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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 3 December 2019

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. Our first item of business today is time for reflection, for which our leader is Ms Emma Jackson, national director Scotland for Christians Against Poverty.

Emma Jackson (Christians Against Poverty): Jesus said to his host, “The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your family, your friends or your rich neighbours—the kind of people who will return the favour. Invite some people who never get invited out—the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind—and you will be blessed.”

Whether or not you share, like me, in the Christian faith, it is hard to hear those words and not feel challenged. It is a poignant question for us at this time of year, when we are perhaps more aware than ever of those who have less than us: those living in debt or struggling with unemployment, or the many people battling issues of addiction and isolation.

Christians Against Poverty is a United Kingdom debt counselling and anti-poverty charity that, at its heart, seeks to connect the local church with those in most need, regardless of background. The unique partnership between individual churches that know their local communities, and our highly-trained, Financial Conduct Authority-regulated head office teams, works to enable families to journey out of debt.

Debt can be all consuming. Shame and embarrassment rob people of their dignity. Almost a fifth of our clients said that before they received CAP’s help, they missed meals daily. More than 35 per cent of clients have said that before CAP got involved, they seriously considered or attempted suicide because of their debt.

Here in Scotland, our award-winning network of 22 debt centres offers hope to those in the most difficult of situations. Through 20 years of providing free debt advice locally, we know that there is always a solution. Lives can be rebuilt.

At CAP, we know that debt is not just a financial issue. We strive, as standard, to offer people the very best support that goes the extra mile. We are interested in whole-person transformation. Our army of volunteers never shies away from providing kindness, compassion, a friendly face, a

listening ear, gas or electricity top-ups, or a cooked meal.

When he contacted CAP, one client, Andy, was at rock bottom because of a broken relationship, mounting debt, alcohol misuse and anger. We took the burden of his debt and we showed him a way forward. That created space for him to heal and to rebuild his relationship, his wellbeing and his life. Andy is now debt free; he paid it all back. He is married, and he works as a local CAP debt centre manager, helping others to find freedom.

Community and connection matter to us all—even more to those who are facing the most difficult of circumstances. Although we cannot all be debt experts, we can all reflect on Jesus’s words and think about who is at our table. Who could we reach out to and offer dinner or lunch to? Who are you going to invite?

Thank you very much for your time this afternoon. *[Applause.]*

Topical Question Time

14:04

Falkirk Gas Outage

1. Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it is providing to the multi-agency approach to the major gas outage affecting more than 8,000 households in Falkirk district. (S5T-01907)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government provides a team in each of the Scottish regional resilience partnerships to help to plan and co-ordinate response arrangements to disruptive events. Since Sunday, those resilience officials have been liaising closely with responders including Police Scotland, Falkirk Council, other emergency services and SGN to support what has been an effective multi-agency response. That work will continue until all residents are reconnected.

The Scottish Government resilience team has been actively involved in co-ordinating response activity within the Scottish Government. Resilience officials have been deployed to the Police Scotland-led multi-agency co-ordination centre in Stirling and the Government's co-ordination facility, SGoRR—the Scottish Government resilience room—has been activated.

The fault has now been repaired and gas is being restored to the network. The process to safely reconnect customers requires engineers to visit all affected properties. That is now well under way, with an estimated 5,000 customers already back on mains supply. SGN engineers, with support from engineers from across the country, are working hard to bring all customers back on supply as quickly as possible.

Angus MacDonald: Progress has moved at pace since I lodged the question yesterday, with swift progress being made on reconnecting the thousands of households affected, which has been heartening. I was pleased to receive a report at midday that more than 5,000 households have now been reconnected. Yesterday afternoon, the cabinet secretary and I visited the control centre to see the resilience room in operation. Every one of the multi-agency partners has to be praised for the swift action that they have taken over the past 50-plus hours: Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the national health service, the ambulance service and Falkirk Council's social services and housing departments—not forgetting the community effort—all deserve praise for the way in which the multi-agency approach has been handled.

There are, however, questions to be asked once every household has been reconnected to their gas supply. SGN has advised me that it is conducting an investigation, but there may be merit in exploring the cause further. Although I have received assurances that the gas governor that failed had been regularly maintained, it may be that a review of maintenance procedures in our nationwide gas network is overdue. Will the cabinet secretary consider requesting a review of the pipeline infrastructure around Scotland with a view to ensuring that such a large gas outage is not repeated?

Michael Matheson: As Angus MacDonald said, yesterday he and I visited the co-ordination centre in my constituency to meet the staff and officials who have been engaged since Sunday afternoon in the process of rectifying the fault and getting customers back on supply as quickly as possible. I offer my thanks and praise for the significant amount of work that has been undertaken over a very short time by organisations including Falkirk Council, the police, voluntary organisations and a range of other partners to support the effort to assist those customers who were left without gas on Monday night and last night. I also took the opportunity to visit St Francis Xavier's church hall, where the local parishioners had come together to provide soup and sandwiches and hot drinks for people who required support during a period when they had no access to gas appliances.

As Angus MacDonald said, the fault that SGN has identified was with one of its gas governors. At this stage, SGN has advised us that it is not clear how that fault came about and there is a need for further work to be undertaken to identify exactly its root cause. We expect that, once SGN has completed that process, any lessons that need to be learned from the incident will be brought forward in the form of further works that may be required to improve the resilience of the other gas governors, not just in the Falkirk area but across the whole network. SGN needs to undertake the investigation work to identify how the fault occurred in the first place and then to identify whether further measures are needed to prevent a similar type of incident being repeated at another location across the network.

Angus MacDonald: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will join me in welcoming the confirmation from SGN that compensation of £30 per household will be paid for each complete 24-hour period for which residents have had no gas. In recognition of the severe weather that occurred in the first 24 hours of the incident and the additional electricity that residents have had to use to heat their homes, SGN will provide an additional payment of £30 as a gesture of goodwill. I am sure that that will be welcomed by the majority of my constituents who were affected.

Michael Matheson: Mr MacDonald is correct that there is a compensation payment for those customers who have had a 24-hour period without gas. That payment should be provided by the gas supplier within a relatively short period. I encourage any of his or my constituents who have been affected by the outage to contact their gas supplier to seek that compensation at an early stage.

I have had discussions with Falkirk Council about people who are on prepayment electricity meters who might find themselves in financial difficulty as a result of the need to use a greater amount of electricity. The council is looking at what arrangements can be put in place to assist those with financial difficulties through the Scottish welfare fund. Any constituents who find themselves in that situation should contact Falkirk Council's Scottish welfare fund officials, who will provide them with advice and assistance around what they can do to meet any financial challenges that they face as a result of having to make greater use of electricity on a prepaid meter.

Peebles High School (Assistance During Closure)

2. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it can give to Scottish Borders Council and the staff and pupils of Peebles high school should it remain closed beyond Christmas, including pupils preparing for their exams. (S5T-01903)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): My thoughts are with pupils, staff and parents at Peebles high school, following the fire at the school. I pay tribute to the resilience of everyone who has been involved in dealing with this challenging situation. I also pay tribute to our emergency services for their prompt action in addressing this very serious incident. The Scottish Government remains in close contact with Scottish Borders Council and stands ready to provide any support necessary to minimise disruption to pupils' learning.

The council has stated that all pre-Christmas prelim exams have been postponed until the new year, to ensure that pupils have an opportunity to fully prepare for those important examinations.

Christine Grahame: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer. My thoughts, too, are with the pupils, staff and headteachers at the school, and my gratitude is with the fire and rescue service.

I note the council's announcement today that it will accommodate 1,300 displaced pupils in Peebles and Galashiels. However, if that does not

work out, is it feasible for pupils to be decanted outwith the Borders, such as to Penicuik? I am already exploring that possibility, having written to the chief executives of Scottish Borders Council and Midlothian Council, as Penicuik and Beeslack high schools are both well under capacity. Penicuik is only 13 miles from Peebles and 18 miles from Galashiels.

Of course, there would be financial implications for both councils, so will the cabinet secretary describe what support the Scottish Government could provide to Borders council in the near future, as well as further into the future, should such alternative arrangements with Midlothian be required?

John Swinney: Statutory responsibility for the delivery of education at local level rests with the local authority, which must therefore address the continuous provision of education for young people.

A variety of school accommodation in the area surrounding Peebles—Christine Grahame cited a couple of examples in the Penicuik area—could be utilised if the local authority judged that to be the appropriate course of action. What helps us in this situation is that Midlothian Council and Scottish Borders Council are part of the south east improvement collaborative. The collaboratives were established to encourage co-operation among local authorities in the provision and enhancement of education. Another participant in the south east improvement collaborative is Fife Council, which has had to wrestle with identical issues in relation to Woodmill high school in Dunfermline.

I am sure that there can be discussion across local authority borders to address the issue that Christine Grahame has raised, which is a matter for the local authority to resolve.

In relation to the role of the Scottish Government, I reiterate what I said in my earlier answer. The Government will be very happy to assist Scottish Borders Council in any way that we can to try to minimise any disruption to young people's learning.

Christine Grahame: That is very helpful.

I ask the cabinet secretary to focus on the issue of pupils sitting prelim exams, who will be finding the situation extremely stressful. Can the Scottish Government and its officials give any assistance to those pupils in particular, who must be concerned about the effect that the situation might have on their results?

John Swinney: We need to have that issue uppermost in our minds. We do not want such a terrible incident to disrupt the education of young people in any way. Obviously, the school and the

local authority can make representations to the Scottish Qualifications Authority about the implications for young people who will be involved in the examination diet in the spring, and the school's internal prelim exams can be adjusted. The school has done that by delaying the prelims until January to ensure that young people have the opportunity to avoid being affected in any way by the events.

There is a deeper question that affects all pupils and staff at Peebles high school and the community there. There will have been a tremendous shock—if not a trauma—to young people, and that impact has to be addressed in how we engage with, support and assist young people in coming to terms with the damage that has been done to their school.

It is very important to be cognisant of those issues in working to support the young people and staff of Peebles high school.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): My thoughts, too, are with the families and children who are affected, the staff and the rescue service that did so much work to put out a huge fire.

Last year, a Scottish Fire and Rescue Service risk analysis of 470 schools in Scotland reported that one in seven of the schools had a high fire risk. Obviously, we have seen a couple of incidents recently. What, if any, actions were taken as a result of that analysis?

There is quite a lot of concern among constituents across the Borders that having to rebuild Peebles high school will have an impact on other planned builds. Can the cabinet secretary reassure our constituents that the school will be rebuilt without any impact on the planned new builds at Eyemouth and Earlston?

John Swinney: All those issues are fundamentally the responsibility of Scottish Borders Council. The local authority carries the statutory responsibility to be assured of the quality of the school estate and to ensure that the estate complies with all relevant guidelines. It is important that the local authority satisfies itself on that obligation.

On the possible rebuilding of Peebles high school, we do not yet know what the situation will be. I suspect that, given the extent of the damage, there will be a significant challenge to address. The Government will, of course, be very happy to engage in discussions with Scottish Borders Council on how we might assist in taking that work forward. Such discussions are constantly under way. Michelle Ballantyne will be familiar with the fact that the Government has opened another programme for investment in the learning estate. The second phase of that programme will be

available for consideration in 2020. We will, of course, be happy to have discussions with Scottish Borders Council as it becomes clear what the route forward is for the delivery of education at Peebles high school.

Queensferry Crossing (Vehicle Journeys)

3. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the targets set out in the Queensferry crossing public transport strategy, what its response is to reports that, in the last year, over 1 million extra vehicle journeys have been made over the crossing. (S5T-01904)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Like the Forth road bridge, the Queensferry crossing has two running lanes for traffic. As a result of the hard shoulders and wind shielding, it provides a more reliable and resilient crossing. The Scottish Government has invested in the public transport corridor using the Forth road bridge, including park and ride and bus lanes, with journey time savings for buses being realised versus car travel at peak times between Fife and Edinburgh. We are committed to sustainable transport and encouraging greater use of public transport, as highlighted in our draft national transport strategy and this year's programme for government.

Mark Ruskell: IAM RoadSmart said that those figures are

"indicative of a failure of Scottish Government transport policy to reduce car use".

Those are its words, not mine.

We are now 10 years on from the publication of the public transport strategy, but only five of the 18 recommendations have been delivered. When can we expect the full review of the strategy to be completed and actions to be delivered? Will commuters be hanging around for another two decades?

Michael Matheson: The member will recognise that the Government has made progress on a number of areas in the strategy. Those include the provisions that we have made in the city region deal for Edinburgh and Fife, which will see £20 million of additional investment going into transport infrastructure in the west of the city. I also recently announced £70 million to be invested in the reopening of the Levenmouth railway line, which will connect Levenmouth back into the Fife circle and will improve rail connectivity and public transport for a significant number of people who live in Fife. As we have set out in the draft national transport strategy, the Government intends to take forward a range of other measures once the strategy is complete and in place.

I recognise that there is more for us to do, but I assure the member that the Government is committed to introducing a range of measures to reduce car use and improve the provision of public transport.

Mark Ruskell: I would like to focus on the actions that have not been delivered. One action from the strategy that is still outstanding is to give commuters a genuine rail choice through a park-and-ride facility at Rosyth. It has been granted planning permission, it is a strategic priority for Government and it is in the strategic transport projects review, so why has it not yet been funded and built?

Michael Matheson: As is the case with a range of matters in STPR2, there are competing demands for financial provision to be made. Issues that are not addressed in the STPR1 process will roll over into STPR2 and can be considered within the next STPR planning period. The issue that has been highlighted, which has not been delivered as yet, will be considered as part of STPR2.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give an update on the measures that are being taken by Transport Scotland to ensure that no motorists are affected by ice falling from the bridge this year?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware of an incident in March 2018 in which a combination of unusual weather circumstances resulted in ice forming on some of the cables of the Queensferry crossing. That was unusual for such a structure and formed because of the weather at that particular time. The expert advice that has been provided to Transport Scotland is that a number of measures can be put in place to monitor the situation more closely. That work is currently out to procurement, with a view to having the appropriate measures in place in the near future.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Transport remains Scotland's most polluting sector, responsible for a third of all greenhouse gas emissions but, last year, car use increased while rail use flatlined and bus passenger numbers continued to plummet. Will the cabinet secretary tell us whether the Scottish Government is working towards an overall target to reduce car usage and, if so, what that target is?

Michael Matheson: I am sure that the irony is not lost on members that the party that so strongly opposed the workplace parking levy is now demanding that the Government take action on reducing car use on our road network. Neither will the contradiction in Labour's position on such issues be lost on members, given Mr Smyth's frequent demands that we build more roads in the

south-west of Scotland, which are surely for car use.

I assure Mr Smyth that the Government is progressing a range of measures, including almost £5 billion-worth of investment in rail transport in Scotland in the next control period. Alongside that, we are making the biggest investment in bus prioritisation in the past two decades by committing some £500 million towards that to help to improve bus patronage.

In our draft national transport strategy, we have set out the hierarchy of approaches that we will take in future investment towards achieving our priority, which is to encourage greater use of public transport.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary reiterate some of the major benefits of the Forth road bridge public transport corridor?

Michael Matheson: One of the benefits that comes from the public transport corridor across the Forth road bridge is that it provides a quicker and much more efficient link between Fife and Edinburgh for buses and taxis. That can be seen from the fact that bus and taxi journey times have been reduced for vehicles crossing from Edinburgh towards Fife and for those crossing in the opposite direction. We need to make greater use of the benefits that come from such reductions. At present, in the region of 500 buses now use the Forth road bridge public transport corridor daily, and we want to build on that to make greater use of public transport across the Forth.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary anticipate that the use of the Queensferry crossing will increase when all the works on it, such as putting lifts up in the pillars, have been completed, and will he say when that will be?

Michael Matheson: I am surprised that Edward Mountain, as the convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, is not aware of that, given that we have already set out the snagging works that will be completed and that the contractor expects to complete them by the end of this year, although some of the work is weather related. As I have always said, I will keep the committee up to date on those issues.

Edward Mountain will understand that an evaluation of the performance of any such major infrastructure project is undertaken at year 1, year 3 and year 5. The year 1 evaluation initial work has already started, which will give us an understanding of the progress that has been made, the use of the bridge and how it is performing. That exercise will be repeated at year 3 and year 5, so that we have a good overall view

of the bridge's performance and the benefits that are coming from such a major piece of infrastructure.

Scottish Prison Service (Auditor General's Report)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Humza Yousaf, on the Scottish Government's response to the Auditor General for Scotland's report, "The 2018-19 audit of the Scottish Prison Service".

14:26

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): The Auditor General's report on the 2018-19 audit of the Scottish Prison Service highlights the significant challenges that are facing the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service, including the rise in prison population numbers, budgetary pressures, the demands on prison officers and staff and the reform of the physical prison estate.

I have previously acknowledged those challenges to Parliament, for example in my recent evidence to the Justice Committee for its pre-budget scrutiny. It is worth noting that, despite those challenges, in her most recent annual report, Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons indicates that she is reassured that, despite a rising prison population,

"staff and prisoners ... reported feeling safe."

However, I recognise the absolute seriousness of the issues that are raised by the Auditor General and the pressures that we face. I am keen to work with members across the Parliament to address those concerns.

It may be helpful if I set out some of the actions that we have already taken, and I will begin with the budget. As noted by the Auditor General, the SPS revenue budget, as for other public bodies, has been constrained over recent years. That occurred during a time that the prison population was falling and the SPS was operating within, or below, its annual allocation.

Going into 2019-20, we acknowledged that the SPS faced a number of uncertainties in its budget, including on pay, pension costs and the costs that are associated with the rising numbers of prisoners in its care. As a result, an additional £24 million has been made available this year to help the SPS meet a range of cost pressures. I will continue to keep the budget position under review throughout the remainder of this year.

Budget allocations for next year are being considered as part of the current budget process, which includes consideration of the factors that gave rise to additional funding being provided to the SPS this year.

Many of the challenges that are raised in the Auditor General's report are a consequence of the rapid increase in the prison population that began in 2018. Although crime, including violent crime, has fallen considerably in the past decade, we know that the nature of the offending that is being prosecuted through the courts has changed over that period, including there being more focus on serious organised crime and sexual offending, including historical cases and crimes that are committed online. That means that the average length of custodial sentence that is being imposed is at its highest in the last 10 years—it has increased by 21 per cent since 2008-09. That, along with other factors such as longer minimum punishment parts for life sentences, the ending of automatic early release for the most dangerous offenders and a reduction in the use of home detention curfew, has contributed to Scotland now locking up a greater proportion of its people than any other nation in western Europe.

I have been unequivocal that that is not a statistic to be proud of—far from it. It is a stain on our country's collective conscience. While prison will always remain the best option for some of the most serious offenders, we know that those numbers are far too high and we have been working closely with our justice partners to take forward a range of progressive measures aimed at bringing those numbers down and easing the pressure on our prisons.

First, we know from the evidence that short-term sentences simply do not work to rehabilitate individuals. Individuals released from a custodial sentence of 12 months or less are reconvicted nearly twice as often as those who are given a community payback order. That is why we brought in a presumption against short sentences, to extend the current presumption against short periods of imprisonment from sentences of three months or less to sentences of 12 months or less.

Secondly, the Management of Offenders (Scotland) Act 2019 includes provisions to expand the availability of electronic monitoring alongside community sentences as alternatives to custody.

Thirdly, the Scottish Government, SPS, the Risk Management Authority and their partners have worked to develop revised operational guidance and processes for the release of prisoners on home detention curfew. In addition, we have asked Community Justice Scotland to take forward work with local authorities to collect information on the local availability of community justice services that can be shared with sentencers to help inform sentencing decisions.

Finally, the 2019 programme for government includes a commitment to undertake work to review the law on bail and remand. The Scottish Government has issued a commission for

research to enable us to better understand the factors driving the relative use of bail and remand.

Those are just some examples of the progressive reforms that this Government is undertaking to address the challenges and to reduce the numbers of people in our custody.

I will move on to the physical prison estate. Since 2007, we have invested almost £600 million in the prison estate across Scotland. That investment has delivered three new prisons—Low Moss, Addiewell and Grampian—and the significant refurbishment of existing prisons, including Polmont, Edinburgh, Glenochil, Shotts and Perth.

In terms of our current priorities, delivering the bold and progressive plans for the new women's custodial estate is vital. Our plans to create community custody units to sit alongside a smaller national facility reflect the recommendations made by the commission on women offenders and they will be more responsive to the specific needs of women who are in prison. Work on this project is well under way and the SPS aims to deliver the first of two local community custodial units in Dundee and Glasgow by the end of 2021. We know that concerns have been raised about the physical condition in parts of HMP Barlinnie and the replacement of HMP Barlinnie is one of our priorities. The preferred site at the former gas works at Provanmill for the replacement facility was confirmed by the SPS earlier this year and it is taking forward an application for an outline planning consent.

In the meantime, we have committed to considering proposals for additional funding to help to deal with the immediate infrastructure issues at Barlinnie, ahead of the replacement prison being completed. I appreciate that members are as keen as the Scottish Government and the SPS are to get the new facilities up and running but, as with any other significant infrastructure investment, there are many factors at play that affect the timetabling for large and complex projects, including the commercial marketplace and due diligence. However, I assure members that we are working at pace to deliver the new facilities. On-going investment in our prison estate will ensure that it is fit for purpose for the future, with modern infrastructure enabling maintenance of the safe, stable and secure environments that we can rightly be proud of in Scotland's prisons.

The Auditor General's report discusses some of the pressures that are being faced by the hard-working prison officers and staff in our prisons. I am sure that the entire Parliament will want to put on record our appreciation for the tough job that prison officers do. They deal with the most vulnerable people in our society and face an

increasingly complex prison population on a daily basis. They do that job with great professionalism and I am greatly appreciative of their efforts.

One area of staffing that is highlighted in the Auditor General's report is the increase in sickness absence among prison officers. The rise is largely attributable to mental health-related conditions. Multiple contributory factors both inside and outside the workplace are triggering illnesses, and the SPS is taking forward a range of measures through its employee wellbeing policy to support officers in their challenging roles. The measures include, to name just a few, lifestyle screening with physical health checks; a critical incident response and support process; an employee assistance programme, which is a free, 24-hour, confidential support service that provides telephone and face-to-face counselling; and an online health platform with multiple tools to monitor and improve wellbeing. Both HMP Inverness and HMP and YOI Grampian are showing a downward trend in the number of staff working days lost due to sickness, and the SPS continues to work hard to maintain that trend.

I have seen at first hand some of the challenges that our prison officers face on a day-to-day basis, so I am pleased that SPS management, unions and staff reached agreement in relation to the recent pay offer. It was a significant offer, which exceeded rises in previous years and pay deals across the public sector—and it was significant in comparison with offers for counterparts in England and Wales. It rightly reflects the hard work and dedication of our prison officers, whose work is difficult, often dangerous and largely unseen by the wider public.

In closing, I extend an invitation to every member in the Parliament. Today I have set out some of the wide-ranging measures that the Government has undertaken to bring about reform to the justice system and to bring about the changes that we want to see in a progressive society. We are clear, however, that we must go further. We want prisons to continue to be used to detain and rehabilitate those who present the biggest threats to our communities, alongside robust community alternatives and interventions to keep out of our prisons those for whom prison is not the best option.

However, we know from the evidence and from international comparisons that there is no silver bullet or magic wand to solve the complex, multifaceted and wider societal challenges in our prisons. I believe in the cross-portfolio, multi-agency and collaborative approach that the Government is taking, and my invitation to those who are here in the chamber is to be part of the solutions and reform. My door has been and will continue to be open to members with ideas and

resolutions to the challenges, but we must find a solution to them, and I, as Cabinet Secretary for Justice, am determined that we do.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. The Auditor General's report made for pretty grim reading, highlighting that the

"SPS is facing threats to its financial sustainability and its operational safety and effectiveness."

Prison staff, who are the bedrock of the system, are facing serious challenges. The number of serious prisoner assaults on staff is double the number in 2016-17. Stress-related sickness rose by a third in 2018-19, with the average number of days lost now 17 and staff working vastly increased hours. Throughcare—an aid to the rehabilitation that we all desire—has had to cease due to a lack of officers. Rehabilitation would be greatly assisted by work in education, yet the number of hours that are provided dropped by nearly 300,000 in 2017-18 to the lowest level since 2011.

What steps are being taken to address the lack of workforce planning, particularly at HMP Grampian, where 80 per cent of the vacancies exist? When can we expect that to yield results, so that the SPS can reintroduce throughcare and rehabilitation opportunities? Will the cabinet secretary at least consider the roll-out of body-worn cameras to protect prison officers?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Liam Kerr for some very important questions. I agree with him that the report made for very grim reading—I do not doubt that, and I hope that I have set that out clearly. I also hope that I made clear my intention that we will work and invest to bring down those pressures on our Prison Service.

Regarding the violence that prison officers face, we have a more complex population in our prisons, and there is no doubt that we now have more serious organised criminals. I have been into SPS headquarters to see the important work that is done by the operations team there to ensure that various crime groups are kept separate in different facilities. That is a very complex job, but it is one that the SPS is doing well.

All that said, the most serious prisoner-on-staff violence went down from 2017-18 to 2018-19, although one serious assault is one serious assault too many.

On the question of body-worn cameras, I ask Liam Kerr to do as he asks me to do. I will keep an open mind in exploring that issue with both the Prison Service and the POAS. It is fair to say from my most recent conversations with the POAS that it was not particularly persuaded. That does not mean that we should not explore the idea, and I

will do that. I have raised the matter with the Prison Service before, and I will commit to do that again, as I can see that it could be a welcome move in many instances. I will keep an open mind on that.

With regard to workforce planning, Liam Kerr is right to raise what is a particular issue at HMP Grampian, which is a prison that the member will be familiar with given that he represents the Grampian region. During my most recent conversation with the chief executive of the Prison Service, I spoke at great length about the workforce challenges. I offered to speak to him about where further investment could be made in the staff—I will look on that favourably—as we go into the post-election spending review and the United Kingdom budget. The challenges in Grampian are difficult due to its geography. I would be happy to meet the member, but I would also be happy for the SPS to speak with the member in more detail about what can be done for HMP Grampian in particular.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. The Auditor General's report is serious and it highlights the overcrowding crisis in Scottish prisons. Our prisons are bursting at the seams and, at the same time, the revenue budget has been reduced by £50 million over the past four years. The Government's response has lacked urgency. Recently, when the Justice Committee visited Barlinnie prison, we were shocked at its substandard conditions. At Barlinnie, more than 90 per cent of prisoners are housed in double-occupied cells that were designed for single occupancy and there are only five cells available for disabled prisoners, only one of which has wheelchair access. What specific actions will be taken to deal with that unacceptable situation?

Humza Yousaf: James Kelly makes reasonable points, but it is important that I bring some balance to them. I would not classify the situation in our prisons as a "crisis". There are certainly significant challenges. However, it is down to the hard work and dedication of our prison officers that we still have prisons that, as HM chief inspector of prisons said, are "well-maintained" and "safe" for staff and prisoners alike. That is important. That is not to downplay the seriousness of the Auditor General's report—I agree with James Kelly that it is extremely serious.

On the question on revenue, as I said in my statement, the prison population was falling over the decade and the SPS was coming in either within or under budget. I do not agree with James Kelly that we have not shown any urgency. For the current financial year, the offer that I made to the SPS was that we would keep its budget under review and, when pressures came to light, we

would fund them. We have done that to the tune of £24 million, as I explained in my statement.

I agree with James Kelly's final substantive point. I have been to HMP Barlinnie and I share James Kelly's reservations. I do not think that we should be proud of that prison's facilities in a modern progressive country, particularly when it is 150 per cent over capacity. The prison is simply not designed to cope with a population that is as high as it is at the moment.

To give the member some reassurance, I have asked the SPS to come to me with some proposals for interim measures. With the best will in the world, we know that the new Barlinnie will not be ready for a number of years so if the SPS deems that we need to give urgent attention to interim measures to improve the healthcare facilities, the reception facilities or any of the other facilities, I will explore that with an open mind.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): We know that there is a range of complex factors that cause an increase in the prison population, which is why it is vital that Parliament continues to back the Scottish Government's progressive justice reforms. Will the cabinet secretary expand on the work that is being done to ease the pressures on the prison population, including female prisoners in particular?

Humza Yousaf: There is a range of progressive reforms, and I mentioned some of them in my statement. I was pleased that the majority of the Parliament got behind the presumption against short sentences, which disproportionately affect women—if I remember correctly, around 90 per cent of women in our prisons are serving sentences of 12 months or less. Our investment in community alternatives to custody will also yield positive results, particularly when it comes to the female population.

As I mentioned in the statement, there is no silver bullet that will fix the prison population or lower it significantly. We have to be willing to look at radical and bold measures. Some of those will be uncomfortable to discuss in this chamber, but we have to discuss them if we want to see a reduction in our prison population. We can do that only by being progressive. I fear that the moment we have a knee-jerk reaction, perhaps in the face of some terrible tragedy, or we begin to become regressive, the prison population will simply increase, not decrease.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of the statement on what is a very grim report from the Auditor General. As others have said, the prison population has soared, self-harm and suicide are increasing and the SPS's throughcare services have been abolished, yet there do not appear to

be any new or radical proposals in the statement to respond to the Auditor General's report or to what I think everybody has to accept is a mounting crisis in our prison system. Given the pressure that staff are now under, given that they were promised a share of 800 extra mental health professionals, and given the lack of detail about how those would be distributed, such that we have asked the Scottish Information Commissioner to intervene, can the cabinet secretary tell us today how many extra mental health staff there will ultimately be in our prisons?

Humza Yousaf: I do not have that figure to hand, but I undertake to write to Liam MacArthur with it. I know that there has been additional investment in mental health staff in our prisons. I take the issue extremely seriously. That is why I asked HM chief inspector of prisons in Scotland to look at mental health, particularly at YOI Polmont, because, of course, the issue affects the youngest and most vulnerable people in our care. I also take extremely seriously the issue of the mental health of our staff. I hope that I have given some detail and some reassurance in the statement about what the SPS is doing to help members of staff with any mental conditions, stress or problems that may arise from working in the prison estate.

I also take the issue of throughcare very seriously. That is why the Government worked closely with the third sector to see where it could come in when the throughcare service was suspended by the SPS and we had to use those experienced prison officers back in the main prison estate. I was pleased that, with its agreement, the third sector was able to step in. That is a temporary measure and, of course, if we manage to reduce the prison population, we can have a further discussion on how things can progress thereafter.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that prisons should be managed by the public sector and not run for profit by private companies? The fact that we have private prisons is a legacy from previous Administrations. Can he tell us how much the private finance initiative contracts for HMP Addiewell and HMP Kilmarnock have cost the public purse?

Humza Yousaf: That is a good question. Given the budgetary pressures that we face, the unitary charges for our private prisons are pretty eye-watering. I have always said, and the Government has always maintained, that prisons should be very much run for the public, not for private profit. We have not built private prisons—they were, of course, commissioned before the Government came into power—and when the contracts expire, let me be unequivocal that those prisons will come

back into the public sphere and back into public ownership.

The unitary charges for each of the private prisons in the estate are, over the course of the contracts, more than £368 million for HMP Kilmarnock and £955 million for HMP Addiewell, which is an eye-watering total cost of more than £1.3 billion. That underlines why prisons should be run publicly as opposed to being run privately for profit.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government's presumption against short-term sentences of three months or less, and now 12 months or less, relies heavily on community payback orders and other alternatives to custody working effectively. Given that the success of those orders and other alternatives to custody relies heavily on the third and voluntary sectors being adequately funded to deliver those programmes, will the cabinet secretary commit to ensuring that third and voluntary sector organisations have sustainable three-year funding delivered directly to them, rather than through local authorities, which are competitors?

Humza Yousaf: Margaret Mitchell will, of course, be aware of the budget challenges that we face. We have had a decade of austerity, and we will see what the general election brings and what the budget will be. I suspect that we will get a one-year budget from the UK Government as opposed to a multi-annual budget. It becomes difficult for us to do a three-year budget because of those constraints. I am sure that I will reflect those conversations with the finance secretary.

Margaret Mitchell's wider point is not lost on me at all. The third sector is an important partner when it comes to community alternatives to custody. We will continue to engage with the sector. It is represented in part of the work that we do in and around the national community justice leadership group, so I will continue to engage with it and listen to its concerns about financing and resources.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned reconviction in his statement. What can we do with people coming out of prison, to make sure that they integrate with the community again and do not get in with the wrong crowd?

Humza Yousaf: That is a really important point. Essentially, we want to stop the cycle of reoffending. To return to Margaret Mitchell's question, we provide £3.4 million a year to the third sector, to support throughcare services for men and women. In addition, to ensure that people do not enter a cycle of reoffending we have to look at measures such as home detention curfew. That is about reintegrating people back

into the community and testing that reintegration in the community.

We know the very good reasons why a review was conducted into the use of home detention curfews and changes were made to it, but a range of measures such as that, which can be challenging and controversial, are much needed in order to test people in the community with minimal risk—with, no doubt, the job of the risk management authority and others being done properly—so that we can hopefully break the reoffending cycle.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I note that the cabinet secretary acknowledged the hard work and dedication of prison staff; he also acknowledged the pressure that they are under. Although a wage increase is welcome, that will not resolve the major issues.

I recently met staff from Perth prison. The situation that they described to me is one in which staff morale is at rock bottom. The staff are stressed, under pressure and anxious, as the cabinet secretary acknowledged. The sickness levels are adding to the pressure, because of the lack of cover, which is also leading to prisoners being kept in their cells for far too long. All that pressure is bubbling away—it is like a pressure pot that staff are frightened will blow. Do we need more staff in our prison service? Has a proper analysis been done of the current and required staffing levels? Will we actually take the action that is required in order to put in place a proper workplace staffing programme, to ensure that prisons are adequately staffed?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Alex Rowley for that important question. I join him in paying tribute to the staff at HMP Perth and across our prison estate for their hard work and dedication.

We recognise that hard work, which is why we brought forward and helped to fund an extremely ambitious pay award that recognises the difficult job that prison officers do. A 14 per cent pay rise over the next three years is a significant recognition of that hard work, particularly in comparison to England and Wales, where the pay rise is between only 2.2 per cent and 3 per cent, depending on the band.

That does not take away from the points that Alex Rowley made about the pressure points that exist in our prison service. Part of the pay award and, in particular, the agreement with the POAS, was about looking at how we can reduce staff sickness.

I mentioned some of the measures that the SPS has put in place to help to tackle mental health issues among prison officers. Interestingly, a number of staff days are also lost—I think it is around 15,000 per annum—due to physical

pressures in the job and musculoskeletal problems. There are two things that I will say on that. One is that I am aghast at the fact that when the UK Government made its reforms to civil service pensions, it did not include prison officers. Due to that omission by the UK Government, prison officers now have to work until they are 68, which I think is a ridiculous notion.

The second point is that the SPS is investing in physiotherapy and a number of other initiatives that will help with some of those physical pressures in the job. Where those initiatives have been piloted, we are already seeing a positive impact on reducing staff sickness. I addressed the additional staff point in response to a previous question. I have spoken to the chief executive of SPS, as I frequently do, and, on the question of additional staff that are needed, I told him that I would expect proposals to come forward from the SPS. When they do, I will discuss them with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work.

The Presiding Officer: There are four other members waiting patiently to ask questions, if we can get to them.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Although we should never be complacent about the challenges faced by our prisons, does the cabinet secretary agree with Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, the chief inspector of prisons for Scotland? In the introduction to her 2018-19 annual report, she said:

“I am pleasantly reassured to see that levels of violence, self-harm and prison suicide, although rising, have not risen as drastically as they did under similar conditions in the English prison service.”

Why does the cabinet secretary think that is the case?

Humza Yousaf: I agree with what Shona Robison said. However, although she is right about what the chief inspector said and it is important to put it on the record, I am not happy about the level of mental health problems, including issues around self-harm and suicide, in our prison estate. I do not think that we should ever be satisfied by what we are doing in that regard or complacent about the issue, and we should do more to reduce the number of those terrible incidents, particularly those involving self-harm and suicide.

On the question that Liam McArthur asked about mental health professionals, I have managed to find the statistics. We have 19 additional members of staff who are deployed in our prisons, and we will continue to invest in the number of mental health staff in our prison estate. That is one thing that we can certainly do.

Shona Robison will be aware that I asked the chief inspector to look into the issue of mental health in HM YOI Polmont. She will also be aware of the mental health review that is being undertaken by my colleagues the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and the Minister for Mental Health, and I note that prisons will be included in the remit of that review.

We are looking to do a range of things. We are certainly not complacent. We await the findings of the review and we will continue to invest in mental health staff in our prison service. Certainly, one incident of self-harm or one incident of suicide is one too many.

The Presiding Officer: There are still three more questions, so I ask members and the cabinet secretary to be succinct.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): Barlinnie prison is currently operating over capacity, with prisoners doubling up in cells, which cannot help rehabilitation. Barlinnie's age is such that there is a high risk of failure in parts of the building, such as the drainage and sewerage systems. What contingency plans are in place in case of such failures? For how long does the cabinet secretary envisage prisoners having to share cells?

Humza Yousaf: I reassure Maurice Corry that contingency plans are in place in the event of, for example, a catastrophic failure in our prisons such that additional spaces require to be found. The contingency plans do not give us much comfort, in the sense that we would be looking at more doubling up in cells and having to use space that is currently used for things such as rehabilitation and leisure in the prisoner's day. I would rather that we did not get into a position in which there is catastrophic failure, as Maurice Corry said, and that we invested in our prison service, as we are doing, including in interim measures, which I look on favourably in relation to Barlinnie.

Maurice Corry alluded to the answer to the problem, the conundrum and the question; the way round the issue is to reduce the prison population. I say this with all seriousness to my colleagues in the Conservatives, because I know that this is a political issue for them: only by being progressive on this agenda, while of course maintaining public safety and public protection—the issues are not mutually exclusive—will we see a reduction in the number of people who come into our prisons. If we reduce the number, I hope that we will not have to take some of the more undesirable contingency measures that we might have to take.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary is aware that many young people who are held on remand or in custody are

taken to HM YOI Polmont. I have a constituent whose family struggled to visit their son because of the financial cost associated with travelling from the Borders to Polmont. Will the cabinet secretary assure members that appropriate support will be put in place for families who are affected by imprisonment? I am asking about support for wellbeing as well as practical support.

Humza Yousaf: We are pleased to fund prisoner visitor centres in our prisons. I have visited a number of centres and seen the good work that they do.

Emma Harper's point is not lost on me. The SPS has established a family strategy group and an improvement plan is in place. I understand that a scheme is in place that can help families who wish to visit family members who are in the prison estate; I will write to Emma Harper to ensure that she has more details of the scheme, which can perhaps help her constituent.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): HMP Inverness is overflowing. The cabinet secretary bought a site for the new HMP Highland at vast expense but has not yet said when work will start. Can he say that now?

Humza Yousaf: I hope that Edward Mountain, in pushing for the next phase for HMP Inverness to be funded right now, is not suggesting that I should deprioritise the new female custodial estate, because that is currently the priority, as I said in my statement. There is a priority list and HMP Inverness is on it, but I hope that Edward Mountain understands that neither the female custodial estate nor HMP Barlinnie can be deprioritised because of HMP Inverness. There is an infrastructure plan, which is based on absolute need, and HMP Inverness is certainly among our top priorities. I hope that Edward Mountain is not suggesting that we deprioritise the new female custodial estate; that is something that I am simply not willing to do.

Glenrothes (Living Wage Town Campaign)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-18826, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on making Glenrothes a living wage town. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the launch of the "Making Glenrothes a Living Wage Town" campaign; understands that Glenrothes is the first UK town to be recognised for its living wage ambitions; acknowledges that the campaign comes as part of Living Wage Scotland's "Making Living Wage Places" scheme where local businesses and employers are encouraged to pay employees the real living wage and become accredited as Living Wage Employers; commends the 64 Fife employers that have already voluntarily committed to ensuring that all of their staff earn a real living wage; considers that the enactment of a guaranteed living wage across Glenrothes would make unprecedented positive impacts on the local community, and wishes all towns across Scotland the best of luck in becoming Living Wage Towns in the future.

15:04

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): The first new town with its own town artist, the home of the first female Presiding Officer and now the United Kingdom's first living wage town—Glenrothes is responsible for many firsts. This summer, I was delighted to attend the launch of the town's campaign to become the first town to be recognised for its living wage ambitions. The campaign has been led locally by Fife Council, working in partnership with Living Wage Scotland's making living wage places scheme.

On that note, I welcome Tom Kane from Fife Council and Lynn Anderson from Living Wage Scotland, who are sitting in the public gallery for today's debate.

Paid work was a key theme of the fairer Fife commission's report in 2015. More recently, Fife Council's local outcome improvement plan has identified challenges for Mid Fife. It stated that:

"It has some of the poorest outcomes in Scotland in areas like jobs, health and deprivation. The area is generally doing less well than we would expect based upon the make-up of its population. This is partly due to poor connections with the rest of Fife and Scotland".

Therefore, ensuring that the living wage is paid in my constituency is a vital opportunity to make a difference to challenging in-work poverty. Last year, Citizens Advice Scotland commissioned a report on food affordability, access and availability. The report found that 40 per cent of respondents in employment had worried about food running out before there was money to buy more. More than

one third of respondents in employment could not afford to eat balanced meals, and more than one quarter of respondents in employment had cut down the size of meals, or had skipped meals, because there was not enough money for the food that they needed. Those are people in work who are going hungry because they cannot afford to eat properly or to feed their families—in 2019. Paying a decent wage across the board has to be part of the answer to that problem.

According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2018, 19.4 per cent of employees in Glenrothes were not paid the living wage rate of £9.30 per hour or more. In 2019, that figure has reduced by 2.5 per cent, which is welcome news.

We know that the living wage is of as much benefit to employers as it is to employees. Research from accredited employers has shown a 25 per cent decrease in absenteeism, and 80 per cent of employers believe that the living wage has enhanced the quality of the work of their staff. Businesses throughout Glenrothes are already benefiting from being part of the scheme.

The following are views of business owners in the town. Brent Burnett, who owns the Glenwood Salon, said:

"I pay my staff the Living Wage because they deserve it and I want to treat them well. I feel strongly about my local community, with both my customers and staff living locally. I feel the business is firmly rooted here in Glenwood. By being accredited by Living Wage Scotland I not only benefit the staff, but the whole community. If I have happy staff I know I will have happy customers."

Gordon Slight, managing director of Landfall Scaffolding, agreed. He said:

"We are a family business and have always believed that being fair to people means they will be fair in return. We place a massive emphasis on the quality of service our staff give to our customers so it's important that their work is fairly rewarded. Living Wage accreditation demonstrates our commitment to values of fairness and helps us attract good young people to train within our business."

Janice Gourlay, who is a founding member and chairperson of Kingdom Community Bank, said:

"I am delighted that we're able to demonstrate our commitment to paying a real living wage and becoming part of this growing movement. We're also the first of the smaller, local businesses in the Kingdom Shopping Centre to become accredited. We hope other businesses will join us in committing to pay their staff a decent level of pay and help make Glenrothes a Living Wage Town."

Paying the living wage is also important for workers. Because it is set according to the basic cost of living, it affords people greater opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. Paying a living wage can give workers more time to spend with their friends and loved ones, because they do not have to worry to the same extent about making ends meet. Indeed, 75 per cent of employees have reported increases in

work quality as a result of receiving the living wage, because they feel valued.

The impact of the policy in a town such as Glenrothes cannot be overestimated. Like any new town, Glenrothes faces its challenges. According to the End Child Poverty campaign, the Glenrothes constituency has the highest rate of child poverty in Fife, at 29.6 per cent. Paying the living wage to families in my constituency is crucial, therefore, because it can help to lift people out of poverty.

On Friday, I visited Auchmuty and Dovecot Tenants and Residents Association to help to launch its Christmas appeal. The campaign started last year because of one family who needed help; 150 families later, ADTRA realised that it could not be just a one-off. This year, the Auchmuty group is asking for donations of children's toys, clothing, toiletries and food in order to provide a Christmas for families who are suffering hardship. Poverty blights the lives of many of my constituents, but that need not be so. According to the United Nations,

"poverty eradication is only possible through stable and well-paid jobs."

That is why the living wage is key.

Across Glenrothes, 64 businesses are now signed up to be living wage accredited. Fife Council is offering to pay the first year of the accreditation fee that is involved in becoming a living wage employer. Although the amount depends on the size of the business, the total can be up to £120 per employer, so that is significant investment from the local authority to incentivise better pay in the area.

Accreditation is a simple and straightforward process. An online licence is provided to an employer, which needs only to pay the real living wage to directly employed staff who are over the age of 18. As a living wage employer, I wrote to all businesses in my constituency, back in September 2017, to encourage them to sign up to the scheme. With the help of Fife Council locally, more organisations are understanding the benefits of paying the living wage to their employees.

Fife Council has been supported in its work by the Scottish Government, which funds Living Wage Scotland, which was established back in 2014 with the aim of increasing the number of employers in Scotland who are recognised for paying their staff the living wage. The local partnership approach is already paying dividends, as the reduction in the number of people who are paid less than the living wage shows.

The living wage is not just about paying people properly; it is about society acknowledging the structural inequalities that low pay creates. The

cycle of poverty is not a new phenomenon, but we are not living in Dickensian times. Just having a job does not protect people from poverty. From the work of the Auchmuty and Dovecot Tenants and Residents Association to child poverty statistics in my constituency, I know the cost of in-work poverty to the people whom I represent. It is human and it is heartbreaking, but we can do something about it.

I am absolutely delighted that Fife Council is leading the way on the groundbreaking initiative to make Glenrothes the UK's first living wage town. I encourage any business in the Glenrothes area that is considering signing up to think about the positives that doing so might bring in improving people's work and their lives.

I will end with the words of a fellow Fifer—one Adam Smith—who, 243 years ago, in "The Wealth of Nations", wrote:

"A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him. They must even upon most occasions be somewhat more; otherwise it would be impossible for him to bring up a family, and the race of such workmen could not last beyond the first generation."

15:12

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Jenny Gilruth on securing the debate. As my party's spokesperson on jobs and employability, I welcome Glenrothes moving towards becoming the country's first living wage town. That is a positive step, with much of the effort being led by the local action group, which represents the public, private and third sectors.

Employment continues to remain at record levels, with real wages growing. That wage growth has become solidified in our economy, which should be welcomed. However, low pay remains a significant issue that we should be united in tackling. Voluntary action is certainly a significant part of driving change but, if we are to build a sustainable high-wage economy, it is vital that further work be undertaken to boost productivity. That must be done across sectors, from the largest to the smallest employers.

The Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, on which I sit, recently held an inquiry into the construction industry. As well as many significant employers, a number of small and medium-sized enterprises are included in the sector. It is important, particularly for those at the smaller end of the business spectrum, that we find ways to make increased pay sustainable and affordable. Productivity must work through supply chains.

Public sector action has been crucial. Increases in the UK national minimum wage and the creation of a national living wage have given millions of the lowest paid in our society a wage increase that can be worth almost £3,000 a year, and that will continue to grow in coming years. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has recognised that the Conservatives' policy proposals will see our minimum wage levels rise to be among the highest levels in the developed world. That has been accompanied by the changes to the personal allowance, which have insured that no one who makes less than £12,500 a year pays any income tax at all on their earnings.

Requiring compulsory pay increases from employers must be done in a measured way. The high levels of employment that benefit so many should not be put in jeopardy. We have outlined our position that the national living wage not only will rise to two thirds of average earnings but, for the first time, will extend to anyone over the age of 21.

As has been recognised since the introduction of the national minimum wage, particular attention must be paid to young people, especially those in formal training. We have seen that that age group can be among the most vulnerable to economic change. That is why it is positive that the UK Government has abolished employers' national insurance contributions for under-21s and for apprentices under 25.

If fairness at work is to be meaningful, we should also look at the conditions of people's employment. The proposals of the Taylor review, which focused on the rise of the gig economy, have been an important part of following the pace of change in our economy and ensuring that dignity and respect are at the heart of the workplace, but Government should go further, and the standards that are expected in employment should level up to match the best global examples.

As I have mentioned, over recent years, real wages have grown across our society, while positive employment levels have been maintained. I am proud of that record, and it must continue, but it is not an achievement that has happened by accident. We must recognise the drivers of wage growth and the importance of building a sustainable high-wage economy. Voluntary action and work with employers certainly remain a key part of that process. In promoting the living wage initiative in Glenrothes, Living Wage Scotland and the local partner organisations have done—and continue to do—excellent work locally, and it is right that they are commended here today.

15:16

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): I, too, thank Jenny Gilruth for bringing the debate to the chamber. It was fantastic to hear of the achievements in Glenrothes, and I congratulate all those who are helping Glenrothes on its journey to becoming a living wage town.

Dundee has also been recognised for the work that it has been doing to become a living wage city. Back in May, an alliance of prominent employers in Dundee launched the city's action plan, in which they set out how they would work together on making Dundee a living wage city, in partnership with Living Wage Scotland. Dundee became the first city to adopt a new, place-based approach to driving uptake of the real living wage by local businesses. The alliance includes major local employers such as Dundee City Council, Dundee Voluntary Action, Dundee and Angus College, Xplore Dundee, D C Thomson Media, and Dundee and Angus Chamber of Commerce.

At the launch of the action plan, more than 50 Dundee employers had already voluntarily committed to ensuring that all their staff, and subcontracted staff, received a real living wage of £9 per hour, which is significantly higher than the minimum wage.

D C Thomson Media in particular is to be congratulated on making the decision, more than five years ago, to pay all its direct employees the real living wage; on extending it to include all its group companies and all agency staff who regularly work in its offices; and on signing up as an accredited living wage employer in 2017.

I echo the sentiments of Ellis Watson, executive chairman of D C Thomson Media and executive chair of Tay Cities Enterprise Executive, who pointed to the fact that, in these times of economic uncertainty, it is heartening to see Dundee taking the lead in tackling low pay and the inequality that it creates. I also echo the sentiments of Clare Goff, living wage places project manager at the Living Wage Foundation, who noted that major employers in Dundee are working together to improve the lives of citizens and boost the local economy by making a real living wage the norm and using their power and influence to spread living wage accreditation through their local area and across Scotland.

Of course, much still needs to be done. Dundee has more than its fair share of people who are struggling against poverty, benefit cuts are biting deep and people's wages cannot seem to keep up with their bills and the cost of living. The Dundee fairness commission made a number of recommendations, which are worthy of a members' business debate in their own right, but it also acknowledged how important the living wage

is in helping to lift people out of poverty. It heard from many people on low incomes, many of whom were working but were trapped on low pay.

The real living wage can make a huge difference to such people and, as the leader of Dundee City Council, Councillor John Alexander, acknowledged, local authorities can be powerful advocates for the real living wage campaign. By trying to be model employers and paying the real living wage, they can encourage better rates of pay across public, private and voluntary sector employers. As accredited living wage employers, they are in a strong position to use their procurement activity to create and support more better-paid jobs in the local economy through their contractors and their extended supply chains.

In last month's living wage week, the Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills announced an increase in the living wage to £9.30, and many new businesses signed up as living wage employers, including the V&A Dundee. At the living wage awards ceremony, this year's outstanding leadership award went to the Dundee living wage action group. As cities and as a nation, we are going from strength to strength in promoting a living wage to help thousands of families out of poverty, but let us redouble our efforts to ensure that all employers become living wage employers. As a living wage employer, I encourage others to do the same.

15:20

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I congratulate Jenny Gilruth on securing time for the debate. It is a great opportunity to highlight the fantastic work going on in her constituency of Glenrothes and in the Mid Scotland and Fife region that I represent. As Jenny Gilruth highlighted, the launch event took place earlier this year and it is very much to be applauded that Glenrothes is the first town in the UK to be recognised for its living wage ambitions. The launch was a positive event that affirmed the importance of the real living wage and the benefits that it brings, not just for employees, by increasing their income, but for employers.

I give credit to the employers and businesses that are members of the Glenrothes action group. The partnership approach has been important in establishing Glenrothes as a living wage town and the involvement of Fife Council—the largest living wage employer in Fife—Living Wage Scotland, Fife College and Fife Voluntary Action, alongside businesses across Fife, has made the ambition a reality.

Although there are 64 registered living wage employers in Fife, as Jenny Gilruth said, it is important to raise the profile of the campaign and

to encourage employers who meet the criteria to register and promote their involvement. It is fantastic to hear the testimony from the Glenwood hairdressing salon and Landfall Scaffolding about their journey to becoming living wage employers. They provide valuable examples of how it is possible to pay decent wages in any profession.

Insecure work has become a feature of our economy as people are forced on to zero-hours contracts or to operate as self-employed when they are effectively working for an employer. Along with precarious work there is a culture of low wages. When the minimum wage was introduced in 1998, in the face of opposition from big business, it lifted an estimated 1.9 million people onto a salary that brought an end to poverty wages. However, it is more than 20 years since the minimum wage was introduced and, as the cost of living increases and wages fall behind, the living wage campaign has been tenacious in arguing for an hourly rate that provides people with a proper reward for their labour.

Many people who are in low-paid jobs are not in a unionised workplace. They can feel that they are without a voice or leverage in their employment. The living wage campaign is a progressive campaign that is people driven, has cross-party support and is a movement of independent businesses, organisations and communities. It is an empowering campaign that seeks to build consensus. It recognises that the minimum wage is not sufficient to live on—it is the absolute minimum that anyone should be paid—and that it should not be the starting point for employers.

Some 470,000 people in Scotland do not earn the real living wage, and 182,000 children in Scotland live in poverty despite having one person in their household in work. Low wages are a cruel trap that people can get caught in. They are working, often having to meet the expenses of travelling to work and finding support for their caring responsibilities, having to pay their bills and often raising a family, but the wages that they receive mean that they cannot make ends meet.

Too many people across the UK face in-work poverty. Kirkcaldy food bank is struggling to survive because of the demand on its services. It reports that although benefit delay is a driver for its services, other people facing financial hardship, many of them in employment but unable to cope with unexpected bills or just unable to make ends meet, often need to use a food bank, too. Central to the living wage campaign is ensuring that people have enough money for a decent standard of living. It recognises that if someone goes out to work they are contributing to society and to their community and they deserve to be properly rewarded.

Although the living wage campaign is tackling an injustice in our society, it is also a celebratory campaign that recognises the positive effort of employers who join the campaign and highlights the benefits that it brings them. Businesses that pay the living wage report that they have lower staff turnover, fewer absences and a more committed workforce. Employers who pay the living wage are really important to the campaign, proving that it is possible to pay a decent wage and run a business and they provide really good peer examples.

Following a sleight of hand from the Government, the living wage has become more accurately known as the real living wage. I believe that a future Government should raise the minimum wage and the national living wage so that it matches the real living wage, which is calculated from the cost of living. It is what a working person should be entitled to. Until then, campaigners will continue to put forward a strong case for an increase in living standards to give everyone pride in their work and a stake in their workplace. I look forward to the progress in Glenrothes as it establishes itself as a living wage town, at the forefront of improving life for people in the town, supporting ethical business decisions and growing a fair economy.

15:24

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in this debate, and I thank my colleague Jenny Gilruth for bringing it to the chamber. I also congratulate Glenrothes on becoming the first town to be recognised as a living wage town, and my colleague Shona Robison's constituency, Dundee, on being the first city in the UK to be recognised as a living wage city.

Everyone should be paid at least the living wage. It should be the absolute minimum, as Claire Baker said. Employees are the most valuable asset that a business can have—without them there would be no business—so it defeats me why some employers do not see the value of paying at least the living wage. It is in their interest and the employees' interest, and it is a matter of common decency. If businesses do not value their workers, they will not gain respect and tap into the full potential of their employees.

Last year I led a members' business debate on unpaid work trials, to complement a member's bill that my colleague Stewart McDonald was introducing in Westminster. Unpaid work trials often exploit young people in every way possible, and the practice is widely abused by unscrupulous employers. During my speech, I said:

"This is about the shameless exploitation of people for free labour and, as we know, the shifts are often used to

cover staff shortages and save money. However, we should recognise that many responsible employers already pay their trial shift workers and that should be applauded."—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2018; c 79.]

At that point, my colleague Neil Findlay MSP intervened and said something along the lines of "Why should they be applauded? Shouldn't all employers be doing that anyway?" He was absolutely right. All employers should be doing that, and the same principle applies for the living wage: it should not be in question.

I recognise that some small businesses might have difficulty in paying it, but they should take all the benefits that the Scottish Government offers, such as rates exclusion, the small business bonus scheme and all the related grants that are available.

In East Dunbartonshire, where my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden is, 74 per cent of employees earn the living wage or above. The national statistical average for Scotland is 81 per cent. However, 85 per cent of people who live in East Dunbartonshire—even if they work elsewhere—earn above the living wage. Those statistics are fair, but they could be improved upon.

In October, the Carnegie UK Trust launched the living wage toolkit to support local employers, communities and people to work together to extend the living wage to more workers and lift more people out of low pay. Low pay that is insufficient to live on is what we are talking about. Low pay leads to poverty and debt in far too many households. The "working poor" is a deplorable phrase that we need to stop having to use.

Too many children are being brought up in poverty and are not getting the best start in life. Too many people are being forced to go to food banks just to get through the week. We should encourage all employers in our constituencies to pay the living wage, and we should get the conversation going and raise the living standards of everyone throughout Scotland.

15:28

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): As another accredited living wage employer, I thank Jenny Gilruth for bringing this members' business debate to the chamber. I am delighted that Glenrothes is the UK's first accredited living wage town. We all know that a real living wage is essential if we are to ensure that everyone has the basic necessities that they require to maintain a decent standard of living. The solution to the brutal austerity that our communities have suffered must begin by ensuring that everyone has access to fair work

and fair pay, and by bringing an end to in-work poverty.

The Citizens Advice Scotland report “Bringing food to the table” found that, as Jenny Gilruth highlighted, poverty exists in many different forms in our communities. According to the report, 40 per cent of working people in Fife are worried about food running out before there is money to buy more. Alongside food poverty, we see fuel poverty, and people struggling to pay bills. We also see transport poverty. Jenny talked about transport isolation, and disconnected communities that face expensive public transport. The isolation has a particular impact on young people who cannot afford access to a car. No one in a country as wealthy as ours should go hungry or find themselves unable to meet any of their basic needs.

Glenrothes has proved that a living wage is possible everywhere in Scotland. The employment rate in Glenrothes currently sits at 71 per cent, which is lower than the Fife rate of 76 per cent and the Scotland rate of 75 per cent.

We know for a fact that increasing wages boosts productivity, retention, industry and our local economies. Research by the Smith Institute found that implementing a living wage would result in a boost of over £1 billion a year for UK city economies. One of the key suggestions in that study was to implement living wage initiatives in cities across the whole of the UK. It is great to see Glenrothes leading the charge.

I had hoped that Stirling could be next, although I welcome Shona Robison’s contribution and hearing about how much progress Dundee has made in that regard. I had hoped that Stirling could move on the issue because Stirling Council was among the first councils to implement the living wage way back in April 2012, and it became an accredited living wage employer in 2015.

Although millions of pounds are being pumped into local economies through the Scottish city deals, it is essential that cities support their local economies and workers by developing the uptake of the real living wage. Anchor institutions such as councils have a responsibility. When they move on the living wage, they have a responsibility to follow through on their leadership, working in partnership with the voluntary sector and the public sector, so that other employers can be influenced. A living wage not only increases income for people who get a wage rise; it supports the local economy and contributes to council budgets through taxation.

I am delighted to commend the many businesses in Glenrothes that already pay a living wage and the champions who will continue to ensure that Glenrothes and every city and town throughout Scotland become places in which

everyone gets a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.

15:31

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): I join other members in thanking Jenny Gilruth for bringing forward the debate, and I thank other members for their contributions. I declare that I am an accredited living wage employer.

I also join Jenny Gilruth in congratulating Glenrothes on becoming the first town not just in Scotland but in the entire UK to be awarded recognition for its plan to become a living wage town. That does not happen by itself, of course. I thank the living wage action group in Glenrothes for the activity that it is taking forward. I thank Fife Council, Fife Voluntary Action, Fife College, Landfall Scaffolding and Glenwood Salon for coming together to create an action group and drive forward their action plan to triple the number of accredited employers in Glenrothes over the first year from the baseline of 11 in August this year.

We have seen good progress in that regard. There are now 18 accredited employers in Glenrothes, out of more than 60 accredited employers in Fife and more than 1,600 across Scotland. That is a great expansion in a very short period of time, and all credit is due to the action group and the activity that it is taking forward in Glenrothes.

I join Shona Robison in acknowledging the success of Dundee in becoming the first city in the UK—again, not just in Scotland—to adopt a new place-based approach to driving uptake of the real living wage by local businesses. I have visited Dundee on a number of occasions to see the work that is being done there. It is making significant progress.

Through those measures, we are showing that Scotland is trying to taking the lead on the crucial aim of creating a fair work nation and tackling poverty.

Jamie Halcro Johnston talked about the UK Government’s approach to the minimum wage, which he sought to defend. Members may expect me to say this, but I do not think that that approach goes far enough. When the Living Wage Foundation objectively assesses that the minimum requirements for an income to be regarded as a living wage are not met by the statutory minimum wage, the UK Government’s approach is not good enough. We do not, of course, have the statutory powers to legislate to do something different, but we have acted. We work in concert with Living Wage Scotland, and we seek to make a difference.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Does the minister welcome the impact that the national living wage has had on those it is provided for? Does he also welcome the increase in the income threshold? Does he accept that things such as council tax increases owing to the pressure that is being put on local government also have an impact on those who earn low wages?

Jamie Hepburn: I welcome any measure that seeks to increase the income of those at the lower end of the income scale. I was going to come on to this point, but I will make it now. When we still see a situation in which the majority of those in relative poverty—both adults and children—are in working households, we can all conclude that the statutory approach to these matters that has been taken by the UK Government does not go far enough. That is not just my perspective; I think that it is shared widely here—perhaps not on the Conservative benches but in most of the rest of the chamber.

Initiatives here in Scotland, such as the plan for Glenrothes to become a living wage town, are necessary. I believe that the creation of living wage places can be a huge catalyst for change and can drive the agenda forward. It can ensure that more employers take up the cudgels and become accredited living wage employers. We are seeing that in Glenrothes, and we have seen it in Dundee as well. I want to make it clear—to Mr Ruskell in particular—that those will not be the only living wage places that we will support the creation of in Scotland. I will be very happy, and Living Wage Scotland will be more than happy, to work with organisations to ensure that Stirling can join Dundee and Glenrothes very soon.

The creation of living wage places is only one small part of the Government's activities. We have committed to making Scotland a living wage nation. That involves a variety of activities, the creation of living wage places among them. We are ensuring that through the funding that we provide to Living Wage Scotland. We have seen great progress in meeting the target that we set it, which was to have 1,000 accredited living wage employers in Scotland. We are now way past that: we have 1,600 accredited living wage employers. On a proportionate basis, that is five times the level of accredited employers across the UK as a whole.

We know that that does not go far enough, and we are now moving into a new phase of working with Living Wage Scotland to focus on the lowest-paid sectors. That will ensure that we are not just driving up the number of accredited living wage employers, important though that is, but making the fundamental difference of ensuring that more people are paid the real living wage.

In that regard, as Shona Robison mentioned, I was delighted to take part in living wage week recently and to announce the new real living wage rate of £9.30 per hour, which will make a huge difference to those who are paid it. We might think that the difference between the rates for the statutory minimum wage and the voluntary real living wage is small. However, I have spoken to many people who appreciate receiving it. I was struck by an example that I encountered in the Borders, where I spoke to a woman who had benefited from her income being increased to the level of the real living wage and who was then able to take her family on their first ever holiday. That is a practical example of the difference that the extra amount can make. I add that great work is taking place in the Borders to ensure that it will soon become a real living wage place.

The real living wage's benefits for those who earn it are very clear but, as other members have mentioned, it also produces clear benefits for employers, through retaining skilled staff, reducing absenteeism, increasing staff morale and encouraging high levels of productivity. As Rona Mackay said, it is in employers' own interests to pay the real living wage.

The Scottish Government will continue to work with Living Wage Scotland to ensure that we realise our ambition that, in the future, many more people in Scotland will be paid at least the real living wage.

Veterans and the Armed Forces Community

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-20103, in the name of Graeme Dey, on Scottish Government support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland.

15:40

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): I am delighted to have the opportunity to present the third annual update from the Scottish Government on support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland. The first update to Parliament was delivered in 2017 by Keith Brown, and we committed then to updating members annually to highlight the work that is happening across the public sector and with partners in the private and third sectors to improve services and support, and to ensure that there is no disadvantage for veterans, serving personnel and their families. The fact that we have the update as part of the parliamentary calendar is welcomed by those communities.

This week, we published the document, "Scottish Government Support for Veterans and the Armed Forces Community 2019", which highlights the actions that we are taking across ministerial portfolios to improve service delivery and access. That cross-Government approach is vitally important, as ministers and cabinet secretaries work together to embed support for veterans. In a way, each and every one of my ministerial colleagues is a veterans minister for their own portfolio responsibilities. An excellent example is the cabinet secretary for Health and Sport, whose portfolio has such a locus in supporting those in our veterans community who are left with unwelcome legacies of their service.

In relation to health, I am pleased to announce today the creation of the national veterans care network, which will be developed by NHS National Services Scotland, and which responds to a key recommendation that was made by Eric Fraser, the first Scottish veterans commissioner. I am grateful to him for his role in directing us to deliver a network that will without doubt improve the care of our veterans community in Scotland, such as the veterans whom I had the pleasure of meeting at the Erskine home in Bishopston last week.

The veterans care network aims to address a number of issues, including a better understanding of the care needs of the veterans population, the barriers to achieving the right access to care and geographical inequalities of services. Key objectives for the network will be the development

of a veterans mental health action plan and ensuring that it complements Scotland's 10-year mental health strategy, and reviewing current funding arrangements for specialist veterans services, ensuring that geographical inequalities are taken into account.

The delivery of those objectives and others will lead to greater parity in the level of care that is available for veterans, no matter where they are located in Scotland. The establishment of the network has been born out of not only Eric Fraser's recommendation, but the views of veterans and charities. I recognise that it is a cause that has been championed in the Parliament, not least by Mike Rumbles.

As veterans minister, over the past 18 months I have visited various parts of the country, from Orkney to the Borders, and from Ayrshire and Arran to Grampian, to hear directly from those who deliver and those who access veterans health services. There has been an inconsistency in what is available and how it is accessed. The network will launch formally in the spring of 2020, but work on it is already getting under way and we are clear on where it is intended to take us.

Of course, it is not just partnership working in Government, but across the public, private and charitable sectors, that is so critical. This year saw the first meeting of the refreshed armed forces personnel and veterans health joint group, which brings together national health service champions, representatives of the service community, veterans organisations, the Scottish Government and other stakeholders. The group is central to delivering a number of the SVC's recommendations and has identified several immediate priorities, including hearing aid provision and reviewing the guidance on wheelchairs.

Like the NHS champions, the role that is played by champions throughout the public sector remains critical. I am committed to strengthening our champions network in local authorities: following a roundtable that I held with them during the summer, we are working with them, the armed forces and Veterans Scotland to support greater understanding of how they can assist serving personnel, veterans and their families, and offer greater consistency in service delivery.

Our work with local authorities does not end with the champions, however. The Scottish Government's affordable housing supply programme supports local authorities to deliver homes for veterans when they identify doing so as a priority. For example, we have awarded more than £350,000 to East Lothian Council to build six homes in Cockenzie for disabled veterans; they are due for completion by the end of March next year.

We will work with local authorities to fully consider the housing requirements of the armed forces community when developing local housing strategies. In addition, our new social housing allocation guidance gives practical advice to social landlords on giving priority to service leavers, and on ensuring that veterans are not disadvantaged when applying for social housing as a result of service time that they have spent outwith the local area.

We have also committed to working with public sector partners on employability and skills initiatives for veterans and service leavers who are making the transition back into civilian life. At Redford barracks in September, I had the great pleasure of launching the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership guide to infantry qualifications and what they mean in Scotland. That was produced with the support of the Scottish Funding Council. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership is expanding this work to credit further military qualifications against the framework. That will help employers and education organisations to better understand the varying skills and experience that armed forces leavers have to offer. Just as importantly, the work will support individual service leavers to translate their skills when seeking employment or education opportunities.

I am continually impressed by the strength of the veterans charitable sector in Scotland and I want to thank all those involved for the wonderful support that they continue to deliver. I have already mentioned Erskine, but I have also visited and met many other valued organisations over the past year, such as Scottish War Blinded. I am pleased that, by working with it and other stakeholders, practitioners certifying people as sight impaired are now guided to ask patients whether they served in the armed forces, and to then signpost them to the free services and support provided by Scottish War Blinded.

The Scottish veterans fund is our primary route to working directly in partnership with organisations and charities that support veterans. It has now given over £1.4 million to 150 projects across the country and that benefits the lives of hundreds of veterans and their families. The veterans fund is also a great example of public, private and charitable sectors interlinking. The Scottish Government is committed to continuing its funding for a further three years, and we welcome Standard Life Aberdeen's continued partnership with the fund. The company is providing £80,000 for 2020-21, which brings the total funding for that year to £200,000.

I talked earlier about mainstreaming support for veterans and their families. That is demonstrated in Scotland's education system being designed so

that services can be adapted to meet the individual needs of children. This year, there have been a number of developments that will provide support, where needed, for the children and families of those in the armed forces—for example, the doubling of early learning and childcare hours by 2020; an additional £15 million to further enhance capacity in education authorities and schools to allow them to respond effectively to the individual needs of children and young people; and our commitment to developing counselling services for schools.

As well as supporting service children throughout their school years, we are committed to equity of access to further and higher education for veterans and their families. We are working with the Scottish Funding Council to explore the barriers to further and higher education that may exist for children of service families, including through the work of the Service Children's Progression Alliance Scottish hub to champion the progression of children and young people from service families into further and higher education.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Graeme Dey: I ask the member to be very brief.

Jackie Baillie: The minister will be aware of my constituent's case, which I have written to him about. Can he tell me when that work will conclude and when it will make a difference to service children who are hoping to go to college or university?

Graeme Dey: Jackie Baillie has indeed raised an issue, I think directly with my colleague Richard Lochhead. This is on-going work. It is going on across the UK with other Administrations. One of the barriers at present is to do with securing the appropriate data from the Ministry of Defence. That is work in progress, but we see it as a priority.

Since I took up my post, it has become ever more apparent to me how important the partners of service personnel and veterans are, both in supporting our servicemen and women to do their jobs and when they go through what can be a challenging time on leaving the forces. We should never forget that partners also need support, and I am determined that the Scottish Government does all that it can in that regard. That is why we amended the criteria for the workplace equality fund to include members of the armed forces community, including partners and spouses of veterans and service personnel. Scotland's Bravest Manufacturing Company successfully secured support from the fund for 2019-20, and I hope that other service charities will follow it in accessing funding to support families.

The Scottish Government will continue to work in collaboration with our existing partners in the public, private and charitable sectors while trying to forge new partnerships to improve the support that we provide for the armed forces community. My ministerial colleagues and I remain committed to providing the best possible levels of support for veterans, service personnel and their families, both now and in the future.

I look forward to hearing the contributions of other members and to responding to them in due course.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of the Armed Forces and veterans community and values the contribution that they continue to make to Scotland; supports the jointly developed Strategy for our Veterans, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes that the Scottish Government will soon publish the response to its strategy consultation, setting out how it will take that vision forward in Scotland, and agrees that everyone should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors to ensure that the Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

15:50

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak in support of veterans, not only as shadow spokesperson for veteran affairs but as a veteran myself. The Scottish Conservatives will support the Scottish Government's motion at decision time.

The armed forces veterans community in Scotland, which numbers 240,000, boasts committed and skilled individuals. Those men and women do not need our pity, nor any other outdated narrative. Rather, they need to be championed, promoted and supported in what they have to offer.

Since last year's publication of "The Strategy for our Veterans", a collaboration with the other Governments across the UK, we have seen encouraging moves towards a co-ordinated and effective delivery of support for veterans that considers their experience and varying levels of need. I hope that we will see further progress in achieving the outcomes that are set out in the strategy, such as improved integration, resilience and ambition.

The effort made by the Scottish Government and its partners in support of veterans in Scotland is evident, and I commend those strides. For example, I welcome the Government's commitment to financially support the Scottish veterans fund for the next three years. The fund has given an impressive £1.4 million across 150

projects since it began. I welcome the minister's announcement of the launch of the veterans care network, and I acknowledge the input by our colleague Mike Rumbles: I know that he has done a lot of work on that concept and I thank him for that.

On social isolation, especially among older veterans, it is certainly right that co-operative partnerships are forged between the Government and veterans organisations to ensure an open dialogue. Indeed, the contribution of Scotland's many veterans charities and organisations is integral in the delivery of support. It is not possible to do their work justice today, but examples such as Poppyscotland, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen & Families Association, or SSAFA Forces Help, and the Armed Services Advice Project, or ASAP, point to the range of help that such groups provide as a whole to those in need. For instance, since 2018, ASAP has given advice on more than 12,300 occasions, covering financial issues and social security.

As regards improvement, I hope that the distinct and diverse needs of older veterans will be considered in greater depth, with a robust and practical action plan in place—one that promotes resources and training for front-line staff. On that issue, I mentioned to the minister last year the work being done by organisations such as the Lothian Veterans Centre, Glasgow's Helping Heroes, the Coming Home Centre and many others that do such a power of work. I asked whether the Government could consider providing some underpinning funding in many cases. Those organisations deal with hundreds of cases every year. In doing so, they take the load off local authorities and do not rely on funds from local authority social care budgets. That is a thought, and I look forward to hearing the minister's comments on that in his closing speech.

There has been further encouragement of the NHS armed forces and veterans champion network. I have met many of those champions across Scotland, and it is obvious to me just how worth while their role is in connecting with veterans in their communities. I would encourage a greater number of representative armed forces champions at the fore of public institutions. I know that there is more of that now, whether in BT, in the NHS or elsewhere—I am coming across it in many other organisations and I welcome that.

I am sure we can all agree that those practical steps, while very encouraging, must be accompanied by wider societal shifts in understanding and attitudes towards veterans, especially surrounding their experience of transition, as has already been highlighted in reports from our Scottish veterans commissioner,

Charlie Wallace. I hope to see the strategy reflect that in its implementation.

On veteran support, we as parliamentarians are responsible, first and foremost, for targeting the misconceptions surrounding the experience of veterans after they return to civilian life.

Unhelpful stereotypes can enforce limited ideas of what is achievable, and can, in some cases, form barriers to veterans' aspirations. Charlie Wallace, the Scottish veterans commissioner, has rightly pointed that out in his recent report. It must be recognised that transition is a complex and nuanced experience—different and unique for every veteran. Our approach to it, in keeping with “The Strategy for our Veterans”, will bear in mind the wide range of people who transition back into civilian life—both those who have enjoyed a long military career and those whose service was stopped short, whether for medical or for personal reasons.

Every year, more than 600 skilled personnel leave the armed forces. Their talents, coupled with sound experience, should be of considerable appeal to employers. It is a failure on our part, as well as that of employers, if our communities and businesses do not seize the opportunity to maximise on their potential and versatile capabilities.

We have already seen progress in employers' support. This year, ten employers, all signatories to the armed forces covenant, received the silver award for their commitment to employment initiatives for veterans, including Glasgow Caledonian University and NHS Dumfries and Galloway. That support extends to the family—as it should do—which is very important. For example, more than 3,400 jobs are advertised through Forces Families Jobs, a site that offers training and employment for family members of those currently serving in the armed forces.

It is especially important that veterans be aware of the value and transferable nature of their skills from the armed forces. For prospective employers, service leavers can demonstrate commitment, discipline, co-operation, team work and leadership.

However, a recent survey, conducted by YouGov in collaboration with the Forces in Mind Trust, showed that 18 per cent of the executives with hiring responsibilities that were surveyed would discriminate against veterans due to “negative perceptions” of their military careers, citing their belief that veterans do not have the relevant skills or experience for the job. Of course, I recognise that the survey presents not the full picture, but a snapshot. However, although serving personnel need to understand and recognise their transferable skills, so do

employers. I hope that, through the Government consultation on “The Strategy for our Veterans”, practical solutions to that mindset can be explored further.

For many looking to life after their armed forces career, housing can be one of the stand-out concerns, and the strategy identifies that as a key theme to address. Improvements have been made in that area. For example, the UK Government's forces help-to-buy scheme has lent more than £280 million to more than 18,000 applicants who would benefit from financial contributions to buying, moving or extending their homes. I am glad to see that that scheme will be extended for another three years.

In my area of West Scotland, I have seen the pilot launch of the future accommodation model—FAM—for service personnel in Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde at Faslane. With the site set to become the Royal Navy's sole integrated submarine operating base from 2020, the area will welcome around 1,700 submariners from Devonport to Clyde.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you come to a close, please?

Maurice Corry: As I said earlier, the composition and needs of veterans are evolving over time. I am glad to see the funding commitment that the minister made today. I hope that he makes sure that funding for our unforgotten forces partnership is extended beyond June next year. That is very important and I know that it is under consideration. I also hope that he takes into consideration the points that I made last year.

I hope that, through the implementation of his strategy, we will encapsulate and promote the value of Scotland's veteran community, and the aspirations that veterans seek to pursue.

15:58

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on armed forces veterans. From the outset, I acknowledge the debt of gratitude that Scotland owes to those who have served in the defence of freedom and to put on record the continued support that we in the Labour Party give to our armed forces personnel and veterans.

We are committed to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that our veterans and their families receive the support that they need and deserve.

In particular, we recognise that our service personnel often need help with the transition to civilian life, especially in finding housing and employment, and we recognise that those who

leave the service can bear physical and psychological scars for many years after their service ends.

Veterans are an asset to Scotland's workplaces and communities, and we must ensure that we can harness their potential and fully support them in that transition to civilian life.

Those who have sacrificed most for our country deserve the best services and care possible and although recent updates highlight progress, there has not yet been enough progress on areas of need outlined by the Scottish veterans commissioner. In particular, the commissioner has noted that funding for specialist mental and physical health services for veterans is disjointed and, in some cases, ad hoc. Positive progress has been made to address veterans' housing needs, but recent figures show that that may be reversing, with an increase in homelessness among the veteran community. A more ambitious approach is needed, both to supporting our veterans and ending homelessness in general, to ensure that that does not become a long-term trend.

We have a clear plan to support veterans across the UK including compensating nuclear test veterans, guaranteeing access to specialist mental and physical health services across Scotland, creating a minimum housing allocation for veterans, and investigating and acting on the barriers to veterans accessing services, particularly mental health services. Being a member of the armed forces, particularly during times of conflict, is immensely stressful, beyond anything that we can imagine. That stressful situation creates a level of commitment and an intense bond among service personnel that is unique to our armed forces. We can only imagine how isolated someone must feel if they are discharged from the armed forces into society alone, perhaps with no family support, having had such a close bond with the comrades they fought with and possibly lost in combat. They sometimes go from living at very close quarters with people they consider family—eating, sleeping, working and socialising with the same close group—to being discharged into a community of strangers who tend not to understand military life and the bond between people that it creates.

I cannot stress strongly enough that the majority of servicemen and women make a successful transition to civilian life. The veterans we have in Scotland are not a problem; they are absolutely an asset to our communities. Veterans have transferable skills that they may not realise they have, which become assets to companies and communities. However, for the reasons I mentioned earlier, it really is not hard to see why a minority of veterans struggle to adapt and reintegrate, which can put a massive strain on

family life as well as on those without family. It is vital that advice and support services are in place to help former service personnel adjust to living in mainstream society. We must support plans to co-ordinate and deliver support and advice services from the public, private and voluntary sectors for ex-service personnel, their partners and children.

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

16:03

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): As a veteran of 15 years of Army service, with several tours of duty, both at home and abroad, I am pleased to take part in this annual debate. The first thing I want to do is to remind everyone, as Mark Griffin said—it bears saying again—that a great many adults in Scotland have served in the armed forces of our United Kingdom and the vast majority of our veterans go on to live normal and productive civilian lives. Unfortunately, though, some of our veterans face particular difficulties in the transition from service life to civilian life; indeed, they may have problems during later life, too. I shall concentrate on those individuals.

In previous annual debates I have concentrated my remarks on what I have seen as the lack of effective provision of veterans' services in my North East Scotland region, particularly in the Grampian NHS Board area. In last year's debate I said:

"People who have risked their lives for this country and have given years of service in the armed forces must be safe in the knowledge that they will return home to well-resourced health and wellbeing support services—for both mental and physical health—and that those services will be available to them regardless of which health board area they happen to live in".

I also said that the minister is

"personally committed to seeing that the military covenant is more than just words"

and that it should be

"operating throughout our public services."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2018; c 47.]

Therefore, I welcome the minister's announcement of a Scotland-wide NHS network for veterans.

We do not yet have an equitable service for our veterans across Scotland. Veterans in the north-east still make me aware that they have difficulties when they present to their general practitioners and that there is no effective first-point-of-contact

service to ensure that every veteran is pointed in the right direction by their health professional.

I am pleased that there seems to be joined-up government in this area. I know that the health service is not the minister's direct responsibility, but there are specific improvements for our veterans that can be made. I hope that the minister will be receptive to my suggestion.

Some veterans in the north-east have suggested to me that they would very much like visitor contact from veterans organisations when they are in hospital in the NHS Grampian area. A veterans question could be included on admissions forms asking whether the individual would welcome a visit from a veterans organisation while they are in hospital. Some veterans receive no visitors at all, and I know that some would, indeed, appreciate the contact. That is such a small change, but it could markedly improve veterans' lives.

I cannot continue my speech without highlighting the work of Age Scotland, which aims to boost the health and wellbeing of those veterans over 65, and Citizens Advice Scotland's armed services advice project.

In my region of North East Scotland, Age Scotland stepped in for the over-65s when the veterans first point programme lost its funding from NHS Grampian. Of course, that meant that those under 65 lost the service. However, I have been told today that some of Age Scotland's funding for the programme may be under threat as of next June. It would be a pity if its service could not continue.

Citizens Advice Scotland's armed services advice project is, as we have heard, another really valuable service. Last year, it gave advice to veterans and their families 12,000 times across Scotland, with much of that advice being provided to those in the north-east.

I am aware from personal contact with veterans in the north-east that there is a danger that many do not get the help and support that they need, especially in their contact with the NHS, so I particularly welcome the minister's announcement today.

A lot of work is being done and there is, indeed, a lot more to do. I have made one proposal about hospital visiting arrangements. It would be immensely helpful if the minister could respond to that when summing up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Thank you. I am sorry, but I have to be really strict with members. We have four minutes for speeches in the open debate. There is not a whisker of time in hand.

16:07

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I remind members that I have three army barracks located at Dreghorn and Redford, and an army-exercise area, in my constituency.

Scotland has a long and proud military tradition, with more than 240,000 veterans in our ex-service community. The Scottish National Party Government was the first Administration in the UK to have a veterans minister and appointed the first-ever veterans commissioner.

The SNP Government also established a veterans portal on mygov.scot, which was launched back in 2017, to bring together a range of useful information on housing, health, jobs, education and veterans support services.

The Scottish veterans fund, which was established in 2008, has allocated more than £1.4 million of funding to more than 150 projects. The fund, which is supported by the Scottish Government and Standard Life Aberdeen, backs projects that provide new or innovative approaches to improving the lives of veterans. This year, the fund is open to supporting schemes that help the families of veterans, not just those who have previously served.

There are also 300 registered charities in Scotland that directly help serving personnel and veterans when they leave the armed forces. Organisations across Edinburgh have shown their commitment to our ex-armed forces personnel by signing up to the armed forces covenant. NHS Lothian and my ex-employer Lothian Buses were presented with a silver award from the armed forces covenant employer recognition scheme. City of Edinburgh Council and Edinburgh Napier University were recognised with a gold award as they had, along with other award winners, committed to ensuring that those who serve or have served in the armed forces and their families are treated fairly and are not disadvantaged in accessing services.

All those organisations, the Scottish Government and many other employers across Scotland recognise that those leaving the armed forces are an asset, bringing many transferable skills and attributes to civilian employers.

However, they can take up employment opportunities only if they have access to accommodation once they leave the Army. I have highlighted the issue before that when a soldier leaves the service, he is given 90 days to find alternative accommodation for his family. However, the UK Public Accounts Committee report, published in June of this year, says:

"The number of empty properties held by the Department was over 10,000 in 2018, roughly the same as 21 years before."

It is my understanding that here in Edinburgh more than 150 Ministry of Defence homes are lying unoccupied. A previous Public Accounts Committee report on the subject of military homes described the Ministry of Defence's failure to reduce the number of empty home properties at a time of a UK national housing shortage as "scandalous". That is why SNP MPs will commit to pressing the Ministry of Defence to use vacant MOD homes to house homeless ex-servicemen.

There is another issue that needs examination if all veterans who choose to stay here are to benefit from the support that Scotland offers them. The Army Families Federation highlights that they and their spouses must meet the knowledge of language and life requirement by taking the life in the UK test and passing the English language test. Foreign-born soldiers also have to pay application fees of £1,206 per adult and £1,012 per child. A soldier who has served more than four years in the British Army and wants to remain and work in the UK has to find, for the average family of four, £4,436 in fees plus £50 per person for the life in the UK test. The Home Office makes a profit on each application. Is that the way that we should treat our veterans?

16:12

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate as we work towards delivering for our veterans—individuals who have served our country with distinction and deserve only the highest praise.

I welcome the update from the minister regarding the Scottish Government's strategy for our veterans, and I look forward to seeing further work done to implement it in the months and years ahead.

I also commend the Scottish veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace, for his excellent work in producing the "Positive Futures: Getting Transition Right in Scotland" paper that was published last month. It is a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the situation faced by many who leave our armed forces, and the challenges that they encounter in moving from the uniformed services to civilian life.

As Mr Wallace indicated, ensuring that our public services can meet the unique needs of veterans is the key to ensuring that as many as possible either return home or choose to make their home here at the end of their time in the military.

The "Positive Futures" paper set out some areas that are vital for easing the transition into civilian life, such as the involvement of families, as well as the need to work towards parity of perception and alignment of military and civilian experiences and

qualifications. In addition, the report makes clear that a holistic approach involving Governments, local authorities, health boards and the wider community is by far the best way in which to deal with many of the societal challenges that veterans face. That should be considered at the early stages of people's military careers, making sure that the transition from the military to civilian life does not place undue stress on individuals in a short space of time at the end of their careers.

It cannot be overstated that getting the transition phase right is of paramount importance for all who are leaving the armed forces. If we are able to get that right, military personnel will be able to leave the forces and move on with their lives in a stable and secure way, with a good job to call their own. If we fail to get that right, that opens the door to individuals getting lost in the system or slipping through the cracks into either poverty or crime. I know that everyone in this chamber is committed to doing all that they can to ensure that that does not happen.

I am pleased that the past year has seen a step-change in the supporting of veterans across the UK. As members will be aware, the UK Government set up a new Office for Veterans Affairs, to be chaired by retired Colonel David Richmond, formerly of the fifth battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland.

That is the first time that a UK Government has put such a strong focus on the wellbeing of our veteran community. I do not want to be too political in this debate when I say that I hope that that work is allowed to continue in the months and years ahead.

I opened my paper yesterday to read that an extra £5,000 is needed to finish restoration work on the war memorial arch in Turriff, in the north-east. I hope that the restorers get the money. That got me thinking. Not only do we owe a debt to the people who fought and died, to remember their sacrifice and their legacy—and I am delighted that we continue to do that—we owe just as much to people who are currently serving when they want to move on with their lives and enjoy the freedoms for which they have fought.

We must therefore keep working to ensure that our veterans have the support that they need when they leave our nation's service. I look forward to seeing that work go on in the years to come.

16:15

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I do not know whether I have mentioned it before in the chamber, but I am from Paisley. Paisley has a long association with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Many veterans in our town served

with the Argylls all over the world, and the connection between the town and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders was such that the regiment was given the freedom of the town.

Many veterans meet in the Royal British Legion in Paisley—the legion has no number and is just known as “the comrades club”. The club was created on the return of many veterans from the first world war, to support veterans and ensure their successful reintegration into civilian life. Time moves on, but the challenges remain the same. The veterans then saw themselves as comrades, as they still do, and the club supports its members and does an unbelievable amount of charity fundraising. Recently, it helped my wife, Stacey, to raise funds for multiple sclerosis research at the Anne Rowling clinic.

Many veterans have difficulties with reintegration into civilian life. That might be because of experiences that they had while they served abroad or because of something as simple as the experience of leaving family life and going straight into the army.

A constituent of mine had no idea how to deal with paying bills and everything else to do with his finances when he came out of the army, because he had gone in as a teenager. In that context, I was interested in what Maurice Corry said about transition. I have talked before in the Parliament about my constituent—I nearly gave his name there—and I used to talk about the negatives and his difficulties with integrating and becoming financially solvent. However, he has now gone through that transition and is self-employed. He has used the skills that he gained in the army as a positive and he now has his own chauffeuring business. People are quite happy to have a former soldier, who has been awarded the military cross, helping them to get from one place to another.

A few weeks ago, I led a members’ business debate on nuclear test veterans. In 1956, the UK Government decided to drop a nuclear bomb on national servicemen and regular soldiers, on Christmas Island. What those men and their families have been through is outrageous and heartbreaking. During that debate, I mentioned Ken McGinley, from Johnstone, who has campaigned tirelessly for those veterans. Ken is an inspiration to us all. He was there as a sapper in 1956, when the nuclear bomb was dropped on all those servicemen, to see how they would work in a nuclear battlefield—in the modern world, that seems bizarre and crazy. The UK Government has still not recognised the plight of those ex-servicemen; it is about time that it did.

I mentioned Paisley’s connection with the armed forces, which might be a reason why Scottish War Blinded opened a state-of-the-art centre in the town. The Hawkhead centre is for veterans who

have sight loss, irrespective of the cause, and it is an activity hub for men and women of all ages and abilities. The minister and I visited the centre in the summer. Let us not talk about the archery—I will just say that I was not very good at it. I have no doubt that the minister will wax lyrical about what he did during that visit. The centre is an example of what is offered to everyone in the west of Scotland.

Our veterans are an asset to our communities—I hope that I have shown that in my speech. In many cases, they are active members of our communities. We must continue to support them.

16:19

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): As the deputy convener of the cross-party group on armed forces and veterans community, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this annual debate and to recognise the importance of the contribution of armed forces veterans and their families to our nation. I welcome Charlie Wallace, the Scottish veterans commissioner, to the chamber.

Last week, I attended the service to mark the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent at the Scottish national war memorial, where I heard stories from the submariners and their families about just how challenging life is when people are away at sea. They are not able to see their loved ones or communicate with them while they are stuck in very cramped quarters at the bottom of the sea. We are all grateful for their service to our country and the work that they do to keep us safe.

Members will be aware that Her Majesty’s naval base Clyde is expanding. In addition to the 6,500 people who are employed at the Faslane and Coulport base, a further 4,500 work in the supply chain and in the local economy as a result of the money that is spent in the area. It is, in fact, the biggest single-site employer in the whole of Scotland, and it is set to become even bigger, with another almost 2,000 service personnel and their families relocating to Faslane as a result of the decision by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown to base all the UK submarines at HMNB Clyde.

Although that has been a complex task, the Ministry of Defence has worked very effectively with neighbouring local authorities in Argyll and Bute and in West Dunbartonshire to prepare. The need for more housing is self-evident, as is the need to make provision in our local schools. Military spouses are bringing many talents with them: they are setting up businesses and they are contributing their skills to the local economy.

Turning to education, I will raise some issues that I have raised before. The minister knows that I

am persistent—let me tell him that I have no intention of giving up. First, I want to discuss the service pupil premium, which is provided by the Department for Education for pastoral care in England. The service pupil premium is not available in Scotland, and it is not part of the criteria for pupil equity funding. That is disappointing, given the concentration of forces families in particular local authority areas.

Secondly, I turn to the MOD education support fund, which started life as a UK-wide fund with a £3 million budget. Its budget then doubled in size to £6 million, in 2014; however, over the past two years, the budget has declined to £3 million and then to £2 million. Of course, it is welcome that it has been continued, but it is disappointing that the numbers are going the wrong way. Scotland punches well above its weight in the allocation of money from the ESF. I know that it has helped to deliver a range of support activities in local authority areas, including in the minister's constituency, in my constituency and in Argyll and Bute. I think that West Dunbartonshire was unsuccessful this time, but it will apply again.

The fund has helped to support activities in local authority areas where there are large clusters of service children in schools, and it provides help during stressful periods of relocation or deployment separation. Education is a devolved matter, and I have suggested to the minister that he should create a Scottish service pupil premium. It would not cost much money, and it would deliver sustainable long-term support, allowing schools to plan better. The minister and the Scottish Government proclaim their support for service personnel and their families, and I believe that they are genuine. It would be a very good way of demonstrating their support if they responded to the needs of service children in that way. I urge the minister: let us not wait any more; let us not have me make the same speech next year; let us do it now.

16:23

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate and welcome the Government's annual debate to reflect on progress that has been made and work that is still to be undertaken. Before I move to the substance of my speech, I thank all the people in my constituency who were involved in last month's remembrance Sunday services, which were opportunities for communities to come together. I also express my gratitude to members who have signed my motion to hold a member's business debate next year so that we can all recognise more fully the contributions in our communities to preserve and look after our war memorials and to ensure that any new information on them that

comes to light is reflected on. I look forward to that debate.

I will reflect generally on our veterans community in Scotland. Last month, members might have seen "My Grandad's War", which was a BBC documentary that was led by Gary Lineker, who reflected on his grandfather's experience of serving in Italy. It touched a chord with me when he interviewed one of the few remaining such veterans—a gentleman who was 104 years old—about his experiences of serving in Italy. It struck me that my grandfather—my mother's father—whom I unfortunately never met because he predeceased my birth, would have been 105 years old. He served with the Royal Artillery not only in Italy but in Greece, North Africa and Sicily.

The connections between those events some 70 years ago and today seem incredibly immediate. The documentary made me reflect that the contributions that veterans make transcend any one time period; they resonate with us today. What veterans have done in keeping us safe and secure is not just for this generation but for all generations, including future generations.

I was struck that many people from my generation and of my age fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Irrespective of people's views on those wars, we are all united in our support for that community. Having been through that experience, many people of my age have come back and made an immense contribution to society, including in my Renfrewshire South constituency.

However, there are veterans who require extra support. Maurice Corry's words were very powerful: veterans do not need to be pitied; they need to be supported and championed. I am delighted that a sense of common purpose has emerged across the chamber throughout the debate and that there is so much agreement.

I commend the Government's work on employability. The exercises that are under way to map qualifications to enhance the opportunities for veterans to gain employment, and to enhance veterans' ability to articulate to employers the relevance of their qualifications, are exceptionally important. That work is to be commended, as is the amendment to the criteria for the workplace equality fund.

I join my colleague George Adam in commending the work of Scottish War Blinded, particularly at the Hawkhead centre, which I was delighted to visit last year. I reiterate that the services that Scottish War Blinded provides are open to all veterans, regardless of the circumstances in which their sight was lost.

I see that the Presiding Officer is telling me to conclude, so I shall take that advice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was trying to give you a visual warning without something going on the record, but that was a waste of time.

16:28

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I, too, am pleased to speak in this important debate. It is clear from the contributions across the chamber that the Scottish Government is to be commended for the steady progress that it is making, year on year, to improve the lives of service personnel and their families across my Cowdenbeath constituency, the kingdom of Fife and Scotland as a whole.

I take this opportunity to mention Councillor Rod Cavanagh, who is Fife's armed forces and veterans community champion. Councillor Cavanagh is a former Royal Marine and he does an excellent job in working with charities and other bodies to tackle the problems that individuals across Fife face in accessing the support that they need. I recently worked with Councillor Cavanagh on a constituency case, and I can say that he is a true champion of veterans and simply never gives up.

In the limited time that is available to me this afternoon, I will highlight a few issues of particular importance. First, I am very pleased to note the Scottish Government's on-going commitment to the veterans fund, which was established by the Government in 2008. The fund has helped to support a wide range of projects, including those on housing and housing support—which we all recognise as vital issues—befriending, employability and transitioning to civilian life. I will come to the minister's announcement of another important initiative later, but I very much welcome his commitment to further funding over the next three years.

Secondly, on the important issue of employability, I am pleased to note that the Scottish Government will continue to make funding available for the promotion of transferable skills, which many members have rightly highlighted as being important. That funding, which will be distributed by the Scottish Funding Council, will facilitate the continuation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and Partnership, which provides for the mapping of military qualifications against those that are recognised by employers. That is a crucial area of activity, as it is self-evident that people who have been in the armed forces possess a plethora of skills that would be of considerable benefit to a wide range of employers.

Thirdly, in the area of health, it is to be noted that a number of excellent initiatives have been undertaken and facilitated by the Scottish

Government. In particular, I welcome the fact that, as is the case with local authorities, every NHS board has a champion for armed forces personnel and veterans. That is an extremely important post, and the incumbent has the responsibility of ensuring that no armed forces personnel or veterans face any disadvantage in accessing treatment for health issues that are a result of their service to their country.

I welcome the restructuring of the armed forces and veterans health joint group, which was effected in December last year. Given that we now have an oversight group that is chaired by the chief medical officer and an implementation group that is chaired by the national clinical director, it is evident that great importance is attached to ensuring that strategic approaches to policy are taken at a very high level. That approach has helped to ensure that the Scottish Government is on track to implement the 18 or so recommendations that the veterans commissioner made in his 2018 report. I understand that a majority of those recommendations have been, or are on the way to being, implemented.

Partnership working is crucial, and I pay tribute to the various charities that work alongside veterans and the Scottish Government. Those include SSAFA, Poppy Scotland, Scottish War Blinded, Help for Heroes, Citizens Advice Scotland and Age Scotland, among many others. I thank all the volunteers in those organisations for their unstinting support.

As a society, we owe our armed forces personnel and veterans an enormous debt. By working together, we can ensure that the right support and care are available for those who need them.

16:32

Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome the chance to speak in the debate. With RM Condor in Angus, and facilities such as Rosendael veterans residence in Dundee, the issue involves many of my constituents in the North East Scotland region.

I am a member of the cross-party group on armed forces and veterans community. Though not a veteran, I, like many people, had parents who were. My father served in the Chindits in Burma. He came home with bouts of malaria that affected him throughout his life. He perhaps came home with other issues, but, for his generation, they were not spoken about.

I have visited the Rosendael veterans accommodation in Broughty Ferry, and I have seen at first hand the good work that the charity Scottish Veterans Residences does in looking after veterans who are in need. I have also met

Stand Easy Productions, an organisation that encourages veterans who have mental health issues, particularly those related to post-traumatic stress disorder, to learn drama skills to improve their self-confidence, with many using the stage to open up about their time in the forces.

The UK Government has set up a new Office for Veterans' Affairs, which will be responsible for ensuring that every veteran and their family know where to turn in order to access support when it is required. In addition, in 2014, the UK Government introduced the forces help-to-buy scheme, and it will extend it for another three years. As has been mentioned, the scheme has lent more than £280 million to more than 18,000 applicants.

The Scottish Government has also undertaken work in supporting veterans. It is independently advised on veterans' affairs by the veterans commissioner, who is in the chamber today and who serves as an ambassador for all veterans in Scotland. The primary role of the commissioner is:

"to improve outcomes for veterans in Scotland, by engaging with, listening to, and acting on the experience of veterans, individually and collectively, and to be an ambassador for veterans in Scotland, helping public services focus on veterans' experience of their service provision."

The Scottish Government has also supported the veterans fund since 2008. Since its inception, the fund has given £1.4 million to 150 projects.

In 2019, Poppyscotland welcomed the publication of the UK veterans strategy and the work that the Scottish Government did to inform its development. Although it recognises that the needs of veterans are often coincident with those of other groups and individuals, Poppyscotland believes that they should be accorded recognition, respect, care and support.

The majority of serving personnel make a successful transition back into civilian life, going on to make positive and lasting contributions to society. However, a minority require extra support due to a range of needs that in many cases are multiple and complex.

Although the action that is being taken by the Scottish Government to oversee and fund activity is making a positive difference for veterans and their families, there is more work to be done. The strategy outlines the vision for the next decade, but it is worth highlighting that although much can be done to support people who are transitioning from the armed forces today and over the next 10 years, the support requirements of people who are already veterans should also be considered.

Furthermore, to deliver the strategy successfully, Governments will need to work together at local, devolved and national levels. In the armed services advice project, which is

delivered by Citizen's Advice Scotland, the service background of the people who are seen varies between regions depending on the proximity of bases where veterans settle. The variety of people and the variety of help that they require is a prime example of how there is more to be done.

Collaboration between Governments underpins the strategy for our veterans and I welcome the support coming from Governments across the UK. Veterans have unique needs and more work is needed to raise awareness of and improve responses to veterans' issues. As a result, I support the ambitions of the UK and Scottish Governments to make the UK and, as part of that, Scotland great places to be a veteran.

16:36

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Last week, in the debate on mental health, I raised the issues that are facing soldiers and veterans. I was somewhat surprised to be challenged by Willie Rennie for doing so. I sought to highlight the loneliness and isolation that many people face when they leave the armed forces and the mental health issues that ensue.

I also mentioned that both the first and second world wars were all-encompassing by nature and that there was a sense of shared experience for the soldiers returning home—a mainstream understanding of what they had undergone. However, the nature of our armed forces and of the conflicts that they fight have changed multiple times since then and we know that the experience of armed forces members is now not so widely shared. For people wishing to leave the armed forces today, there is little mainstream understanding of what it is like to serve—no national shared experience that can inform their welcome home.

Any veteran making the transition from military service to civilian life will face some degree of difficulty and isolation, but as our understanding of mental health improves, we begin to understand just how challenging that transition can be. For armed forces veterans, who have been totally immersed in the armed forces culture and separated from loved ones for long periods and who may have psychological or physical injuries, those factors are multiplied. That helps us to understand why 65 per cent of armed forces veterans find that exiting the armed forces causes them to feel lonely or socially isolated.

We have to be proud of the Scottish Government's commitment to strengthening the bonds between our society and the armed forces community and of the fact that in Scotland we welcome former service members as valued members of the civilian community. That is why I

welcome the Government's strategy for our veterans, which is a collaborative approach that acknowledges the challenges faced by the armed services community. It sets out a clear vision to support it across a range of themes, including community, relationships and health and wellbeing.

We know that returning service members have a wealth of talents and experience that are easily transferable to our economy and our communities. As a society, we benefit when veterans are able to transition back to civilian life successfully, so I am pleased to see the efforts of both the Scottish and UK Governments to tackle the serious issue of social isolation in our armed forces community.

However, we have to acknowledge that the issues faced by our veterans often arise from their time in service, which is where many problems occur. The pay increase of 2 per cent for the armed forces is below the increase in average earnings, forces personnel have been subject to a public sector pay cap, and recruitment and retention is in crisis—I think that there is a recruitment shortfall of 8.4 per cent. The disastrous handling of the contract with Capita has caused problems as well, and we have huge downsizing at a time when the roles for and demands of the armed forces have increased dramatically.

We also have the situation—I fundamentally disagree with Jackie Baillie on this—in which we intend to spend up to £200 billion on nuclear weapons that should never be used when we cannot pay the average earnings to our armed forces personnel. That is a scandal—it is obscene. In addition, we have known for some time that there are major shortages in equipment, whether it is helicopters or boots, and we have seen a year-by-year reduction in the training opportunities available to members of the armed forces, which is part of the reason for the retention and recruitment crisis that we have.

If we want our veterans to have the best possible start when they rejoin civilian society, we have to ensure that their experience in the armed forces is a good one. As Gordon MacDonald pointed out, the quality of some service accommodation is absolutely appalling. I know one family who has been through three different education systems in three different countries within three years, and in substandard accommodation. Such experiences have a major effect on veterans.

This debate is about the armed forces and veterans. If we are serious about looking after our veterans, we have to make sure that their experience in the armed forces is just as good as we expect their experience to be when they come out of the armed forces.

16:40

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Given that we are having this debate so close to Christmas, I want to speak first about those who served in our armed forces in recent conflicts and paid the ultimate price. This Christmas, the parents, spouses and children of those who lost their lives will be broken-hearted and without their loved ones. I know from speaking to members of such families that their grief and pain is every bit as real today as it was when they received the tragic news of the death of their loved one. So we remember the 19 servicemen from across Scotland who lost their lives in Iraq, and the 33 Scots who lost their lives in Afghanistan. We think of their families this Christmas.

I recently met representatives of a charity that works with homeless veterans, who told me that the number of veterans who are homeless has not decreased but increased. I have found it difficult to find statistics on that issue, as I have on many other areas of social policy regarding veterans. Although I recognise that the Scottish Government has committed to enhancing the collection, use and analysis of data across the public, private and charitable sectors, in order to build an evidence base so that the needs of veterans can be effectively identified and addressed, in my view that is not happening quickly enough. Perhaps the minister will say what progress he believes has been made.

The British Legion has stated that veterans who are homeless

“have been found on average to be older, have slept rough for longer, be less likely to use drugs and more likely to have alcohol-related problems”

than the overall homeless population. A study by the ex-service action group highlighted that a clear majority of veterans who were experiencing homelessness had served in the army, rather than the navy or the air force, and pointed out that that might be attributable to the tendency of the army to recruit people from educationally and socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although I welcome the work that the Scottish Government has done, we must step up the progress, because many veterans are still slipping through without the support that they need.

Veterans are mentioned briefly in the Government's mental health strategy and its suicide prevention action plan, but that is not enough. One of the key recommendations of the report “Veterans' Health & Wellbeing in Scotland” was that the Government should produce a mental health action plan focused on meeting the mental health needs of the veterans community. The report suggested that the action plan should address potential barriers to veterans accessing

mental health services; the nature and scale of drug—especially painkiller—misuse by veterans; geographical inequalities in the provision of services; the protection of specialist PTSD services; and suicide risk in the veterans community.

The Government said in April that that an action plan on veterans health would be produced, but I am not aware that that has happened. So, although progress is being made, there is still much more to be done. We have heard from many members today that the majority of veterans transition without any major difficulty, but there is still a large minority who do not and who need more support.

I will finish where I started, by paying tribute to all those who have lost their lives in recent conflicts. It is important that we never forget not only their sacrifice but the sacrifice and pain that their families continue to suffer.

16:45

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members that I was a soldier and I served my country for 12 years. I am also very proud to be able to say that my son is still a soldier and that he is serving in the same regiment that I served in.

I do not foresee a future in which we will not need our armed services to protect our nation and to be a force for good across the world. There are people who foresee such a future, but my message to them is simple: I believe that they are very wrong. Veterans will therefore always be part of our responsibilities, as will families whose loved ones remain on duty.

As a veteran, I am pleased that there continues to be cross-party support to improve the support and services that are aimed at veterans and the armed forces community. I hope that that will continue for the future. I give credit to the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans for all that he is doing on behalf of veterans. I know that I often give him a hard time, but I believe that he works tirelessly on their behalf.

I welcome the combined approach that has been taken by the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government, which has resulted in all three jointly creating the strategy for our veterans. Through that strategy, veterans can expect, by 2028, to feel

“more valued, supported and empowered”

and not disadvantaged as a result of their service. That is why I support the actions of groups such as the unforgotten forces consortium, which is coordinated by Poppyscotland. However, let us not forget that there are eight more long years to fulfil

that ambition. The clock is ticking, and veterans rightly expect all three Governments to deliver. I believe that the Scottish Parliament will ensure that the Scottish Government does so.

I welcome the Scottish veterans commissioner's most recent report, which is entitled “Positive Futures: Getting Transition Right in Scotland”. It is clear from that report that Governments and charities have a responsibility to help veterans to transition from military life to civilian life and to make that transition as smooth as possible. It has been mentioned already that more can be done to help veterans to find a new career and new accommodation. Those are just two areas.

Transition from the services is a challenging time, especially for some veterans. Let me be clear: we should understand that building a new life as a civilian cannot happen if veterans are being wrongly pursued. Members will have come to expect me to mention historical allegations and why I believe that they are a critically important issue to address. A member of the armed services knows that, despite the many unknowns, there will be some givens. The most important given is that, however difficult things become, one of their buddies will have their 6 o'clock. Whether the serviceman was in a tight spot in a ditch in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Africa, Srebrenica, Afghanistan or Iraq, or in any of the other conflicts that our services have taken part in, someone would always be by their side and that person would be by theirs. No one would be left behind, and no one would be hung out to dry. That is what veterans rightly expect when they have done their duty and they return to civilian life. Someone should always have their 6 o'clock, and that is the very country that put them in harm's way during their service.

Recently, we have seen the rise of ambulance-chasing lawyers who have done little more than hound soldiers who have done only what was asked of them. In some cases, the lawyers have no experience of the pressures of armed conflict, and the biggest quandary that they have had to face is whether to have a latte or a flat white. If we want those in our armed services to transition fully to civilian life, we need them to know that we have their 6 o'clock. They should know that, when it comes to the law, provided they have followed it, we will never hang them out to dry. We also need them to know that people such as John Downey, who is strongly believed to have blown up my friends and colleagues and their horses in London, will face the full force of the law.

I will briefly mention the very important issue of housing. It has been mentioned today that, when soldiers leave the Army, they are given a short period in which to leave their house. That is to ensure that the council finds suitable housing for

them and that quarters are kept vacant for families who come in. Having been a married soldier, I can tell you that there is nothing worse than your wife being unable to accompany you to where you are serving.

It is expected that, by 2028, almost half of all veterans living in Scotland will be of working age. There will be more veterans of working age who have families, and who have built up skills and are looking for a way to re-enter civilian life. It is crucial that the Scottish Government, in partnership with the UK and Welsh Governments, sets the right conditions for a seamless transition. Veterans need to know that we will always have soldiers' and servicemen's backs. We need to recognise that they have been prepared to give their all for us, and therefore we should do the same for them.

Former armed service personnel have much to offer society when they leave the services, and it is up to us, in this Parliament and across the United Kingdom, to make sure that we release their full potential.

16:51

Graeme Dey: I thank members for their contributions. I will respond to as many as I can in the time that I have available.

Before I do that, I will update the Parliament on the strategy for our veterans, and the work that the Scottish Government has undertaken since the strategy was launched in November 2018. The strategy set out to build on the work by organisations across the public, private and charitable sectors to support and empower veterans by setting clear goals for the next 10 years and beyond about how we should support our current and future veterans. The aim was to ensure that every veteran would feel even more valued, supported and empowered, and I am clear that that should extend to their families.

Members might recall that the Governments of the United Kingdom joined forces to create and launch the strategy, demonstrating our shared commitment to supporting the veterans community, and ensuring that the support that they receive is fit for the present and for the years to come. Following the launch, each Government conducted its own consultation on the strategy and undertook to share feedback to ensure that, wherever they were located in the UK, the views of veterans, their families and those who support them were heard.

I intended to take this opportunity to launch the Scottish Government's response to the veterans strategy and to highlight some of the actions that we will be taking. However, one of the recurring messages that have come out of the consultation

on the strategy has been stakeholders' praise of the Governments working together to jointly own the strategy, which some described as putting veterans before politics.

Therefore, given the restrictions that the forthcoming general election has created, and following a request from the UK Government, I have decided to delay publishing the Scottish Government's response until early in the new year, in an attempt to align it with the publication of those of the other Governments across the UK. I hope that the Parliament will recognise that doing so is a genuine attempt to maintain the collaborative approach that has gone down so well with the sector.

That said, an area that loomed large during the consultation—it has also been raised directly with me on many occasions and referenced in the debate—is the transition process, in which service leavers are prepared for life back in the civilian world. As we have heard, it has also been the subject of a commentary by the present Scottish veterans commissioner, Charlie Wallace, that was published just last week. There have been criticisms that, given its fundamental importance to a successful transition, the process is not being begun early enough or is too narrowly focused on employment outcomes. As other members have referenced, it has also been thought to require more content about other aspects, including education options and life skills such as managing money and securing suitable housing.

Clearly, the responsibility for action to improve the transition process lies primarily with the MOD and the UK Government, and I expect that their response to the strategy will include steps to address that. However, again in keeping with the joint Government collaboration on the strategy, I have spoken to Johnny Mercer, the MOD's Minister for Military Personnel and Veterans, and have offered him every support from the Scottish Government in preparing service leavers for their lives after the military.

The Scottish Government's consultation on the strategy for our veterans has provided an ideal opportunity to review our support for their community. I look forward to publishing our detailed response to the strategy early in the new year, and no later than the end of January.

I will address some of the points that other members raised in the debate. I commend Alex Rowley for reminding us of the sacrifice that families have made and continue to make, having lost loved ones in service of their country. That legacy is particularly felt at this time of year. He also made a point about homelessness and how the long-term trend on veteran homelessness is encouraging. Nevertheless, the more recent spike is a concern and it is one of the reasons why, in

2020, we will be developing a specific pathway to try to prevent homelessness in the veterans community. That is an important piece of work.

Alex Rowley also referenced the mental health action plan and tackling geographical challenges for veterans. I noted earlier that the new veterans care network will undertake that task, so we are very much alive to that issue.

Maurice Corry asked about underpinning funding for smaller charities. The principal vehicle is of course the veterans fund, and the Government, in partnership with some organisations in Scotland, is exploring how we might grow it to meet demand, because demand is significant, as we all know.

Maurice Corry also called for the skills potential of departing service leavers to be maximised, which is a priority for the Government. One way of doing so is to actively encourage those who proactively recruit from the services to become vocal advocates for that approach, in order to challenge the ill-informed view that veterans have somehow been diminished by their service, when, for the vast majority—as Mark Griffin and Gordon MacDonald noted—the reverse is true.

Maurice Corry also asked about the unforgotten forces consortium. We all know that the consortium is carrying out fantastic work in supporting our older veterans—it is a good model; there is no doubt about that. I recently met members of the consortium to be updated on how the work is progressing and their plans for the future. They are in the midst of on-going efforts to secure sustainable funding beyond 2020, when the UK Government LIBOR funding ceases. I have written to the UK Government on the consortium's behalf, asking what plans Westminster has to support the work. After all, it set up the consortium and provided the prime funding. The principal responsibility for supporting that work lies at Westminster, but our dialogue with the consortium will continue, because I value its work.

Mike Rumbles raised a very important point regarding the social isolation of veterans when they are hospitalised. Between 2017 and 2019, the Defence Medical Welfare Service provided just such a service in hospitals, thanks to funding from the unforgotten forces consortium. That veteran-to-veteran support has continued since then in two health board areas, NHS Fife and NHS Ayrshire and Arran, because of direct funding from those boards. Additionally, the Royal British Legion Scotland's befriending service will accept referrals by hospitals. There is a general data protection regulation issue here that has to be overcome, because not only would hospitalised veterans have to be prepared to declare themselves as having served, they would have to indicate a desire for such a visit. None of that is

insurmountable, and I am happy to ask health colleagues to investigate how such a service might be delivered on a wider basis. The Scottish Government is also in the midst of exploring how it can support veterans organisations to enhance their befriending offerings more widely.

Gordon MacDonald highlighted the fees that are charged to armed forces families. To be clear, the Scottish Government views those fees as excessive.

George Adam was right to talk about deficits in the financial skills of some who are leaving the services. I point out to him that there is a growing recognition, particularly in the Army in Scotland, that it needs to better equip its personnel in that regard. I also draw his attention to a financial education programme that is being delivered to serving personnel by Barclays bank—it is a first-class service.

Alongside the usual elements to her contribution, Jackie Baillie noted the role of spouses in supporting the submarine service. I agree that such support is significant and I have met with that cohort twice in recent weeks, particularly around the issue of employability. It is hugely challenging for navy wives to secure sustained employment, which is one of the reasons why we are helping to develop a can do entrepreneurship hub at Faslane.

Annabelle Ewing noted the excellent work—

Jackie Baillie: Will the minister take an intervention on education?

Graeme Dey: No. I am genuinely running out of time, as Jackie Baillie will note from the clock.

Annabelle Ewing noted the excellent work of Councillor Rod Cavanagh as the armed forces champion in Fife, and she was right to do so. We need to ensure that that level of excellence is the norm across Scotland, and I acknowledge that we have local authority champions of all political persuasions who are doing a first-class job.

As ever, this debate has been a constructive part of the parliamentary programme, and it has demonstrated the support for our veterans that exists across the political spectrum. I look forward to returning to the chamber early in the new year to update Parliament on the Government's response to the strategy consultation findings.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There is just one question to be put this evening. The question is, that motion S5M-20103, in the name of Graeme Dey, on Scottish Government support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of the Armed Forces and veterans community and values the contribution that they continue to make to Scotland; supports the jointly developed Strategy for our Veterans, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes that the Scottish Government will soon publish the response to its strategy consultation, setting out how it will take that vision forward in Scotland, and agrees that everyone should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors to ensure that the Armed Forces community receives the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

Point of Order

17:00

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. During portfolio questions earlier this afternoon, I questioned the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Michael Matheson, on uncompleted works on the Queensferry crossing. He suggested that I should read the papers that have been sent to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. I have done that, and the letter that he was referring to, no doubt, is the one of 14 October 2019. I specifically asked about one matter, which was the completion of the lifts in the pillars, and he said that I had not confirmed the details of the letter—they are not mentioned in the letter. I wonder whether there is a way in which the cabinet secretary can correct the record, because he has obviously misconstrued what he wrote in his letter.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I thank Mr Mountain for the point of order. There is clearly a dispute over either the information that was given or the question that was asked. I would encourage the member to ask another question, to pursue the matter in committee, to write a letter to the cabinet secretary or to pursue one of the many other ways of addressing the issue.

Purple Light-up Campaign

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-18901, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, on #PurpleLightUp, a global movement for change. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends the work of the Purple Light Up campaign, which celebrates the economic power of disabled people all over the world; notes that #PurpleLightUp aims to link the colour with disabled employee networks and resource groups and the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which takes place every 3 December; understands that the campaign is led by disabled employees and challenges organisations and businesses to consider what it would take to join up disability networks in order to build a movement that drives cultural change from the inside out and enables business leaders to learn from their own people and to celebrate the economic contribution of disabled people, and notes the calls encouraging disabled employees to shout out about their talents and for businesses, disabled organisations and governments to listen, act and innovate in order to improve opportunities for disabled people.

17:03

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to lead this debate to highlight the purple light-up campaign, which celebrates the economic power of disabled people around the globe. I thank the members across all parties who supported my motion.

As members will be aware, today is the United Nations international day of persons with disabilities, which is always marked on 3 December. It is a chance for Scotland, the United Kingdom and the wider world to celebrate disabled talent and highlight the valuable contribution that the disabled community makes to our economy.

The colour purple is increasingly linked with disabled rights. In November, we had the launch of purple Tuesday, which is a campaign that is designed to focus on changing the customer experience of disabled people, and it has been a huge success. Large retailers and companies that offer tourist experiences, such as Sainsbury's, Asda, The Body Shop, Edinburgh zoo and Glasgow's St Enoch shopping centre, are among the many organisations that have pledged to commit to taking even just one action to improve the experience of their disabled customers.

That action can be something as simple as staff training, inclusive marketing or turning down the music to have quiet hours.

One such action that I have been championing, including over the course of this year, is increasing the availability of changing places toilets—facilities

that are larger than standard disabled toilets, with additional equipment for more complex needs. I wrote to key businesses here in Lothian, and I was delighted to meet representatives of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, the Gyle shopping centre, Dalkeith country park and the King's theatre, which have all come on board and have committed to introducing changing places toilets into their current redevelopment plans.

That move will be further strengthened by the passing of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019—with regulations under the new act coming into force today. The provisions of my amendment, which will ensure that a changing places toilet is required in all planning applications for new retail facilities over 10,000m² and other large buildings such as schools, motorway services and hospitals, will also come into force.

Purple Tuesday is not without its financial merit. I am sure that many members are aware of the huge untapped potential of the purple pound—the term that has been given to the potential spending power of the disabled community. It is estimated that the value of the purple pound to the economy of the United Kingdom could be as much as £249 billion, a figure that surely cannot be ignored.

Disabled customers are just part of the purple disabled movement. The purple light-up campaign is led and designed to celebrate the economic contribution of disabled employees in the workforce. It is directing the spotlight to the power of disabled employees, as well as customers, and to the economic and social benefits of retaining disabled employees.

I am the convener of the cross-party group on disability, which regularly discusses the benefits of recruiting disabled people and the barriers that many businesses perceive there to be in recruiting them. Those barriers include a lack of understanding and awareness among recruiters, concerns over the cost of reasonable adjustments that might need to be made and the potential loss of productivity due to health issues or absences from work. However, many of those barriers can be easily overcome.

The Royal Blind organisation, in its submission for this debate, highlighted the importance of the guaranteed interview scheme and of placing adverts in places where disabled people have the best chance of being made aware of job vacancies, including occupational therapy departments and job websites with good online accessibility, in addition to assistance from disability employment advisers in job centres. Furthermore, disabled people need to be encouraged to self-declare their disability without fear of stigma or of being overlooked for a position.

One key way of overcoming the reluctance to recruit disabled people is by the introduction and encouragement of disabled workplace employee networks or resource groups. We need to harness the power from within organisations. Such groups can be instrumental in ensuring that disabled employees are recruited, welcomed, empowered and willing to share their experiences and knowledge of how they have got on.

A good example is provided by Scottish Water, whose disability forum is one of the company's seven employee-led belong networks, and has been instrumental in putting disability at the forefront of Scottish Water employee initiatives such as a wellbeing calendar and the hosting of a Scottish wellbeing conference on what it feels like to experience certain physical health conditions and dyslexia.

Such groups can help to drive cultural change and to stop employers worrying that recruiting disabled people means costs for making workplace adjustments and potential time off. Workplace disabled networks can come together across the country, facilitated by organisations such as PurpleSpace, whose founder, Kate Nash, provided the vision behind the purple light-up campaign. Companies that are signing up to the campaign are signalling that they are agreeing to put disability on their board agendas, they are showing a willingness to improve the lived experience of their disabled employees, and they are supporting the campaign to build disability confidence.

I recognise that both the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government have set good and challenging targets. I urge the Scottish Government, businesses and organisations to listen to their disabled workforce, to help overcome the systemic barriers obstructing their employment and economic empowerment, and to ensure that the Government meets its target to reduce the disability employment gap by at least half by 2038.

I commend the purple light-up campaign today—but not only today. I hope that all businesses, across the calendar year, will seek to be open to those with disabilities, to give them the confidence to join them and shop in them. All our lives will be enhanced by that.

17:10

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I congratulate Jeremy Balfour on securing time for the debate. Today is, of course, the UN's international day of persons with disabilities. It has been observed each year since its inception in 1992, and the theme for this year's IDPD is:

“Promoting the participation of persons with disabilities and their leadership: taking action on the 2030 Development Agenda.”

That is about the empowerment of people with disabilities, equitable, inclusive and sustainable development, and pledging that no one should be left behind.

The purple light-up campaign links with the UN's IDPD to celebrate the economic power of disabled people. The day is about changing culture and valuing the contribution of disabled people to the workplace. I look forward to seeing many of our workplaces lit up in purple today.

Let me highlight a project that breaks down the barriers and challenges the notions of what disabled people can achieve and of the type of jobs that disabled people—especially those with learning disabilities—can do. Breaking barriers, delivered by Enable Scotland, the University of Strathclyde business school, Scottish Power plc and Marriott hotels, is the first initiative of its kind. Young people with learning disabilities attend one of the leading business schools in the UK and get access to a world-class education. They achieve accredited qualifications and graduate alongside their peers, while gaining real work experience and, in many cases, employment.

We know that about 40 per cent of school leavers go on to university; however, only 4 per cent of young people with learning disabilities do so. That is a significant gap.

Only 7 per cent of people with learning disabilities are in employment. Employers are missing out on a talented, skilled and loyal workforce because they cannot see beyond that person's disability. Employers involved in the breaking barriers project get to work with young people on work experience, and many have taken those people on permanently.

This is what Joe Kingdom, one of the project's graduates, had to say:

“I got involved with Breaking Barriers through ENABLE Works. I'd had some negative experiences with Higher Education in the past and had decided that it just wasn't for me. Breaking Barriers changed all of that, and through it, I've achieved things that I didn't think were possible. Getting an accredited qualification and work experience has done so much for my self-esteem. It's been amazing. It just goes to show that with small differences being made, every experience can be made inclusive for everyone.”

During his work placement at Scottish Power, Joe worked in several different departments and got to discover his passion for renewables. Scottish Power recognised the enthusiasm that he showed in completing his work placement and offered him a long-term position.

This is a ground-breaking partnership that delivers real results and will help to close the

disability employment gap. I congratulate all who are involved because it is giving genuine opportunities to young people and enabling them to reach their economic potential while benefiting our economy—what's not to like? The second cohort graduated in November, and I understand that the project will run again in 2020.

As the convener of the cross-party group on learning disability, I know that that is the kind of thing that makes a difference. On this day, I commend it to the chamber and to the minister.

17:14

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I congratulate Jeremy Balfour on securing the debate and thank him for doing so. I, like others, welcome the opportunity to celebrate the important work of the purple light-up campaign to highlight the talent of disabled workers and what they bring to the workplace. I will make an obvious point: “disabled workers” might be a single label, but it hides a vast array of disabilities and talents and we should not imagine that one label covers it.

I will talk about one of my late pals, who died three years ago. Brian Rattray was a pal, a colleague and a great political campaigner. When I joined the Bank of Scotland as a trainee programmer in 1969, Brian was already in situ, working as a programmer. He had been totally blind since an accident he had at about the age of 12.

I was ensconced in a room in a rather cold building in George Street, Edinburgh, learning how to do computer programming. A guy came in—he was always silent—went across the room, sat down at a card punch machine, punched away at his programmes, took them out and just walked out. Being the new boots, in my first week at the bank, I was ignored by him totally and I said nothing to him. It was very cold and I moved a little closer to me the two-bar electric fire that the bank, in its largesse, had provided for heating the room. The next time Brian came in, he walked straight through it and it was only then, after three or four days, that I realised that he was blind. So adapted was he to his environment that I was unaware of it. He was not ignoring me because he was rude, and he definitely did not ignore me after he tripped over my fire: I got a volley of abuse that would have done justice to anybody in the shipyards of the Clyde or any of our industrial factories.

Brian never let his disability get in the way of the job he was doing. He refused for years to have a guide dog; he walked along the street and you could not keep up with how fast he walked, waving his white stick. On one memorable occasion, he walked over—that is the only way I can describe it—the chief executive of the Bank of Scotland,

who was coming the other way and did not dodge out of the way quick enough. Brian just walked over him, swore at him and continued on. That was how Brian treated life.

His blindness, however, meant something very important that made him extremely valuable to his colleagues. Because it was difficult for him to read all the technical manuals relating to our job, he had basically memorised them all. Whenever you needed the answer to a question that was technical and deep, you simply asked Brian. He was genuinely the brains and the memory of the outfit, and I will treasure the memory of him forever.

We had John, who was also blind. He had very slight sight and his hobby, amazingly enough, was flying gliders. He never got to fly solo, but he loved looping the loop in a glider, under supervision. There is no limit to what people can do, except the limits that we impose upon them: that is an important point.

Jeremy Balfour referred to the Scottish Government's work. We have seen a decrease in disability unemployment, which is good, but we are only just on target for halving disability unemployment by 2038. I would certainly like to see us move a little faster. The Government itself is recruiting more disabled staff. We identified in 2018 that 16 per cent of recruits identified as disabled; two years earlier it was eight per cent. So the Government is doing its bit.

Others must also help to create a society where disabled people generally have equal access to education, as Jackie Baillie said, because of the contribution that they can make. Programmes such as Fair Start Scotland are making a big difference. The improved participation of young people in modern apprenticeship programmes is removing some of the barriers that disabled people experience. The motion calls on,

“businesses, disabled organisations and governments to listen, act and innovate”.

I see evidence that they are, but we have a lot more still to do.

17:19

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, thank Jeremy Balfour for bringing this members' business debate to the chamber and raising an issue that is close to the hearts of many of the members here.

As others have highlighted, today is also the UN-led international day of persons with disabilities, which the purple light-up campaign supports. It is a relatively new movement, having been established just two years ago. However, since that time, it has become an important part of

the grass-roots movement to recognise the potential of people with disabilities around the UK and internationally.

In Scotland, fewer than half of disabled people are in employment. For non-disabled people, the equivalent figure is well over 80 per cent. As a result of that substantial disability employment gap, there remains a significant and very real underrepresentation of workers with a disability in the labour market. However, as the purple light-up campaign highlights, disabled people have a huge amount to offer our economy.

As a society, we have a duty to help people with disabilities work towards their aspirations and realise their ambitions. We perhaps forget that, for many, employment and economic participation represent independence. However, for many, that it is not the assumed outcome.

Work must begin early. We should look not only at people currently moving into work, but at the next generation of children with disabilities. They deserve to be able to look forward with confidence, just as their friends and peers can.

Across the UK, we have seen major employers in the public and private sectors engage with the purple light-up campaign. We have also seen action from Government. The Scottish Government has set out its ambition to halve the disability employment gap, a welcome commitment that will be judged on its results.

At a UK level, we have seen schemes such as the Department for Work and Pensions' disability confident campaign raising the profile of disability employment, which is vital.

In some businesses, the barriers to adaptation for disabled employees can seem far greater than they are. My Highlands and Islands region has a proportionately larger share of small employers. Those are businesses that often have had little or no experience of taking on staff with disabilities. For many, taking on staff can itself be a big step. In those cases, awareness raising can be enormously beneficial. Sometimes, the most important thing to have is simply somewhere to turn to for advice, guidance and to be pointed in the right direction.

We will all have experience from across our regions and constituencies of some of the excellent examples that exist of disabled people being supported into work. In my constituency, I have visited Highland Blindcraft, which has been providing meaningful, high-quality supported employment to people with sight problems and disabilities since 1881. The Orkney Blide Trust is a charity supporting mental health that also helps with work. It is also supported in delivering Scottish mental health first aid, a programme supported by NHS Health Scotland that teaches

how to approach people who may be suffering a crisis in mental health.

Today, this Parliament should give its clear and full support to disabled people in the workplace. Collectively, we should be addressing disabled people directly and acknowledging how much we value their contribution, recognise the struggles that they may sometimes face and affirm that we will do what we can to make sure that every individual has an equal chance to thrive and succeed.

However, we are only one part of that. It is also important that disabled people are involved in promoting employment and that they lend their voice to employers and to other disabled people looking to enter work, to retrain or simply to advance in their chosen career, because, simply put, there are no better advocates for disabled people than disabled people themselves. I wish the purple light-up campaign every success.

17:23

The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie): I am really pleased to have the opportunity to respond to today's debate. I welcome the purple light-up campaign. I obviously got the memo to dress in purple, and it is my honour to do so. I hope that Jeremy Balfour will be wearing a purple tie tomorrow.

It is particularly apt to hold the debate today because, as members have mentioned, it is the international day of persons with disabilities. As we have heard, too many disabled people face too many barriers, especially in accessing fair work. In a tight labour market, and as things change, that means that we are not accessing a talented labour pool or doing what we can to make businesses and organisations much more diverse.

Any employer will tell us that a more diverse workforce is a more productive workforce. I will give an update on the range of actions that the Scottish Government is taking to address that issue. We have launched our new devolved employability programme, fair start Scotland. More than 2,500 disabled people have been in contact with the service since its inception. It is great that people are accessing that support.

We have increased modern apprenticeship funding for young disabled people, and we are implementing a health and work support pilot in Dundee and Fife to help disabled people and those with a health condition to stay in work or to move quickly back into work if their health worsens and they have to take some time off.

In December 2018, we published an employment action plan, which sets out how we and our partners—who will be a key element and

who I will come back to on many occasions—intend to halve the disability employment gap by 2038. That is a big challenge—we are in no doubt about that. If it was easy, we would have fixed it already. It will take a significant change in the way that many people perceive disabled people and their contribution to the labour market, but it is possible, especially when we all work together to create that change. We have heard some great examples of that today.

Stewart Stevenson talked about ability and talent. When I talk to a person with a disability, they sometimes say, “People keep talking about my disability, not my ability.” We need to change that narrative. Stewart Stevenson also spoke about the need for understanding and the need to enable workplaces, communities and the environment to be much more inclusive.

We continue to work with, and are grateful for the guidance and expertise of, our disabled people’s organisations, the third sector, trade unions, local authorities and employers. I will come back to some of those in a second. We know that businesses and disabled people need the right support at the right time to fully realise that opportunity. Jeremy Balfour talked about how important workplace networks can be and how they can be a driver of change by supporting the employer and, more important, the employee.

Our plan includes commitments to support employers to improve employment practices and provide inclusive workplaces. Scottish Water is a great example of that work. The plan also includes commitments to help disabled people to access the right support at an early stage, so that they can enter fair work, and to support all disabled young people who want to work.

We are also tackling the cross-cutting issues that many disabled people face, including child poverty, by investing £6 million of additional resource to support disabled parents into work and to support their families while they are at work. We will also support employers by investing up to £1 million in the formation of a public social partnership to bring together employers, disabled people’s organisations, the third sector and Government to co-produce a range of pilot schemes to ensure that employers are provided with the support and expertise that they need to attract, recruit and retain talented disabled workers. Jackie Baillie, Jamie Halcro Johnston and others talked about how important participation is. That is why that piece of work is being done in a way that involves co-production on the part of all the groups that I mentioned. On that issue, I pay tribute to the Glasgow Disability Alliance for its work on participatory budgeting. It has gone right into the nuts and bolts of the issue, asking Government and local government, “Where

are you spending your money, and what difference does it make for me?”

Jamie Halcro Johnston also talked about the duty to help people to fulfil their ambition to work. I hope that the work that I have outlined reassures him about our action and our ambition in that regard.

To improve employers’ ability to hire disabled people, we will invest £500,000 to develop a pilot scheme that is aimed at delivering similar support to the access to work scheme to those who are undertaking work experience or work trials, so that they can continue into employment afterwards. Jackie Baillie spoke loudly and clearly about changing the culture, and I would hope that that type of input would change the culture in those workplaces.

The other big piece of work that we have done recently concerns the workplace equality fund, which supported 22 projects with a total of £750,000 funding in 2018-19. Several projects focused on addressing labour market inequalities for disabled people such as a project that involved Enable Scotland—members will be glad to hear me mention that body—working with businesses to identify barriers to the recruitment and retention of disabled people and people from a minority ethnic background. I hope that that reassures Jeremy Balfour about our collaborative approach to work in this area.

Jamie Halcro Johnston talked about some of the other organisations that we should work with. I hope that he will be pleased to hear that the Royal National Institute of Blind People has collaborated with the Marriott Group to produce a toolkit to support employees who have or are experiencing sight loss. That is an example of a third sector disabled people’s organisation working with the private sector, and it feeds back into the points that Stewart Stevenson made about his former colleagues.

It was great to hear about the breaking barriers project. When I was a young employment development officer in a social work department, we were always keen to see such work. Jackie Baillie talked about the small differences that are being made to Joe Kingdom’s opportunities in the workplace, which are brilliant to see. She will know that the keys to life strategy focuses on such work in the context of people who have learning disabilities.

My colleague the Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills recently launched the new, expanded workplace equality fund, which will fund 23 projects. Stewart Stevenson mentioned that we need to do more, faster, and I hope that the fund will be a trigger in that regard. In one of the projects, the Royal National Institute for Deaf

People will work with private business to improve confidence in recruiting, supporting and retaining deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in the workplace.

Jeremy Balfour talked about retention. The Scottish Government has just published “A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: Scottish Government Recruitment and Retention Plan for Disabled People 2019”. We should lead by example, should we not? We are doing some of that in Government and in the civil service. This Government’s key purpose and commitment is to ensure that we create a more successful Scotland, providing opportunities for everyone who lives here, focusing on people’s wellbeing and fostering sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

While I am talking about matters inclusive—or #incLOOsive—I pay tribute to PAMIS and its great work on changing places toilets. I was able to work with PAMIS to fund pamiloo 2. Science centres, the national galleries and other organisations, including the one that Jeremy Balfour visited, are working alongside PAMIS to create opportunities—because if a place offers the right support, disabled people can go there and spend their money, thereby boosting the economy—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, minister. I can give you some extra time. I just want to ask the two people at the back of the chamber to go somewhere else to talk.

Christina McKelvie: I have almost finished, Presiding Officer.

We have heard a lot from members about the things that we are doing and the things that we need to do. The key is partnership working that takes account of people’s lived experience. That is why we are so grateful to our disabled people’s organisations and all the other organisations that work with us.

If we can achieve our goal, Scotland will be a world leader on diversity, inclusion and human rights. More important, disabled people will have the support that they need to be able to live their lives independently. Realising that ambition requires an all-Scotland approach, which is why participation and partnership are so important. I welcome the support of members of all parties. We have worked endlessly on this stuff, but members should always keep the Government on its toes, to ensure that we do more, faster, in partnership with the people who matter—that is, disabled people and their organisations in Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:32.

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