728, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 19 February 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Ministerial Statement: Response to the latest EU Exit vote in Westminster
followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Rate Resolution
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 20 February 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Health and Sport
followed by Preliminary Stage Debate: Hutchesons' Hospital Transfer and Dissolution (Scotland) Bill
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 February 2019

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Stage 3 Proceedings: Budget (Scotland) (No.3) Bill
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 26 February 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Financial Resolution: Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 27 February 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Communities and Local Government; Social Security and Older People
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 28 February 2019

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Stage 1 Debate: Census (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, in relation to any debate on a business motion setting out a business programme taken on Wednesday 20 February 2019, the second sentence of rule 8.11.3 is suspended and replaced with "Any Member may speak on the motion at the discretion of the Presiding Officer"

and

(c) that, in relation to First Minister's Questions on Thursday 21 February 2019, in rule 13.6.2, insert at end "and may provide an opportunity for Party Leaders or their representatives to question the First Minister".—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-15723, on the establishment of a committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament shall establish a committee of the Parliament as follows:

Name of Committee: Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints

Remit: To consider and report on the actions of the First Minister, Scottish Government officials and special advisers in dealing with complaints about Alex Salmond, former First Minister, considered under the Scottish Government's "*Handling of harassment complaints involving current or former ministers*" procedure and actions in relation to the Scottish Ministerial Code.

Duration: Until the Committee concludes its inquiry.

Number of members: 9

Convenership: The Convener will be a member of the Scottish National Party and the Deputy Convener will be a member of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

Membership: Alasdair Allan, Jackie Baillie, Donald Cameron, Alex Cole-Hamilton, Angela Constance, Linda Fabiani, Alison Johnstone, Margaret Mitchell, Maureen Watt.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: Do any members wish to speak on the motion?

17:01

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): We support the motion to establish a committee on the Scottish Government's handling of the harassment complaints, and we respect the rules of the Scottish Parliament that determine the number of MSPs from each party on the committee and the rotating selection of the convener under the d'Hondt formula. We are also confident that all the MSPs who have been selected will seek to scrutinise the decisions that were made in this matter and provide recommendations on a way forward.

We do, however, continue to have concerns about the fact that the convener of the committee will be selected from the Scottish National Party. I wish to emphasise that that is no reflection on the SNP member who may be nominated for the post of convener, but there is a clear public interest in ensuring that the committee both is, and is seen to be, impartial. There is no getting round the fact that that will be more difficult to achieve, in this very particular circumstance, if the convener is from the same party as the Government.

Although we will support the motion this evening, we are disappointed that the SNP did not, of its own volition, choose to stand aside on this occasion. We continue to encourage the SNP to reflect further and to offer the convenership to an Opposition party. That, in our judgment, is the right thing to do.

17:03

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): The Scottish Labour Party supports the creation of a committee to look into the Scottish Government's handling of harassment complaints; indeed, we called for it at the Parliamentary Bureau. We support the remit of the committee and fed into the wording of that. We are content with the proposed number of members to sit on the committee.

However, such is the nature of the subject matter that the committee will deal with that it is essential for the standing of this Parliament that we get it right. The committee will deal with the actions or inactions of the most powerful politician in Scotland, the First Minister, and some of her key advisers in relation to complaints about the conduct of the previous most powerful politician in the country when he was in office.

All eyes are on this Parliament in relation to how the inquiry will be conducted. Can the Parliament be trusted to do things openly and transparently in the national interest? This is a big test for us all. It is vital that any committee is not compromised before its work begins and that there is no perception of in-built bias.

We fully understand that the Parliament operates the d'Hondt principle to allocate speaking times, committee places and so on. According to the convention, the next committee to be formed is meant to be convened by an SNP member. That is how the system works in normal times. These are not normal times. Scottish Labour has serious concerns about the damage to the reputation of this Parliament if such an important committee, which will look at such serious allegations against the most senior politicians in this country, is convened by a member of their own party. We made that clear at the bureau.

This is not an attempt to block an inquiry. It is a call for this Parliament to do the right thing. We lodged an amendment to the motion to ensure that an Opposition member would convene the committee, but it was not selected by the Presiding Officer.

Before Christmas, Professor Alison Britton's report to this Parliament on the conduct of independent reviews said that

"the process for the selection of members should be as independent of the subject ... under review, as possible"

and the appointees should have

“no perceived conflict of interest which may raise doubts on impartiality and independence.”

Although this is not an independent review, those words are prescient and they should not be ignored.

We ask the Government to withdraw its motion and return with a proposal for a non-Government convener. Otherwise, we will vote tonight against the terms on which the committee is being established.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Graeme Dey to respond on behalf of the Government.

17:06

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Over the past several weeks, business managers have discussed every aspect of the proposed committee at the Parliamentary Bureau and agreed the motion on behalf of their parties. A few moments ago, when I moved the motion, I of course did so on behalf of the bureau. However, speaking as the minister for parliamentary business, Presiding Officer, I want to acknowledge and welcome the considered and constructive approach that characterised those deliberations, which were chaired by you.

The matter of the convenership was among the matters that were discussed, and I proposed that the SNP would remove itself from the nomination for the deputy convenership, which we were also due to receive under the d’Hondt allocation. Beyond that, we took the decision to nominate four hugely experienced and highly respected parliamentarians to the committee. Both approaches were decided upon before any questions were raised by other parties—a clear indication of the importance that we place on the committee and the work that it will undertake on behalf of the Parliament.

Further evidence of that is to be found in the fact that, when the committee meets, it is our intention to nominate to the role of convener Linda Fabiani, who, I believe, should have the confidence and respect of all parties in this Parliament. The unprecedented decision to nominate a Deputy Presiding Officer to such a role is one that I had hoped other parties would—and I know that some do—recognise as pointing the way for the work of the committee to be carried out in an appropriate, non-partisan way.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. The vote on the motion will be taken at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to

move motions S5M-15729 to S5M-15731, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S5M-15732, on approval of the draft Scottish social security charter.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Housing and Property Chamber (Incidental Provisions) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Supplemental Provision) Order 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Modification of the Repairing Standard) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Social Security Charter [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Decision Time

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that motion S5M-15677, in the name of Edward Mountain, on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's report on salmon farming in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's 9th Report, 2018 (Session 5), *Report on Salmon Farming in Scotland* (SP Paper 432).

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-15723, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the establishment of a committee, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 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 Kinrossshire) (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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)

(Con)

Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 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)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (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)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (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)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 92, Against 19, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament shall establish a committee of the Parliament as follows:

Name of Committee: Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints

Remit: To consider and report on the actions of the First Minister, Scottish Government officials and special advisers in dealing with complaints about Alex Salmond, former First Minister, considered under the Scottish Government's "Handling of harassment complaints involving current or former ministers" procedure and actions in relation to the Scottish Ministerial Code.

Duration: Until the Committee concludes its inquiry.

Number of members: 9

Convenership: The Convener will be a member of the Scottish National Party and the Deputy Convener will be a member of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

Membership: Alasdair Allan, Jackie Baillie, Donald Cameron, Alex Cole-Hamilton, Angela Constance, Linda Fabiani, Alison Johnstone, Margaret Mitchell, Maureen Watt.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on the four remaining Parliamentary Bureau motions. Does any member object?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: That is good. The question is, that motions S5M-15729 to S5M-15732, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Housing and Property Chamber (Incidental Provisions) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Supplemental Provision) Order 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Modification of the Repairing Standard) Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Social Security Charter [draft] be approved.

Scottish Powerchair Football Association

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): If I could ask members to gather themselves. [Interruption.] I have not called you yet, Mr Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am so excited.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are very much so, and you have obviously excited everyone else around you.

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-15106, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, on the Scottish Powerchair Football Association. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the work of the Scottish Powerchair Football Association (SPFA), which was formed with support from the SFA in 2015; notes that it was established in recognition of the growth in the sport's popularity in Lothian and across the country, with the Peak Sports Centre in Stirling considered to be the sport's home; believes that it is run by volunteers who have made a genuine difference to the lives of powerchair users in Scotland; understands that, in March 2018, the SPFA applied for charitable status; hopes that the SCIO process will enable it to access greater funding opportunities; commends it on organising a national league and two knockout competitions, the League and Scottish cups; understands that, in May 2018, the SPFA organised a para-football event at which a number of players were selected for the Scotland international squad; believes that the organisation's commitment to the sport has enabled it to almost double the number of teams in the country, and wishes all involved with the SPFA continued success.

17:11

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): This afternoon, I have the pleasure of opening this debate on the Scottish Powerchair Football Association.

I am incredibly supportive of all the work that the SPFA does to grow and develop powerchair football in Scotland and internationally. I am sure that I am speaking on behalf of all members of the Parliament as I take this opportunity to welcome Ryan Galloway, who works for the SPFA, and a number of players, who are watching the debate from the public gallery. [Applause.]

The Scottish Powerchair Football Association is the official governing body of powerchair football in Scotland and was formed in 2015. Its various roles include organising competitions and events and promoting participation in the growing sport of powerchair football.

Powerchair football is a unique sport, which provides opportunities for people with a high level of impairment to access football. The game is for anyone who uses a powered wheelchair or who has limited movement in a manual wheelchair. The sport is fast paced and dynamic and allows players of all ages, disabilities and genders to compete alongside one another. Players range in age from 12 to 58.

A few of my colleagues, including Brian Whittle, took part in a Sunday afternoon game last year. I am sure that Mr Whittle will tell us about his experience later in the debate.

The game involves two teams, each made up of four players, who use powerchairs that are equipped with foot guards to attack, defend and spin-kick a football in an attempt to score goals.

There are two national competitions: the SPFA league cup and the Scottish cup. A national squad is being developed and there is a desire to take the sport to an international level. I am pleased that international games will take place later this year.

Around 70 players are currently involved in the sport in Scotland. Here in the Lothians, the Lothian Wolves powerchair football club was established in 2016 by Lothian Disability Sport. The club has had tremendous success. It regularly trains at Heriot-Watt University, and the hard work of the players and their coaches has obviously paid off: Chris Jacquin, who started to play the sport only in 2016, was recently selected for the first ever powerchair football Scotland squad. That is a fantastic achievement and—with my natural bias—I wish Chris and the team every success in the years ahead.

Research commissioned by sportscotland and the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that disabled people in Scotland are less active, have poorer experiences of school physical education and are less likely to participate in sport as adults. That is something that the SPFA, along with its players and other sporting organisations, is trying to tackle. It wants to raise awareness of powerchair football through the many partnerships that interlink the health, voluntary and sports sectors, among others, in order to see the sport become accessible for all. Since the SPFA's creation, powerchair football has seen a huge rise in popularity and there is a clear trend that that is increasing, due to the work of volunteers and others.

I would like to highlight the desire to make powerchair football accessible to all wheelchair users. Given the importance of sport for a person's wellbeing, I fully support the SPFA's mission and drive to see that happen. However, there are barriers that are preventing it from happening, and

they need to be addressed. The way that wheelchairs are set up and the speed at which they work stop some people from playing. Too often, health boards across Scotland have a "no do" attitude, whereas they should be far more positive. Another barrier concerns sports centres. Although there are centres across Scotland that can accommodate a single powerchair football team, very few venues—in fact, only four—are able to host multiple teams, which is absolutely essential for the creation and maintenance of league and national cup competitions. Any tournament requires the use of at least two courts, with additional space needed for viewing, for officials, and for players to move around in their powerchairs safely.

In addition, there is a need for changing places toilets. Even now, the SPFA's current home in the Peak sports centre in Stirling lacks acceptable toilet facilities. Our own Lothian Wolves club does not have a changing places toilet at Heriot-Watt. It would be great if such sports centres would consider installing that type of toilet. At the Peak, the SPFA has access to a mobile hoist and changing bench, which fits one accessible toilet but leaves little room for carers and safe transfers. That is totally unacceptable and is a huge barrier to those who would like to play powerchair football, but cannot access it because they simply do not know how they are going to be able to go to the toilet.

I support the call for existing sports venues to be updated with changing places toilets. I am pleased to report that my amendment to the Planning (Scotland) Bill, advocating the building of changing places toilets in all new suitable sports centres, has been agreed to with cross-party support. That is positive progress for increasing accessibility for people with disabilities, and I hope that it will pave the way to create a more accessible and inclusive society. However, that will take time, and I urge sports centres that are already up and running to look at the issue seriously.

The players, members and volunteers are a class act, and Scotland can certainly be proud of them. I therefore urge the Scottish Government to continue to invest in disability sport and its governing bodies, to help to provide the infrastructure that is needed for cultural change, and which ultimately is needed to support and encourage the disabled community's involvement in sport.

17:18

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I congratulate Jeremy Balfour and thank him sincerely for securing this debate on an important issue.

As the motion that we are debating today points out, the Peak, in my constituency, is the home of Scottish powerchair football. I know from those who work at the Peak, which is part of the Active Stirling portfolio, that they take pride in providing an array of inclusive sports activities, suitable for people across a range of disabilities as well as with abilities. However, as Jeremy Balfour rightly pointed out, more needs to be done on issues such as changing places toilets.

I understand that classes started in powerchair football, in particular, in association with Stirling Riverside Football Club last August. It is accessible to anyone who uses an electric wheelchair, which—if I have the technicalities right, Mr Balfour—requires a bumper that allows the player to dribble, pass and shoot; something that I could never manage when I was playing football myself. I liked the way that Jeremy Balfour described that in his speech.

With the support that is provided by the Scottish Powerchair Football Association, there are now weekly classes in the sport, with monthly league fixtures taking place at the Peak. It is clear that powerchair football has taken off in a significant way in Stirling, while opportunities across the country have also opened up. Despite the improvements that are still required, I believe that all of those involved in the initiative deserve to be commended.

Jeremy Balfour has already covered a lot of the specifics about powerchair football, so I would like to look at the wider offering of disability sport in my constituency. The Stirling Wheelchair Curling Club, also based at the Peak, is open to adults of any age and gives members the chance to take part in full-length curling, short curling and competition curling. Full membership is just £28 and the club trains on a Wednesday afternoon. I know that Active Stirling also opens up its sports classes to people who have a physical, sensory or learning disability. Currently, swimming classes are being run on a Friday evening at Stirling high school. Each class is supported by qualified coaches who can adapt each class to the needs of the children who take part in order to develop their swimming skills.

Beyond the actives that are provided by Active Stirling, Stirling City All Stars provides recreational football in Raploch community campus for adults with disabilities. That involves weekly coaching sessions run by volunteers, and the club gets involved with tournaments up and down the United Kingdom every year. Members pay a fee of just £20 a year for membership, which includes the opportunity to take part in social events.

The national swimming academy at the University of Stirling also benefits many of my constituents. The facility provides competitive

swim coaching to junior swimmers with a physical disability. It is available to young people over the age of nine, with land training available at the poolside before swimming sessions.

Stirling has a well-deserved international reputation for developing local athletes. It is clear that lots of work is going on to ensure that people with disabilities get to benefit from the widest possible range of activities. However, it is also clear that a lot more work needs to be done to include as many people with disabilities as possible in sport. It is true to say that the more we work together to achieve that, the better we can improve the confidence that people with disabilities have in their local sports services. That level of inclusion is good not only for physical health but also for mental wellbeing.

I am delighted that I have had the opportunity to share some of Stirling's experiences with regard to this topic. Again, I thank Jeremy Balfour for bringing this important subject to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Brian Whipple—Whipple? I mean Whittle. I beg your pardon, Mr Whittle.

17:22

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I answer to many things, Presiding Officer.

As a seasoned powerchair footballer myself, I welcome this debate and congratulate my colleague Jeremy Balfour on bringing it to the chamber.

I was not long into this job when I had the opportunity to take part in powerchair football with the Ayrshire Tigers, and I invited some of my colleagues to join me—it was interesting to think of John Scott and I, along with Colin Smyth, being on the same sports team. Of course, we were ritually shown up by the powerchair footballers themselves, but it was a real pleasure to be part of that and to see the way in which powerchair teams train together—they put us to the sword with a great deal of glee.

Following that, I managed to organise a parliamentary team to go along to the Peak in Stirling during the Scottish championships, at which we took part in an exhibition match. We played our joker card, which, of course, is Alexander Stewart, who now has the nickname of Davros because, in his attempt to take a penalty, he manoeuvred his chair backwards, forwards and sideways, and spun about like a little top, but the ball stayed exactly where it was. I have video evidence of it that I am quite happy to share with anyone who would like to see it.

Of course, the unflappable Dean Lockhart also took part, and it was interesting to watch him

spinning around and going in no particular direction—in fact, I am sure that, in his attempt to manage his powerchair, he actually moved postcodes. Within 10 minutes, we were beaten 6-0. The lesson there for anybody who wants to take part in sport is that they have to train. The athletes involved in powerchair football do exactly that and train as hard as anybody.

The debate highlights barriers to participation. I was struck by the powerchair footballers' talking about the ability to get to training and to facilities. The transport required to take equipment and powerchairs to venues is one of the big barriers to the sport, so we must consider the equipment that is needed. As Jeremy Balfour eloquently suggested, we also need to consider what is required at the venues. With any sport or activity, it is important that we look at and break down the barriers to participation, so that we give as many people as possible the opportunity to participate.

As always, I will discuss the importance of access to opportunities and inclusivity, which is one of the key pillars of health. Over the years, I have been lucky to coach people with so-called disabilities, and I still coach some now. They train along with the rest of my squad and they are not given any special treatment—the approach is the same as for any other athlete. Every single athlete who I work with has some kind of special need that is individual to them. Whether someone has a physical disability and is in a wheelchair or has a mental disability, the approach is exactly the same—that is what any athlete of any description would want.

Therefore, I challenge the idea that we should approach the sport differently from how we support any able-bodied sport—I want to break down that barrier. The term “disability” is a misnomer, because it is all about ability. To see where ability lies, one just has to watch the MSPs' attempt to play the sport—as I said, we got beat 6-0. Would I go back and do it again? Absolutely, as it was some of the greatest fun I have had since becoming an MSP.

Again, I congratulate Jeremy Balfour on bringing the debate to the chamber and giving us the opportunity to discuss the issue.

17:27

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank Jeremy Balfour for bringing the debate to the chamber. I declare an interest, as I am the convener of the cross-party group on muscular dystrophy. I want to namecheck John Miller of Action Duchenne for bringing the debate to my attention and phoning my office every two minutes to insist that I speak and to confirm that I would do

so. I am therefore delighted to be speaking in the debate.

It is important that we celebrate the work and achievements of the Scottish Powerchair Football Association and the positive impact that it has on individuals with physical difficulties, never mind half the Tory party. Given where powerchair football started, it is even more remarkable to see what the association has achieved today. Back in April 2010, there were just six players but, in nine short years, powerchair football has become the fastest-growing disability team sport, with more than 1,100 participants across the UK, 62 of whom are based in Scotland and play for the Scottish Powerchair Football Association.

In December 2018, the Scottish powerchair football team took part in their first international match, which I understand was against the English powerchair football team. The less said about the result the better but, as I have learned in my 20 years as a Scottish Labour MSP, it is the taking part that counts, although it has to be said that recent results are much more promising. Just days ago, the Scotland blue team came second and the Scotland yellow team came third at a national tournament in Leeds, so everybody had better watch out, because they are working towards the top place, and that is without the help of Brian Whittle and his colleagues.

More than half the players have a muscle-wasting condition which, to able-bodied people, can seem daunting, demoralising or even debilitating. However, powerchair football has given people with complex and varied physical disabilities the opportunity to play as part of a team at amateur and professional levels, and it has allowed them to reach their potential while doing something that they clearly love and enjoy.

Muscular Dystrophy UK, which is a charity that is close to my heart, has collaborated with the Scottish Powerchair Football Association to sponsor the Muscular Dystrophy UK premierships and the MDUK premierships in Scotland until the 2021 season. The hard-working staff and volunteers at Muscular Dystrophy UK and the Scottish Powerchair Football Association cannot be praised enough for the welcome space that they have given to individuals in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK who might not have discovered their skill for powerchair football had it not been for the opportunity that was presented.

Powerchair football brings together people of all ages, genders and backgrounds to form one united team. It brings communities together, ignores people's varying levels of physical ability and bonds them over a shared love of football. The dedication that is shown by powerchair players and the physical and emotional barriers that many of them have had to overcome to get to

where they are today show how passionate they are about the sport and how deserving they are of every success in it. The transferable skills that are learned through playing powerchair football, including teamwork and communication, will undoubtedly have a positive effect on every aspect of a player's life.

Praise should be given to the local powerchair football clubs across the country that, year on year, have inspired new potential powerchair players to take up the sport. The continuous support of coaches and volunteers creates a huge amount of positive energy for the players, and it inspires them to achieve even greater things.

A number of overseas powerchair football clubs, as well as the European Powerchair Football Association, have supported the SPFA. Their generous support has helped to buy the necessary equipment for the players and to make venues more accessible. However, there certainly needs to be more funding and investment in powerchair football. I will not let the minister off lightly, because some clubs still struggle to find an appropriate venue and to buy appropriate equipment. Many powerchair football players end up having to crowdfund in order to get suitable wheelchairs for the sport, which can cost up to £8,000.

Again, I thank Jeremy Balfour for securing the debate, which I hope will not only inspire potential powerchair football players to try out the sport but encourage the minister and others to look at how they can provide investment and awareness, so that the SPFA, which is a fantastic organisation, can continue to go from strength to strength.

17:33

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): It is fair to say that disability sport in Scotland has had a huge number of achievements to celebrate recently. Wheelchair tennis player Gordon Reid, from Alexandria, has won an amazing 11 grand slams in singles and doubles tennis. Most recently, he won last year's US open, and he also won two medals at the 2016 Paralympic games.

T34 sprinter Maria Lyle, from Dunbar, has won a whole armful of medals in recent Paralympics, world and European championships and Commonwealth games, including a silver medal when she represented Scotland at the 2018 Gold Coast games.

In August last year, the UK team won the BC1 boccia world championships with a team that included three Scots: Stephen McGuire, Patrick Wilson and Jamie McCowan. Brian Whittle and I challenged Stephen McGuire to a game in the garden lobby. We foolishly thought that we might have a chance, but we were soon put right.

In March, Scotland will play host to the biggest wheelchair curling event outside of the Paralympic winter games, when the 2019 wheelchair curling championships come to Stirling.

I particularly highlight that Chris Jacquin, who plays for Lothian Wolves, has been selected for the first ever Scotland powerchair football squad.

Disability sport is going from strength to strength, and we are becoming more aware of the achievements. The athletes are receiving the attention that they deserve. Today we are talking about the amazing growth of powerchair football, which we can add to the list of achievements. I thank Jeremy Balfour for providing us with the opportunity to congratulate the Scottish Powerchair Football Association on its work in developing the sport in Scotland, and I am really pleased that we are debating the subject in the chamber.

I have been involved in athletics for almost 40 years, so I know that developing a sport can be challenging. There are teams to establish, league rules to draw up, officials to be trained and retained, funding to find for kit and venue hire, and so much more. There are particular challenges when expensive equipment is involved. It involves time, dedication, perseverance and passion, even more so when, as with powerchair football, the sport is relatively new, and limited support exists.

Clearly, this is the fastest-growing disability sport in Scotland, so the organisers and players have the necessary qualities in spades. The number of teams that play the sport has doubled in four years, and in that time the game has gone from being a grass-roots organisation to having well-established leagues and a national team. Having watched a little powerchair football—just on the screen so far, but I will give it a bash—I am not surprised. It looks great fun and enthralling, and I can understand why people get hooked.

The first European champions cup will take place in 2020. It will be fabulous to see Scottish players have an opportunity to take part in that. Thereafter, I hope that the SPFA can move the sport on even further by hosting the cup in Scotland for the first time. I offer congratulations from the Scottish Greens on that incredible expansion of the sport in a short time.

As colleagues have said, there are additional challenges, such as finding venues that are able to accommodate large numbers of powerchair users. As the SPFA notes in its helpful briefing, only a few sports centres are suitable for the football tournaments and even the sport's home base at the Peak sports centre in Stirling lacks the necessary accessible toilet facilities. We can and must do better.

Although the development of the sport has been impressive, there are barriers to further growth. The SPFA is concerned that there are currently no powerchair football teams south of Edinburgh and north of Dundee. We must ensure that Scots who want to try out the sport are able to do so, wherever they live.

That is not easy, because of the complexities and costs of holding powerchair football taster days, which can cost £800 to £1,500. The SPFA has no budget for that. It has appealed to the Scottish Government for support with funding and signposting to sources of funding, and I look forward to the minister's comments on that when he is closing the debate.

I understand that some players have met with resistance from the national health service wheelchair service to adapt powerchairs so that they can go at the necessary speed in order to play the game properly. As the SPFA has stated, there is an opportunity for it to work with the NHS wheelchair service to promote powerchair football when, for instance, a person collects a new chair. The association has already been in touch with the minister on those issues, so it would be interesting to have an update on that.

I congratulate the members of the Lothian Wolves team, who play at Heriot-Watt University. In September, the team came third in the league cup and they are currently five points clear in the Scottish powerchair championship. I wish them well in their campaign for promotion to the premiership.

It is great to see another sport grow and thrive in Scotland. No matter what their age, disability or background is, everyone should have the opportunity to take part in sport, professionally and for leisure.

17:38

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I join other members in congratulating Jeremy Balfour on securing this evening's important debate.

Before I move on to talk specifically about powerchair football, I will say a few words about disability sport in general. A number of members raised that subject.

First, Bruce Crawford gave a fantastic advert for the disability sport facilities in the Stirling area, which is the home of powerchair football in Scotland. It was good to hear Alison Johnstone remind us of the significant successes that we have had in disability and para-sports in Scotland.

Alison Johnstone, Jeremy Balfour and perhaps others made a number of points about the general challenges that people have with disability sports.

For example, most of us take it for granted that if we go to take part in a sport we will be able to access the toilet facilities. I agree with Mr Balfour that we need to improve on the fact that that is not yet the case for many people. The changes that the Parliament unanimously supports in the context of the Planning (Scotland) Bill will help in the future.

I hope that those who are in charge of leisure facilities across Scotland are hearing the call for changing room facilities, and that such facilities are at the centre of any refurbishment work that is going on. Only if such work is at the top of the list in our leisure facilities and other places across Scotland will we make major progress. It is a basic right for people to be able to use a toilet when they enter our public buildings and I hope that we will make progress on that.

Football is Scotland's national game. It is enormously important to individuals, communities and the Scottish Government. It does not always get the most positive press; many of the discussions that we have about football in this chamber focus on its negative aspects. Yes, Scottish football has its challenges—and we are working with clubs, the football authorities and other stakeholders to address those—but it remains a powerful force for good.

Football can inspire individuals and deliver a range of positive outcomes. We see that in the breadth and depth of the excellent community activity work that is delivered by the Scottish Football Association, the Scottish Professional Football League Trust, the Scottish Football Partnership Trust and individual trusts and foundations. It is remarkable right across Scotland.

The debate has highlighted the positive impact that our national game is having for people with disabilities. Football is our national game and should be enjoyed by everyone. Mr Whittle made the point about ensuring that there are no barriers to participation in sport, and that is equally true for football.

Jackie Baillie gave us a brief history of powerchair football going back to 2010. The Scottish Powerchair Football Association was founded in 2015 in response to the growth in the game, and—as Jackie Baillie also noted—it has continued to grow since then.

With support from the Scottish FA, it has achieved a great deal in a short time. It now organises a national league competition and two cup competitions—the Scottish cup and league cup. Last year, it arranged a para-football event at which—as we have heard—a number of players were selected for the Scotland national squad. Its work has helped to almost double the number of teams in the country and it is playing an absolutely

crucial role in the growth and development of powerchair football in Scotland. However, I recognise that there is more to do to extend its reach. Its success, however, can largely be attributed to the dedication and enthusiasm of its volunteers—some of whom are in the chamber—who are the lifeblood of the association.

It is important to acknowledge the work that the Scottish FA has been undertaking in this field. Although it may not generate headlines, it is groundbreaking work and is leading the way in world football. In 2017, the Scottish FA rebranded its work on disability football as para-football, with the aim of ensuring greater emphasis on the diverse work that it carries out—including with groups dealing with issues such as dementia and mental health—as well as creating a stronger voice for those groups within the game.

The para-football Scottish national association will be the first dedicated national association in the world. As well as funding all member organisations for domestic and international competitions, a representative of the association is eligible for a place on the Scottish FA board as the representative of the non-professional game, meaning that disability football will have its own voice at the top table for the first time. I pay tribute to the SFA—and to David McArdle in particular—for this commendable initiative.

Like others, I have seen first-hand the positive impact that powerchair football can have. One of my early engagements following my appointment as Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing was attending the powerchair football league cup final on 9 September 2018, which was won by my local powerchair football team, the Tayside Dynamos.

Even if they had not won, it would have been a really enjoyable day. To anyone who has not been to a powerchair football match, I highly recommend it. It is as competitive as any other football match—perhaps even more so. There is also the complexity that virtually everyone who is involved in the game is a volunteer and we had the interesting situation in which the referee gave points against her son. It was an absolutely fantastic and exciting game.

I encourage members to go along and support their local powerchair football teams. If they do not have one, perhaps there are folk we could get in touch with to support the development of more teams. Such development is being supported in some parts of Scotland by the local professional team, for example by Clyde Football Club, which I commend for its action.

On 13 November last year, I met John Miller from Action Duchenne, which was mentioned by Jackie Baillie. John's grandchild plays for the

Lothian Wolves team. Originally, our discussion was arranged to be a wider discussion about support, but we mostly talked about powerchair football. We talked about how to improve and support the sport going forward and other issues that were raised today by members such as Jeremy Balfour and Alison Johnstone.

The Scottish Government recognises the value of powerchair football and the importance of the Scottish Powerchair Football Association and its volunteers.

I know that the Scottish Powerchair Football Association has applied for charitable status. I hope that success in that will allow it to access more funding opportunities to further strengthen the game. Much has been achieved in the short time since the association was formed in 2015, and I have no doubt that the sport will continue to go from strength to strength. The new para-football Scottish national association will provide further opportunities when it formally goes live later this year.

I congratulate Mr Balfour on securing the debate and I pay tribute to the Scottish Powerchair Football Association and its volunteers for their dedication to this excellent cause.

Meeting closed at 17:47.

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