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Scottish Parliament

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[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:15]

Independent Prison Monitors

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The first item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-19364, in the name of Alexander Stewart, on the valuable role of independent prison monitors. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges that, on 31 August 2015, the first independent prison monitors (IPM) went into Scotland's 15 prisons, including HMP Glenochil in Clackmannanshire, to ensure humane treatment and conditions for prisoners; believes that, in the months leading up to the launch, HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) had been on a journey of change by developing a new structure for prison monitoring to replace the previous work done by the long-established prison visiting committees; notes that IPMs are volunteers from communities who visit prisons on at least a weekly basis to observe practices and to speak to prisoners about their experiences; understands that this information about conditions and treatment is collated and that the regional and national findings help detect patterns and provide information for continuous improvement; notes that this system is supported by a team of four prison monitoring co-ordinators based at HMIPS along with an advisory group with expertise in human rights, criminology, prisons and healthcare; acknowledges that each IPM holds statutory authority under the Public Services Reform (Inspection and Monitoring of Prisons) (Scotland) Order 2015; believes that the IPMs play an essential role in the justice system in aiming to ensure that prisoners' human rights are upheld and that life in prison contributes to rehabilitation; considers that the IPM system has brought a new group of people from a wide range of backgrounds into prisons to act as the eyes and ears of prisoners and their families, and believes that the commitment, motivation and enthusiasm of the growing team of IPMs has been tangible over the last four years and this system has gone a long way to improving Scotland's prisons, as well as informing best practice in independent monitoring to protect prisoners' human rights.

13:15

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted and grateful to have the privilege of opening this members' business debate. I pay tribute to my fellow members of the Scottish Parliament who supported the motion, which allowed the debate to take place today.

The independent prison monitor is a brand-new volunteering role for Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland. The role, which was launched on 31 August 2015, replaced work that was previously done by the long-established prison visiting committees. I pay tribute to all those

individuals who were members of the PVCs, because their role was vital. The new independent prison monitor role takes that work to the next level. Many of the individuals who previously sat on PVCs have chosen to become IPMs. The IPM role, which holds statutory authority under the Public Services Reform (Inspection and Monitoring of Prisons) (Scotland) Order 2015, is essential within the Scottish justice system.

At the end of August 2015, the first IPMs took up their posts. They went into Scotland's prisons including Her Majesty's Prison Glenochil, in Clackmannanshire; HM Prison and Young Offenders Institution Cornton Vale, in Stirling; and HMP Perth. All those facilities are in the region of Mid Scotland and Fife, which I represent.

The role of the new volunteers was, in essence, to ensure humane treatment and conditions for prisoners. In the months leading up to the launch, HMIPS had been on a journey of change and had developed a new structure for prison monitoring, which as I said replaced the long-established PVCs.

The independent monitors, who are volunteers, are people from the community. In my capacity as a councillor for Perth and Kinross Council, I was aware of this work because councillors were asked to sit on PVCs and made up a large segment of them; a few still do that today, but not as many and that has created an opportunity to broaden horizons among the individuals who want to participate in the IPM role.

IPMs visit prisons on at least a weekly basis, on a rota, to observe conditions and speak to prisoners about their experiences. They work alongside prison officers and prison management. Having that contact is vital, because it creates confidence in the monitoring process. The skills that IPMs bring to the role are also vital, and I will speak about that later.

IPMs look at conditions and treatment, and subjects such as healthcare and work placements; they can also act as liaison on family matters. The information that they gather is collated by the prisons on a regional and national level, and the findings that are provided ensure that there is continuous improvement.

The system is supported by a team of professional monitoring co-ordinators, who are based at HMIPS and operate in an advisory capacity to ensure that monitors get the training and support that they deserve to enable them to fulfil their role. They have expertise in human rights, criminology, prisons and healthcare.

Monitors play an essential role in the justice system, and in aiming to ensure that prisoners' human rights are upheld and that life in prison contributes to rehabilitation. The monitor system

has brought into prisons a wide range of individuals who act as the eyes and ears for prisoners; they can also have a connection with prisoners' families, which ensures that there is close contact.

The role of the independent prison monitor is wide and varied, as I said. Monitors need training, because they can find themselves dealing with harrowing situations. They might deal with petty criminals or with dangerous criminals who have committed serious crimes. They might have to visit individuals who have been placed in segregated units for their own protection.

We know that for a number of years there have been problems of overcrowding, drug use and violence in our prisons and that many prisoners require medical support, depending on their needs. From time to time there are suicides in prisons, and monitors might be involved in that regard—a monitor might have interviewed the prisoner a few days or hours before. Monitors must sometimes deal with individuals who protest—some prisoners go on hunger strike and others take part in dirty protests.

Individuals who volunteer as monitors have to take on board that whole range of circumstances. A monitor brings their experience of the outside world when they go into a prison, whether it is a young offenders institution, an open prison or a maximum security prison.

As a result of my role as a councillor, I am aware of many such individuals. I pay tribute to them all. My sister Heather became a prison visitor in the old prison visiting committee system back in 1999 and she has continued in her role; I am aware of the commitment that she has given to her role.

Monitors are there to give an independent view and, if an investigation needs to be made, to ensure that the results are dealt with in a balanced way. In addition to observing and monitoring, all monitors produce reports on their findings. The regular monitoring and inspection of prisons and other places of detention provides an important safeguard and a reassurance to the public. Monitors identify areas of good and bad practice.

We know that some individuals in the prison environment want to create difficulties. However, it is important that prisoners have the chance to sound off to an independent person who is not a prison officer or the prison governor and is therefore not part of the prison regime.

Monitors are required to produce regular reports, which is important. They ensure that standards are upheld and that the law and international and professional guidelines are complied with, so that we can all be confident that

our prisons are well run. The reports contain statements of fact in that regard.

First and foremost, the independent prison monitoring system is designed to assist in the running of prisons and to encourage transparency and openness.

The commitment, motivation and enthusiasm of the ever-growing team of independent prison monitors is tangible. Over the past four years or so, the system has gone a long way towards informing best practice, thus safeguarding human rights and ensuring that Scotland's prisons are better places.

I pay tribute to everyone who has taken on the role of prison monitor. The experience that monitors bring to the role makes a difference. Monitors are professional individuals who give their time and talents to support prison inmates and ensure that rehabilitation is the focus, throughout Scotland.

13:23

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank Alexander Stewart for giving us the opportunity to debate the important subject of prisons.

In session 2, I was my party's spokesperson on prisons. Because of that role, and because there has long been a prison in my constituency, I have been to many prisons—not just in Scotland; I have been into prisons in Wales, France and Georgia, in the Caucasus. Different jurisdictions have different approaches to incarceration and the treatment of prisoners, but all prisons deal with the same, difficult part of our communities, that is, people who have got themselves into trouble through their deliberate—or sometimes inadvertent—actions.

People in prison are likely to have lower IQs than people in the population as a whole. There is a greater incidence of mental ill health in prisons, and a much higher proportion of prisoners are functionally illiterate and/or innumerate. There are substantial problems with the people who end up in prison, which are not necessarily as pervasive in the general population.

I have interviewed and listened to prisoners in a number of our prisons and it is always revealing to do that. The first thing that I learned is that most of the people in prison are remarkably similar to the people outside: they are not thinking criminal acts 24 hours a day or planning to be in prison.

As a community, we should be interested in punishment—the deprivation of liberty is a punishment—and we also want to protect our society from the more violent members of our prison population, which is a very small proportion

of them. However, even more important, we also want to promote new behaviours and new beginnings for prisoners when they leave the prison.

The prisoners are, of course, isolated from their families and social circles. Therefore, the role of prison visitors, and now of the independent prison monitors, is very important in ensuring that those people have a proper connection with the outside world and someone independent of the system to whom they can take their concerns, whether those are valid or invalid. It is proper and necessary that they can bring their concerns to somebody's attention.

As an example, I sat in a cell at Saughton with six, or it may have been eight, murderers who were on life sentences. The prison chaplain was at the door in case I was at risk, ready to shout to the staff if necessary, but I had a private conversation with the prisoners. One of them was quite interesting. While he had been out on licence, he was at the scene of another murder. He did not perpetrate the murder, but he wondered why he was recalled to prison. It is interesting that there is often a disconnect between the thinking of people in prisons and the criminal justice system and the thinking that we would like them to have.

Independent prison monitors play an important part in helping prisoners to understand what behaviour outside prison should look like and in keeping them, particularly those with long sentences, in touch with any changes that are happening. In my constituency, Peterhead prison was Scotland's centre for sex offenders with sentences of more than four years. Some prisoners had been there for well over 10 years—sometimes more than 20 years—and they were totally disconnected from the world outside. They had few visitors, because many of their offences were committed against members of their own families.

I congratulate everyone who takes up the role of independent prison monitor. They have my thanks and, I suspect, the thanks of everyone here. They are a vital part of the system in helping prisoners to come out of prison a wee bit better than when they went in. I hope that they have every success in future.

13:27

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank my colleague Alexander Stuart for securing this members' business debate. Scotland's independent prison monitors deserve our appreciation and recognition today.

The role of independent prison monitor was introduced and developed under the Public Services Reform (Inspection and Monitoring of

Prisons) (Scotland) Order 2015, as has been mentioned. IPMs undertake the task of visiting prisons, of which there are 15 in Scotland, to ensure that the human rights of prisoners are met and that their treatment favours a path towards rehabilitation. The IPM team is made up of volunteers from local communities. They come from diverse backgrounds and bring a range of experience outside one set mould. For example, there is expertise in the current team in the areas of advocacy, educational management, criminal system reviews, detention monitoring and social work, to name but a few.

Each prison in Scotland is visited by one of the monitors at least once a week. Through that regular contact, the volunteers have a duty to observe prison life, noting how prisoners are treated and what their living conditions are like. Moreover, monitors investigate any issues that prisoners raise with them. That pathway is designed to be accessible, with prisoners able to contact the monitors in person during their visits, by making use of the IPM freephone number or by using a request box in prisons.

Scotland's incarceration rate is one of the highest in Europe and the role of the independent prison monitors is therefore vital. Through their findings and reports, we can understand the nuanced and complex issues that prisoners may experience, which can often be hidden from view. Not only that, but their work can reflect the wider, systemic problems in our prisons that need to be addressed, such as staffing pressures relating to the rising prison population. That, in turn, helps to pinpoint patterns in our prison system at both regional and national levels.

At the heart of this voluntary role is a human rights-centred approach. Every individual deserves to have their human rights protected and that does not change when it comes to prisoners. Linked to that approach is the importance of confidentiality. When approached by prisoners, the IPM team endeavour to respond with the utmost sensitivity, fairness and respect. In addition, the team promotes HMIPS standards while maintaining the objectivity that is needed for handling sensitive cases.

The nature of the role of the IPM means that they enter prisons without preconceived ideas and it is paramount that they do so. By being wholly objective in their findings, the team members work with integrity to ensure that they make recommendations that are based on sound judgment and accurate records, after continual visits to prisons.

In 2018-19, the third full year of operation, a team of more than 120 IPMs recorded practice and assisted with prisoners' requests. During that time, the IPMs volunteered more than 5,000 hours

to this work and handled more than 900 requests from prisoners. The majority of such requests related to medical questions and issues with the prison regime. In my region of West Scotland, HMP Barlinnie had 65 IPM visits, with 100 prisoner requests. That speaks to the clear necessity of having IPMs drawing well-founded conclusions as part of our justice system in Scotland.

The work of the independent prison monitoring team could not be achieved without the co-operation of the governors and staff in each prison across Scotland, for which I am grateful. The observations that are made by the IPMs would certainly be more restricted in scope, and therefore less wide ranging in their recommendations, if such transparent and collaborative efforts were not made. Therefore, it is encouraging to see that those efforts are made.

Scotland's independent prison monitors make a much-needed contribution to the improvement of our prisons. Their work, which is founded on diverse experience and sound observational judgment, deserves our on-going support.

13:32

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate Alexander Stewart on securing this afternoon's members' business debate on the important issue of independent prison monitors.

As Alexander Stewart pointed out in his contribution, the first important thing to recognise is that the prison monitors are volunteers. People are giving up their time to go into prisons, liaise with prisoners and assess conditions, so it is excellent that Parliament is able to recognise and congratulate them on that important work. Their work in prisons is crucial, and some of the issues to do with prisons in Scotland that have been highlighted recently underline that fact.

Recently, the Justice Committee visited Barlinnie, which is due for renewal but not until at least 2024. It is fair to say that the committee was taken aback by the stark conditions in the prison. Recent reports from HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland and the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment highlighted some of the issues and challenges that we face. For example, there is serious overcrowding in Scottish prisons. Barlinnie is more than 50 per cent over capacity and many of the prisoners are sharing cells that were designed only for single occupancy. I have raised the issue in Parliament and I know that the Government has underlined its concerns.

I mention the overcrowding issue to give the context in which the independent prison monitors carry out their work. It is crucial that, building on

the previous excellent work of prison visiting committees, we have groups of individuals who visit prisons throughout Scotland to speak to prisoners, make an assessment that can be fed back to prison governors and speak to the families outside the prison. Crucially, all that work helps to ensure that prisoners learn from their experience as they go through the system and are able to re-enter the community and play a positive role as a result of their rehabilitation. In the end, that will reduce reoffending rates, which will take the strain off the prison population and lead to a more settled community in the outside world.

One of Maurice Corry's points that I want to emphasise is the importance of healthcare in prisons. From my experience in dealing with constituency cases, it is clear that healthcare can become a major challenge due to the conditions in which some prisoners are having to inhabit prisons. It is crucial that we ensure that prisoners have adequate support, particularly as they enter the final stages of their prison sentence and look to re-enter the community, so that they are returned to their families in a healthy state.

I again thank Alexander Stewart for bringing forward the debate. I recognise the role of independent prison monitors in dealing with the serious issues that we have in the Scottish prison system, and I thank them for their contribution.

13:36

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I congratulate Alexander Stewart on lodging his important motion. I thank not only prison monitors but their predecessors, the prison visiting committees. When the change took place, there was concern that the work of the prison visiting committees was not valued, but that is not the case.

I want to talk about the basis for the work of IPMs, which is the optional protocol to the United Nations convention against torture. The United Kingdom chose to take up that option in 2003. Where the optional protocol differs from other aspects of the UN human rights system is in its emphasis on proactive prevention rather than reaction. We have heard examples of that. The main obligation that is placed on a state that ratifies the treaty is to set up an independent national preventative mechanism to undertake regular visits to places of detention and formulate recommendations to the authorities. It is about providing a constructive climate, which is what we have in Scotland's prisons.

We have too many people in Scotland's prisons—I know that that is not what today's debate is about—and we need to have robust

community alternatives and to ensure that the people in our prisons deserve to be there.

Prison monitors work to the inspector of prisons and I thank David Strang, who was previously in that post, and Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, who is the present inspector. I also thank Colin McConnell and all the staff of the Scottish Prison Service.

Like my colleague on the Justice Committee, James Kelly, I attended the visit to Barlinnie, which was illuminating. Many of us have visited prisons on many occasions.

I will now look at the two most recent examples of independent prison monitors' reports on my local prison—Inverness prison—which are in a helpful format to act as briefing papers for parliamentarians. Decency is one of the issues that they look at, which I am sure members will agree is fundamental if we are taking a rights-based approach to a penal system. They talk about the staff and prisoners who work in the kitchen having a positive working relationship—we know how fundamental staff prisoner relationships are to having good order in prisons.

James Kelly talked about healthcare. There is a reference to healthcare in the prison monitors' report on Inverness prison for April to June 2019, in which they talk about speaking to

“prisoners and staff regarding the provision of healthcare services. No issues or concerns were made.”

We would imagine that that would be the end of it, but they go on to say:

“Steps are taken by staff to ensure that prisoners suspected of having taken illegal substances are safe”.

I like that emphasis on the wellbeing of prisoners. There is an enforcement role to be played and we know that illegal substances are a challenge—

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Having spoken to a number of prison staff over the past while, I know that their priority is ensuring that prisoners are safe. However, there is a huge issue regarding the health and safety of prison staff, who enter prison cells not knowing what prisoners might have taken. The impact on some prison staff has been pretty devastating.

John Finnie: I absolutely agree with Mr Findlay on that point. The issue is not confined to people in the Prison Service; it affects police officers in the community, other people who work in the community, and people in hospital services. That is why robust procedures to prevent the import of substances is very important.

The most recent report from the independent prison monitors talks about the fabric of the prison and a situation in which there was a lockdown but the prison staff made efforts to ensure that

prisoners got a proper opportunity to access fresh air. Under the category

“Respect, autonomy and protection against mistreatment”, it very helpfully talks about the monitors observing

“staff providing guidance to prisoners on how to make use of the SPS complaints system”.

That is very important.

Finally, Mr Kelly and I encountered in Barlinnie prison the growing prevalence of people with additional needs in prisons and the inability of the estate to cope with that.

I thank Mr Stewart for lodging the motion. That we have independent volunteers who play the role that they play is a very positive thing.

13:41

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I echo the thanks to Alexander Stewart for securing this important debate and for the way in which he set the scene. It is entirely appropriate that we put on record our collective gratitude to all those who have acted as independent prison monitors since their establishment in 2015.

Of course—John Finnie alluded to this—moving away from the previous system of prison visiting committees was not without its challenges or, indeed, its critics. I well recall that my colleague Alison McInnes and others voiced concerns at the time. There were questions about how expertise might be retained and how routine and comprehensive the oversight would be. Nevertheless, as Alexander Stewart explained very well, the current system has succeeded in allaying those fears and proving its worth over the past four years.

As the motion rightly observes, the 120 or so IPMs are drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds. That is the great strength of the approach. They act as

“the eyes and ears of prisoners and their families”,

and they respond to issues that have been raised by prisoners or from observations that have been made during the course of prison visits, reporting formally on their findings to the chief inspector.

Since 2015, monitors have volunteered more than 5,000 hours of their time in prisons on 917 occasions and have dealt with more than 900 requests from prisoners. I think that James Kelly made that important point. Their purpose, of course, is to ensure that prisoners' human rights are upheld and that life in prison contributes to rehabilitation.

As we are all aware, the role has been made increasingly difficult as a result of the spiralling prison population and the levels of overcrowding

that we now see across Scotland's prison estate. That is pertinent to the debate. We lock up a higher proportion of our population than any other country in Europe, with the exception of Turkey and Russia. Unfortunately, rather than seeking to find solutions to address that, some of Mr Stewart's colleagues appear intent on exacerbating the situation. I strongly suspect that Mr Stewart feels as uncomfortable as many of us do with some of the more bellicose rhetoric that is used by his colleagues north and south of the border, which certainly risks making an already difficult situation worse.

As the chief inspector of prisons, Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, made clear in her most recent report,

"regular monitoring of prisons by IPMs and the professional inspecting of prisons by inspectors, make a significant contribution to improving the treatment and conditions for people in prison."

However, she went on to observe that overcrowding is making it more and more difficult to do effective rehabilitation work with prisoners, and it is contributing to rising rates of violence. Two thirds of our prisons are now at or over capacity, and double-bunking is increasingly the norm, as James Kelly and John Finnie have observed—I think that it affects over 90 per cent of prisoners in Barlinnie. In response, the Scottish Prison Service has had to suspend its throughcare support in order to redeploy staff to other roles. That is an unhealthy and unsustainable position that puts prisoners and prison staff at greater risk.

Last year, the number of assaults in prisons increased from 2,500 to just over 3,500, and the number of serious prisoner-on-prisoner assaults has doubled in the past five years—the number has increased from 94 to 135 in the past year alone.

Ultimately, of course, any reduction in rehabilitation activity also leaves the wider public less safe, as those who leave our prisons are less ready to reintegrate back into their communities.

Similar concerns have been raised by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which recently shone a light on a range of issues from the treatment of remand prisoners to the incarceration and isolation of women, many of whom have serious mental health issues.

Therefore, the work of independent prison monitors has never felt more important or necessary. At the same time, the Government and the Parliament urgently need to take bold steps to address the concerns that IPMs and others are raising and to deal with their root causes.

In the meantime, I again thank Alexander Stewart for bringing the debate to the Parliament. I also thank all those involved with IPMs and their predecessors on prison visiting committees.

13:45

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Denham): I, too, thank Alexander Stewart and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I thought that he gave a very detailed and informative speech. I also thank other members from across the chamber who have contributed to what has been an interesting and informative debate.

A number of members mentioned visits that they had undertaken to prisons. Maurice Corry and James Kelly mentioned that they had visited Barlinnie, and John Finnie also said that he had been there with members of the Justice Committee. Stewart Stevenson said that he had visited Saughton, which I, too, have visited.

Several members mentioned the issue of prisoner numbers, which the Scottish Government is taking a range of actions to address. I will not go over them all; instead, I will highlight a couple of the steps that we are taking. We have extended the presumption against short sentences to cover custodial sentences of 12 months or less rather than those of three months or less, and we expect that to have an impact on prisoner numbers. We are also investing £1.65 million over three years to increase access to supervised bail as an alternative to remand. We are adopting a number of strategies because no single approach will solve the issue. We expect the various steps that we are taking to have a cumulative effect that will start to have an impact in the short to medium term.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that Scotland is a modern, inclusive nation that protects, respects and realises internationally recognised human rights. People in prison are hidden from society. Some lack basic life skills and others have committed crimes that leave them isolated. Many struggle with addictions or have issues with self-esteem. In recent times, our prison population has changed, and we now see an increasing number of older people coming into custody, some of whom have complex social care needs. To ensure that individuals who are removed from society and placed in conditions of detention do not face any risk of ill treatment, it is vital that we have a robust and independent system in place for monitoring the conditions in which they are held and how they are treated.

Scotland has a long tradition of monitoring how prisoners are looked after. For the best part of a century, that was done through the work of prison

visiting committees, which a number of members mentioned, but, over time, that system became outdated and incapable of providing the level of scrutiny that is needed of a modern prison service. For example, the visiting committees focused on the wellbeing of prisoners, as John Finnie mentioned, and there was no overarching structure that considered aspects such as training and support.

In 2011, the Scottish Government therefore announced its intention to create a new system of independent monitoring of prisons. Following extensive consultation, in January 2015, the Parliament approved the Public Services Reform (Inspection and Monitoring of Prisons) (Scotland) Order 2015, which set out the statutory arrangements for the system of independent prison monitoring that we have today.

As well as complying with the optional protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment—known as OPCAT—the new system introduced a range of other features. First, it brought in independent prison monitoring under the auspices of Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons for Scotland, which provided strategic oversight for the first time. Secondly, it enabled the results of monitoring to be captured at a national level so that cross-system issues could be identified, thereby supporting an ethos of continuous improvement. The establishment of prison monitoring co-ordinators—or PMCs—has also ensured that independent prison monitors receive appropriate support and training to perform their duties effectively, as Alexander Stewart mentioned. Finally, the prison monitoring advisory group is responsible for keeping the effectiveness of monitoring under review and the guidance and training arrangements up to date.

During 2015, the Scottish Government and Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons in Scotland co-chaired a steering group that oversaw the implementation of the new arrangements and developed detailed guidance for monitors. They then undertook an extensive round of recruitment, initially appointing four prison monitoring co-ordinators, who subsequently worked to recruit and appoint more than 100 individuals to the role of IPM.

IPMs are central to the success of our current monitoring arrangements. They are volunteers—that point came out strongly during the debate—who willingly give up their time to ensure that prisoners are treated fairly, with dignity and respect. Monitors work together to ensure that each prison is visited at least once a week. They make announced and unannounced visits to prisons and meet prisoners who request their help in dealing with a particular issue or issues. They

also raise issues locally and record information on their findings so that wider analysis can take place.

The structure of the new arrangements ensures that IPMs are provided with the training and support that they need to confidently undertake their role. That includes training in human rights issues and in the HMIPS standards for inspecting and monitoring prisons in Scotland.

Neil Findlay: I appreciate that the minister is heading towards the end of her speaking time. Will she address some of the issues that have been raised around the use of new psychoactive substances and other such drugs in prison, and around the health and safety aspects of those?

Ash Denham: We are seeing some of that in prisons at the moment. The SPS is undertaking a range of new actions to identify those drugs before they get into prisons, but I appreciate what the member is saying. I do not have time to go into detail now, but, if the member would like, we could have a meeting to discuss the matter further or I could write to him with more information.

Since the revised arrangements came into effect, IPMs have conducted nearly 4,000 monitoring visits, dealt with in excess of 4,300 requests from prisoners and spent over 17,000 hours in prison. The new arrangements have contributed to a more diverse demographic of monitors, with an increased number of young people, women and individuals in employment taking up the role.

The benefits of the new independent monitoring arrangements are clear. A single, consistent process is in place across the country for prisoners who wish to speak to an IPM as well as a process to follow up with a prisoner when they move prison while there is still a live request. There is improved information sharing and, through the work of the PMCs, we now have improved training and support for IPMs.

There are also opportunities to share best practice, such as exchange visits with the Independent Monitoring Board in England, and opportunities for IPMs to visit other prisons in Scotland are being introduced. As a result of those changes, Scotland is now seen as a model of good practice. For example, prison services in Turkey recently asked to visit Scotland so that they could learn about our monitoring arrangements.

I offer my sincere thanks to our IPMs for their dedication, their hard work and the amount of time that they volunteer to look into the conditions in our prisons and how prisoners are treated.

13:53

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Economy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the first questions are on the rural economy. I give my usual mantra: if there are short questions and snappy answers, everyone will be able to ask their question and we can all go home happy.

Women in Agriculture

1. **Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to encourage women into agriculture. (S5O-03985)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): I was delighted to see the publication of the final report of the women in agriculture task force in November last year. The task force's recommendations will deliver the change that we need to ensure equal opportunities and to encourage more women into agriculture. That is not only the right thing to do but critical to building the resilience of agricultural businesses that are facing a post-Brexit future.

Implementation work has already begun. We are piloting unconscious bias training for agricultural organisations, and we are offering training to women in agriculture to develop their skills and leadership abilities.

Sandra White: We definitely need to look at changing culture and practice. How will the report contribute to changing culture, practice and the law to ensure that the significant contribution that is made by women in farming and food production is properly supported, developed and acknowledged?

Mairi Gougeon: The need to change culture and practice is one of the core conclusions that was made in the report. Key recommendations in the report to try to achieve that change include developing and applying an equality charter for Scottish agriculture, which will urge industry organisations and businesses to make their training and structures more accessible to women; undertaking more early planning for succession; and calling on equipment manufacturers to make equipment that will improve women's safety. The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting the implementation of the report's recommendations in their entirety.

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): We need to encourage more young women into agriculture, yet they face

significant barriers, as we have discussed, such as access to reliable childcare and grant support. Will the Scottish Government reverse the absurd decision that it made in 2018 to cease funding for the new entrants scheme and provide more financial support for young female farmers, so that Scottish agriculture can have a more sustainable and positive future?

Mairi Gougeon: The previous scheme was one of the only such schemes to exist across the whole of the United Kingdom. I absolutely recognise the importance of the issue, which was raised through the task force's work. When the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy made his statement on the task force and its recommendations, he said that any future recommendations on the new entrants scheme will be considered as part of the food and farming production future policy group's work.

We also have the land matching service, which was launched last year. We hope that the service will operate well and become a success, and we will continue to monitor it.

Forestry (Renfrewshire South)

2. **Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports forestry in the Renfrewshire South constituency. (S5O-03986)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): There are more than 2,000 hectares of woodland in Renfrewshire South, which represents just over 12 per cent of the constituency's area. Through our agency, Scottish Forestry, we provide grants for tree planting and the sustainable management of woodlands across Scotland. In Renfrewshire South, we have provided more than £2.7 million of support for 22 forestry projects in the past five years, including 17 new woodlands totalling 334 hectares.

Tom Arthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that detailed answer. What role does the Scottish Government believe that the forestry sector can play in achieving the outcomes in the national performance framework?

Fergus Ewing: The forestry sector plays a key and, indeed, unique role in supporting our national outcomes relating to both climate change and economic growth. The sector supports about 25,000 jobs and contributes more than £1,000 million a year to the economy. It also helps to support the population of our rural areas and to fight climate change by removing the equivalent of almost 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year from the atmosphere.

However, the contribution does not end there. As set out in "Scotland's Forestry Strategy", which

we published in 2019, forestry also contributes to national performance outcomes on health, wellbeing, communities, education, biodiversity and industry. The most recent figures show that our support for the sector allowed Scotland to create 84 per cent of all the new woodland in the United Kingdom, deliver 66 per cent of the UK's softwood timber harvest and meet our biodiversity commitments for planting native species.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place is key to supporting forestry. Given the impact of rising levels of timber transport on small rural routes, will the cabinet secretary seek to expand funding for the timber transport fund? Will he consider increasing the Government intervention level to more than 50 per cent, given the budget pressures on local councils, which currently have to find the other 50 per cent to match investment?

Fergus Ewing: Mr Smyth raises an important point. If he is not already aware of this, I am delighted to inform him that I have already done what he asked. For the past three years, I have done what he asked. We have substantially increased the funding for the timber transport fund, because we saw that it was necessary to help the sector, to improve our economic and environmental performance, to unjam bottlenecks and to work with local authorities, which welcome the work that we have done on timber transport.

The fund has been a terrific success story in Scotland, and I am grateful to all the groups throughout Scotland that work hard to identify which candidates qualify for support from it. Local authorities are reasonably happy with their arrangements, whereby they receive substantial support to supplement their efforts. However, we will keep that under review.

Budget (Rural Economy)

3. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy has had with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work, regarding how much will be allocated to farmers in the next budget. (S5O-03987)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work and I work together closely. We have discussed our concerns that the United Kingdom Government has not provided any meaningful, long-term statement about replacing European Union common agricultural policy funding.

Over the past three years, I have repeatedly pressed the UK Government—notably Michael Gove—to honour the pledge that it made during

the Brexit referendum to at least match EU funding post-Brexit. After three years of my persistent questioning, it belatedly confirmed funding for direct payments for 2020. However, serious gaps in its assurances remain, such as the impact of exchange rates. Crucially, there is no certainty for funding for farmers, foresters, land managers, LEADER projects or wider rural businesses beyond 2020.

Jeremy Balfour: With respect to the cabinet secretary, I say that the UK Government agreed to match the current annual budget available to farmers for every year until 2024, starting with £472 million in financial support to farmers in Scotland over the next two years. By failing to publish a new common agricultural policy and arrangements for financial distribution in the agriculture sector post-Brexit, the Scottish National Party Government has left Scottish farmers in the dark. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that work on that is under way? When will it be published?

Fergus Ewing: I am not sure whether Mr Balfour has read the letter from Rishi Sunak, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work. I have it in front of me. It does not say what Mr Balfour says that it says. It does not contain the categorical assurances that he said it provides. It goes some way to doing that. After three years of my questioning Michael Gove face to face in umpteen meetings of the ministerial group—probably questioning him more frequently and persistently on that issue than anyone else—I am pleased that, at long last, there is a belated reply. It remains a mystery why it took three years.

However, there is still no assurance on the specific funding that will be received beyond this year and there is no certainty about the exchange rate issue. Further, there is residual doubt about whether the assurances apply beyond farmers. The reference to assurances is to “farmers”. Foresters are not necessarily farmers—in fact, most of them are not farmers. LEADER is not farming. Why does the Government not specifically mention all those who receive the rural funding?

I respectfully suggest that, if the member wishes to make categorical statements of a sweeping nature, he gets his facts right first.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I welcome the news that the less favoured area support scheme loan payments have begun. Will the cabinet secretary update Parliament on the value of the funding of those payments that have been provided to farmers and crofters this winter already, and will he say whether there is still time for people to apply for a loan payment?

Fergus Ewing: I am speaking from memory, but I think that the money thus far provided by way of LFASS loan funding is just more than £38 million, and that, in the first tranche, 7,595 farmers and crofters have received loans, to the tune of 95 per cent of entitlement. I believe that the payments have been made slightly earlier than they were last year—on average around 10 days earlier—and that that support has been welcomed by farmers and crofters throughout the country, particularly in the light of the huge remaining uncertainties about Brexit, the import of cheap meats from other countries and the possibilities of tariffs on sheep meat, 88 per cent of the exports of which go to the EU.

That is welcome funding to a vital part of our community, namely hill farmers and farmers on challenging land, and I was delighted, as cabinet secretary, to take that decision to get that money out as soon as possible. That funding is extremely important and I am grateful to Iain Carmichael and his team of officials, who have so efficiently delivered it.

Finally, I recommend that anyone who has already received an offer of an LFASS loan—more than 10,000 have—should return it, if they have not already done so, so that we can get on with paying the remaining balance of payments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate the questions and the answers, but I would like to get as many questions in as possible, so let us move along.

Forestry (Fire Hazard)

4. **Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on the forestry sector of increased fire hazard due to long-term environmental changes. (S50-03988)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government's resilience division is working with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to include an updated assessment of wildfire risk in the second iteration of the Scottish risk assessment. Wildfires include grassland, moorland and forest fires, and the new assessment will be available to responders in spring 2020.

In addition, the programme for government makes it clear that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will develop a wildfire strategy, to ensure that we can respond to the increased risk of wildfires, including forest fires.

Stewart Stevenson: The number of reported wildfires in Scotland quadrupled in the past year, albeit that we are not at Australia's level. Is it appropriate to consider the wider effects on

communities of wildfires and, perhaps, in particular, how muirburn is one of the smallest contributors to that?

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. We know that, as our climate changes, we are seeing more extreme weather events. I am sure that everyone in the chamber has watched in horror the events unfolding in Australia and understands the massive impact that they have had on Australia's landscape and wildlife, as well as the sheer human cost of what is happening there and the human effort that is needed to tackle it. Stewart Stevenson is right to point that out and to mention the impact that the issue has had in Scotland. In April last year, we saw wildfires in Moray and, in May, we saw them in Sutherland, where they burned for five days.

We must do everything that we can to prepare for such challenges. That is why, along with partner agencies, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is developing its wildfire strategy, so that we can fight wildfires, try to prevent their happening in the first place and minimise the damage if they occur.

FAME Diesel (Impact on Farmers)

5. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the problems farmers encounter with the inclusion of FAME in red diesel. (S50-03989)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): The serious financial and safety issues that Scottish farmers have faced with that fuel in recent months are simply unacceptable. My officials are in close communication with the Department for Transport, NFU Scotland and Petroineos as work to fully understand and mitigate the issues progresses.

With fuel legislation reserved to the United Kingdom Government, Scottish ministers—Michael Matheson has the lead role in this particular area—have written to the UK Secretary of State for Transport, pressing for urgent action on dealing with stockpiles of affected fuel as well as longer-term solutions that will allow continued carbon reduction. As the UK Government has not yet responded, ministers are writing again this week, stressing the urgency of the matter.

Liz Smith: I thank the cabinet secretary for that helpful answer. As he rightly points out, there have been some stockpiles of contaminated fuel, which is a major concern, as we may experience a period of very cold weather. I will pick him up on his reply to my question. Is the Government looking at compensating farmers who stockpiled that fuel and did not know that it was contaminated?

Fergus Ewing: I appreciate that Liz Smith understands that this is a very serious issue, especially with cold weather coming along. The fuel is necessary for vehicles that transport feed to animals—especially to sheep on the hills. If farmers cannot use their vehicles, they cannot feed their animals, therefore risks to animal welfare are foreseeable. It is important to state that, because it illustrates the plight that farmers face. Although Liz Smith will be aware of that, I wanted to point that out.

Any question of financial compensation for those who are affected or who are dealing with affected fuel that is already in tanks is a commercial matter for the sellers and distributors of the fuel to address. The UK Government is responsible for the matter, as it is a reserved function. Mr Matheson, who, as I said earlier, is the lead Scottish minister in the matter, has been in contact with the DFT to try to find a solution, as have his officials. With respect, there is a real need to reach a solution and that is what farmers want now, rather than an argument about compensation.

There is no question that it is a complex issue, but the UK DFT can play a role—for example, by co-ordinating accelerated testing to identify the root cause of the filter locking issue. I will not go on, Presiding Officer—I always try to be as brief as I possibly can be. That said, I very much hope that the UK Government accepts its responsibilities.

The last thing I will say, to stress how important the issue is, is that I specifically raised it with George Eustace on Monday in a bilateral meeting after the meeting of the inter-ministerial group for environment, food and rural affairs. I hope that the UK Government will take heed of Liz Smith's question as well as my answer and will very swiftly try to find a solution, otherwise the consequences for animal welfare could be very serious.

Meat Products (US Regulatory Standards)

6. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what the impact could be on meat products imported to Scotland as part of a future United Kingdom trade deal of the reported plans by the US Department of Agriculture to introduce a system of self-regulation and policing for US slaughterhouses. (S5O-03990)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member must ask the question as it is written in the *Business Bulletin*. I think a few words—references to the US Department of Agriculture and the US—slipped in that are not in my printed version.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): Slipping in words is more for ministers, is it not, Presiding Officer?

The Scottish Government is extremely concerned that any proposed free trade deal might undermine our high-quality regulatory standards. I raised the matter with UK ministers this week, when we met, to make it clear just how important it will be for those standards to be maintained in future trade deals. I made it clear that this Government will resist vigorously any attempts to undermine the current standards.

Emma Harper: Scotland is known worldwide for the provenance and quality of its products and its excellent standards of animal welfare. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the potential self-policing of US slaughterhouses poses a safety concern and a risk to Scottish products, as it could lead to consumers being provided with cheaper products of substandard quality?

Fergus Ewing: I agree. The issue is of great concern to our beef farmers, producers and slaughterhouses around the country. In Scotland, we produce meat to the highest standards. If we are to import meat from other countries, in the Americas broadly, that do not have the same standards—including standards of provenance, animal hygiene and official veterinary supervision—or the closed-circuit television checking of abattoir processes, consumers will not know what they are getting, and that is of huge concern. Frankly, if cheap imports from countries that do not observe our high standards flood the market, that could well undermine the meat sector in Scotland. Therefore, that is one of the most important Brexit issues that has not yet been resolved, but which must be resolved.

I note that Theresa Villiers gave certain assurances on the issue when she spoke at the Oxford farming conference. Time does not permit me to read them all out or go into it all, but suffice it to say that there are serious misgivings about whether there is a real commitment across the United Kingdom Government to follow through on the fears that, in some dodgy deal with the USA, standards will be dropped and animals that have not been bred, reared and slaughtered in accordance with those standards will be introduced into the UK market.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to respond to that question, albeit briefly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not know about “briefly”, because I cannot now get in the questions from Maurice Corry and Graham Simpson. Nevertheless, I realise that it is a detailed area. I apologise to the members who wanted to ask supplementary questions but whom I could not call because we were so tight for time.

Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity

Borders Railway (Rolling Stock)

1. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when new rolling stock will be in operation on the Borders railway. (S5O-03993)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Since December 2018, we have added more than 30,000 seats on the Borders railway. Two services have been strengthened with extra carriages, adding around 1,500 seats daily between Tweedbank and South Gyle.

The addition of further carriages has been delayed by the poor performance of Angel Trains and Wabtec in delivering our investment in additional refurbished high-speed train carriages. I continue to press those involved to ensure that there is a strong focus on completing the refurbishment programme, to enable more carriages and more seats, so that Borders passengers can enjoy the full benefits of our investment, and to continue to improve performance.

Rachael Hamilton: The cabinet secretary has confirmed the delays with Angel Trains and Wabtec. However, the recent decision to terminate the ScotRail franchise early will definitely create uncertainty, which could affect investment in rolling stock. Currently, the class 158 trains that run on the Borders railway are not sufficient for passengers. It is clear from the latest SQUIRE—service quality incentive regime—figures, which measure the quality of trains, that improvement is needed, because the class 158 trains are failing to meet 10 of the 17 benchmarks, which is unacceptable. Will the early termination of the franchise directly affect investment pledges? Will passengers on the Borders railway actually get the new rolling stock that they need and want?

Michael Matheson: The answer to the member's first question is no, because the franchise agreement will remain in place for the coming two years, and the investment that we have committed to making through the franchise remains in place. There will be continued investment in rail infrastructure and rolling stock.

On the second question, as I outlined in my initial answer, the cascading of more carriages to the Borders railway has been disrupted as a result of the poor performance of Angel Trains and Wabtec in carrying out the refurbishment programme for HST carriages. Fairly recently, I visited Wabtec's site in Kilmarnock and met senior executives, including the vice-president of the company, to again impress on them the need to

make further progress. They have given a commitment to do that. We will continue to ensure that they hold to that, and complete the work as quickly as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mark Ruskell can have a supplementary question on the Borders railway.

Mark Ruskell: Figures that were released this week show that last year the number of rail journeys in Fife fell by 2 per cent—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. The supplementary is to be on the Borders railway.

Mark Ruskell: My question is about rolling stock.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. Sit down, please.

Mark Ruskell: Can I reframe it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, you cannot. You should have thought of that.

Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route

2. **Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made in resolving the outstanding issues in relation to the Aberdeen western peripheral route. (S5O-03994)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): As I advised the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee in December, following lengthy discussions Transport Scotland agreed a commercial settlement in principle with Aberdeen Roads Ltd. The settlement recognises that ARL faced significant challenges in delivering what was a complex and challenging project, including adverse weather and the collapse of Carillion Construction Ltd. It also recognises the significant risk, cost and uncertainty that are attached to lengthy court proceedings. The terms of the settlement are currently being finalised, but it will include a payment of £65 million to ARL, which is largely offset by the £53 million saving in payments that have been made to date.

Lewis Macdonald: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for confirming the reports that were given to the stock market just before Christmas.

In relation to other outstanding issues, the road safety risks and congestion at Kingswells south roundabout have been highlighted more or less since the day that traffic began to run along that section. I am pleased that Transport Scotland has made a commitment to take action on that and on the contract for signage to be let by Aberdeen City Council. In relation to the south Kingswells roundabout, will the cabinet secretary—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. Please—

Lewis Macdonald: —indicate what the timetable is for those works being done?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the issue of concern that Lewis Macdonald has raised, which other members have raised before. I cannot give a specific timeframe, at present, but I will endeavour to come back to the member with more detail, if that would be helpful to him and his constituents.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): On 5 December 2018, the cabinet secretary said to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee:

“If there is any additional cost over and above the fixed-price contract, Parliament will be notified.”—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2018; c 33.]

Why did the cabinet secretary wait until the recess to announce the extra costs? On what date did he agree to the extra costs? Why did he not inform Parliament at that time?

Michael Matheson: The Parliament was informed through the REC Committee as soon as an agreement had been reached. Galliford Try was required to notify the stock market of the agreement, which is what compressed the timetable. That is why we notified Parliament through the REC Committee as soon as a settlement had been agreed.

Haudagain Roundabout (Link Road Project)

3. Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the £30 million link road project at the Haudagain roundabout in Aberdeen. (S5O-03995)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Construction work is well under way on the A92/A96 Haudagain improvement project, and the main works contractor has already made significant progress on critical earthworks and utility diversions. The project is expected to open in spring 2021, subject to unforeseen circumstances, such as exceptional adverse weather.

Maureen Watt: I was disappointed, but not surprised, to see a North East Scotland member, Liam Kerr, trying to score political points in the local press about police incidents at the Haudagain roundabout. Mr Kerr and his Westminster colleague have this week been called out by local campaigners in Laurencekirk for trying to do likewise in respect of the flyover for which they have spent years campaigning. Does the cabinet secretary agree that instead of obsessing over petty point-scoring—[*Interruption.*]—the Tories should welcome the investment in north-east roads, including the Aberdeen western

peripheral route, that the Scottish National Party Government continues to deliver?

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Government has already committed more than £800 million of investment in road infrastructure projects in the north-east of Scotland. We have seen that very substantial benefits are already being provided by the AWPR.

We will not stop there. As the member made reference to, the Haudagain junction work is moving on apace. We expect that project to continue to be developed, and we expect to see improvements to traffic flow and to journey times, once it is completed.

The draft orders have been published for the new grade-separated junction at Laurencekirk. They are now out for public consultation, so the local community has an opportunity to express its views on the proposed works at the site. There will be a significant level of investment in that part of the north-east.

That investment sits alongside our plans for dualling the A96 between Aberdeen and Inverness, which is, at £3 billion, a major infrastructure project to improve connectivity from the north-east of Scotland to Inverness.

While the Tories carp from the sidelines, we will get on with doing the day job.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The link road is a good scheme, and I can assure Maureen Watt that the accident statistics that I was asked to comment on were not of my making. The taxpayers will want to know the cost. At the start of the project, the Government said that it would be £14 million—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

Liam Kerr: The cost was £18 million in 2016; in 2019, it was £30 million; and, last week, Transport Scotland said that it was £49.5 million. Will the cabinet secretary say here and now that it will not rise again?

Michael Matheson: I presume that Liam Kerr is referring to the Haudagain roundabout project. The cost of the Haudagain roundabout project is £49.5 million. That includes all the wider aspects of the project, including purchase of land, public utility diversions, advisory fees, preliminary work, geotechnical work and environmental surveys. That is the overall cost of the project.

It never comes as a surprise to me that the Tories want to talk down Scotland and improvements that are being made in Scotland, such as the one to which my colleague Maureen Watt referred.

Bellfield Interchange

4. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress being made to resolve the reported long-standing and escalating traffic flow issues at the Bellfield interchange in Kilmarnock. (S5O-03996)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The difficulties that are faced by traffic using Bellfield have been identified as part of the second strategic transport projects review. STPR2 will identify transport investment priorities for the next 20 years to help deliver the new national transport strategy, and it will form an aspect of how we prioritise funding in those areas. That includes the strategic transport network, which includes the trunk road around Kilmarnock. STPR2 will be concluded in early 2021.

Willie Coffey: The cabinet secretary will be aware that the Bellfield interchange has been named as one of the top three most dangerous roundabouts in Scotland. Various studies that have been carried out in recent years have failed to come up with a technical solution. Can the cabinet secretary give me some hope that that problem can be examined afresh in order to identify whatever solutions are required to effectively manage traffic flow and reduce the dangers for my constituents who use the Bellfield interchange?

Michael Matheson: Over recent years, several measures have been undertaken on the junction to address safety issues. The most recent annual road safety review did not highlight that there is a specific problem on the Bellfield interchange. However, it is recognised that there are congestion points at peak times, and the STPR2 process will consider whether further measures need to be undertaken to address the congestion issues that can occur at the Bellfield interchange. I am conscious of some of the plans that the local authority has for further industrial and commercial development in the area. Those plans would have to be taken into account in any measures to address the issues associated with the interchange.

Rail Services (South Scotland)

5. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the performance of the rail services in the South Scotland region that are regulated by the Department for Transport. (S5O-03997)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government last met

with the Department for Transport on 5 November 2019. Part of that discussion included the performance of cross-border rail services. The Scottish Government also maintains a regular dialogue with all cross-border operators.

Joan McAlpine: Lockerbie train station is the worst in Scotland and it is the fifth-worst in the UK, according to a recent survey. All of the services running through the station are regulated by the UK Government, including TransPennine Express, which has cancelled its mid-morning service from Lockerbie, although trains still run through the town. That means that there are no longer any off-peak tickets to be had in the morning. Also, seats on journeys from Lockerbie can no longer be reserved. That service is a lifeline service for the people of Dumfries and Galloway. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government needs to get its finger out and take action against those operators?

Michael Matheson: I am aware of the recent TransPennine Express punctuality and cancellation issues. I understand that the performance of that UK Government train operator franchise has been affected by the introduction of new rolling stock and a shortage of train crew to operate that stock.

I regret the fact that TransPennine Express amended its December timetable to reduce services, which has had an impact on rail connectivity into and out of Scotland. Two TransPennine Express services that called at Lockerbie were removed from the service in the December 2019 timetable, which was due to changes because of constraints on capacity. I have been told that TransPennine Express is working with the rail industry to reinstate those two services in the May 2020 timetable change. However, that has not been fully confirmed as yet. I call upon the UK Government transport secretary to look at restoring those services as quickly as possible, and to address ongoing concerns about punctuality and cancellations of the TransPennine Express service.

Reaching 100 per cent Broadband Programme

6. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it expects to be able to proceed with the R100 procurement for the north area, in light of the legal challenge from Gigaclear Ltd. (S5O-03998)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): Until legal proceedings have concluded, we are suspended from signing a contract for the north lot. Timescales for contract signature will therefore depend on the length and outcome of proceedings, and I will update the Parliament once they have concluded. The timing of the

proceedings is, rightly, a matter for the court to determine, taking into account its other business.

In the meantime, we will provide additional support to ensure that everyone can access superfast broadband services by the end of 2021, delivered through a national, demand-led voucher scheme, which will be funded by the Scottish Government. Anyone who will not be able to access superfast broadband by the end of 2021, regardless of whether build through the R100 contracts will ultimately reach them, will be eligible for the voucher scheme.

Rhoda Grant: I thank the minister, because people in the north were promised access to superfast broadband by the end of next year, and community solutions ended, as did the connected communities broadband project in the Western Isles, which left 500 customers in limbo.

The minister mentioned a voucher scheme. Can vouchers be used collectively? Everyone knows that it is the most hard-to-reach communities that are left behind, and if people cannot use their vouchers collectively they will not be able to access superfast broadband at all.

Paul Wheelhouse: Rhoda Grant raises an important point. I am aware of examples of communities looking to use existing United Kingdom Government voucher schemes, which has proved difficult, as she rightly identifies. We need to learn lessons from that. We are in the process of developing the voucher scheme and getting clearance for it. As I said last Thursday in my statement to the Parliament, we propose to use the mechanism for one of the existing UK Government voucher schemes to provide the funding to enable customers to use their vouchers. We can certainly consider how we promote the use of the scheme locally, in communities, to ensure that we aggregate demand and make projects happen more effectively and efficiently. I will look to engage with members on how we can do that.

Road Infrastructure Projects (Environmental Issues)

7. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how the development and delivery of planned and on-going road infrastructure projects take environmental issues into account. (S5O-03999)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Consideration of environmental issues is crucial to all road projects. In line with relevant legislation, Transport Scotland undertakes significant environmental assessment work and consultation with key stakeholders, including the Scottish Environment Protection

Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage and Historic Environment Scotland, during the design process, which culminates in the publication of an environmental impact assessment report. If required, a public local inquiry is held, to consider objections that have been received, before a decision is made on whether to proceed with the project. During the construction phase, obligations are placed on contractors to comply with environmental legislation and commitments, including mitigation, that have been identified during the design process.

Alexander Stewart: Roads can play an important part in environmentally balanced infrastructure, but the Scottish Greens have been demanding that the Scottish National Party Government terminate all new road projects. The car park tax showed us the Greens' price. Will the cabinet secretary assure members that the SNP will not sell out to the Greens the people who rely on improved road maintenance?

Michael Matheson: As I have made clear on a number of occasions in recent weeks and months, we remain committed to major road investment projects such as the A9 and A96 projects, alongside road improvements. That is not to say that we do not recognise the significant climate change challenge that we face and the need to take appropriate measures to achieve a zero-carbon economy. That involves looking at the investment that has to be made in low-carbon technologies and encouraging people to use alternative modes of transport and reduce their reliance on cars for journeys, where possible.

At the same time, we must balance that with an approach whereby we get the right type of infrastructure investment that is necessary to support our economy and our communities. That is the approach that the Government will take. We will take seriously our climate change obligations while ensuring that we make the right strategic infrastructure investments to help to support our economy and our communities.

ScotRail Franchise (Potential Buyers)

8. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with potential buyers for the ScotRail franchise. (S5O-04000)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Neither the Scottish Government nor Transport Scotland has had discussions with potential buyers for the ScotRail franchise. We remain committed to working with Abellio ScotRail to deliver continuous improvement and high-performing services until the end of the current contract, which is expected to be in March 2022. Work is under way to examine the post-2022

options that are open to the Scottish ministers. However, that will be subject to the outcomes from the United Kingdom Government's white paper, which we expected in autumn last year.

Murdo Fraser: Given that the Scottish Government's track record in taking over private companies such as Ferguson Marine, Burntisland Fabrications—BiFab—and Prestwick airport is less than encouraging, what confidence can we have that a public sector bid for ScotRail would be any more successful?

Michael Matheson: As things stand, the only legal option that we have for rail services in Scotland is to franchise them. No other option is provided for in the existing legislation. We wish to see a range of options, which is why we are awaiting the outcome of the Williams review to see what approach the UK Government intends to take.

I have already made it clear that I do not think that franchising in its present form is fit for purpose or serves the public well. If we look at the number of franchises in England that are in serious financial difficulty, we see that there are systemic problems with rail franchising. For example, the UK Government has had to transfer a number of services to the operator of last resort because of the failure of franchising in rail services in England.

I would prefer us to find a more effective means of structuring our rail services in Scotland. The most effective way to do that would be to have a single organisation that is responsible for the rolling stock, the provision of passenger services and the infrastructure on which those are dependent. In doing that, we could have a more joined-up approach to our rail services in Scotland, with a focus on ensuring that they deliver the best services for communities and the travelling public.

Secondary Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a Conservative Party debate on motion S5M-20415, in the name of Liz Smith, on education.

14:42

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On 31 occasions over the past five years, Scottish Government ministers have proclaimed officially in parliamentary time that education is the Scottish National Party's top priority. In those five years, only six times has the SNP has chosen to debate school education in its business time and there was no debate on schools in SNP debating time in 2018 and 2019. That represents a significant mismatch, just as there is a significant mismatch between some of the SNP's current rhetoric about education standards and what is happening in schools.

Before we have the usual accusations thrown at us by the SNP that the Opposition parties are always talking down Scotland's schools, I say that the Opposition parties have no difficulty in agreeing with the Scottish Government when it cites some of the encouraging aspects of attainment in Scottish schools: the three quarters of higher candidates who passed with A, B or C grades and the one quarter who achieved an A grade in 2019; the improvement in national 5 results in 2019, after the fall in 2018; the increase in the number of young people taking advanced highers, provided that they are lucky enough to be in a school or hub that still offers them; and the fact that the recent programme for international student assessment—PISA—reading score was better than the previous set of statistics, even if it was not back to 2012 levels. I wonder, however, what the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills makes of the comments about PISA that were made by his colleague Carol Monaghan MP. I will come to that a wee bit later.

What we will not do is agree with the SNP when it says, repeatedly, that Scotland's schools are producing

"a strong set of results"

and that any recent concerns about the higher are down to annual variation. The cabinet secretary knows fine well, as do his officials and our education experts across Scotland of whatever political hue, that Scottish schools are facing serious challenges. That is why the Opposition parties continue to use a great deal of debating time and questions at First Minister's question time to scrutinise the SNP's record on education.

It is precisely because we do not feel that there has been sufficient transparency over or acceptance of the nature of the challenges that our schools are facing—serious challenges that do not sit easily with the persistent Scottish Government rhetoric that Scottish schools are consistently doing well across the board. That is plainly not accurate, and parents, teachers, young people, education experts, employers and Opposition parties do not believe that it is accurate.

Our frustration is that it has proved extremely difficult to get answers to some key questions. Such frustration extends to all parties on the Education and Skills Committee, which concluded unanimously in recent reports that there is a complete lack of clarity over who is responsible for decision making about the curriculum. We put that issue to the cabinet secretary in our committee meeting on 27 November. To give an example, Johann Lamont asked in the committee on 18 January 2017 who took the decision that the national 4 qualification should not be externally examined and on what criteria that decision was made. No answer was forthcoming; indeed, we are still waiting.

Likewise, if we go through the transcripts of the Education and Skills Committee meetings over the past two years, and the official letters that our convener, Clare Adamson, has had to issue to the education agencies, there have been no fewer than nine occasions on which key questions from committee members have not been adequately addressed and the convener has had to ask the agencies again for the key information to be sent in.

On other occasions, key education officers have been unable to come up with what ought to have been essential information. I cite the example on 3 April 2019, when I asked a senior officer in Education Scotland where the greatest impact on subject choice was being felt due to teacher shortages. He said that he could not tell me. Surely that is a key question for our schools and our parents. It impacts heavily on the school curriculum, on the prevalence of multilevel teaching—we will be supporting Iain Gray's amendment on that this afternoon—on teacher workload and on the ability of schools to address additional support issues.

I will come to the four-year decline in higher pass rates, which we know, thanks to freedom of information material, was a cause of considerable concern to Mr Swinney's officials. It was not just an issue to do with annual variation, as he told us on 6 August, or why would he have commissioned an investigation? The First Minister told Jackson Carlaw—

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will in a minute. Perhaps the cabinet secretary can answer my question. The First Minister told Jackson Carlaw that he should apologise for asking about the issue. My response is to ask why. Why on earth should he apologise? All Jackson Carlaw wanted to know, as did the rest of us, was what Mr Swinney's officials had said was the reason for the four-year decline. Given that they clearly advised him that there was a problem, we wanted to know what he was going to do about it.

John Swinney: The point that the First Minister was making to Mr Carlaw in Parliament last week was that he had suggested that new information had been produced over the Christmas break—that was the foundation of his question to the First Minister last week—when in fact, I had, for a considerable period of time, addressed the issues in response to questions that were asked by Liz Smith herself at the Education and Skills Committee meeting on 27 November.

I am interested in hearing from Liz Smith what steps she believes have not been taken by the Government to address the implications and recommendations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review in 2015, which she supported when it was published?

Liz Smith: I am interested in the reasons that the cabinet secretary's officials uncovered for the four-year decline in the higher pass rates. During the committee meeting that the cabinet secretary referred to, I asked him to tell us what his concerned officials believed to be the problem. I have the transcript here. I got told about what the cabinet secretary and education agencies are doing to help teachers

“better understand the standards expected of them and better support them to achieve enhanced learning”,

but I was not told, and neither was Jackson Carlaw, what the specific problem was. I will ask again whether the Parliament would not be better off if we had an assessment of what the problem is, especially as it relates to the so-called gold standard of Scottish education, and what we are going to do about it.

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: Of course.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Liz Smith for giving way for a second time.

I will publish the outline of the information that was gathered as part of this exercise—I was going to confirm that in my speech, but I am happy to

confirm it now. Fundamentally, it relates to issues that Liz Smith cited and what I said to the Education and Skills Committee, which was that the conclusion of the analysis was that it is important to ensure that we constantly support the understanding of standards. That is what the Scottish Qualifications Authority is currently engaged in doing, as Liz Smith would expect. Further, we are taking steps to ensure that there is support available to enhance learning and teaching which, as she understands, is central to the education process.

Education Scotland, the SQA, our regional improvement collaboratives and local authorities are jointly taking forward that work as part of what I ask Parliament to understand and accept is an annual exercise—a habitual exercise—to review performance in the education system and ensure that we are addressing any weaknesses that persist.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Smith, do not have concerns about your time—it will be made up.

Liz Smith: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am grateful to the cabinet secretary and I am pleased to hear that he will publish that information, because it is essential, particularly ahead of the review of the senior phase that he has commissioned. It is just a pity that we did not get that information when we asked for it.

We know now that the cabinet secretary's advisers in Education Scotland say that there needs to be a new narrative on the curriculum for excellence. The Scottish Conservatives called for that as far back as 2016, so we welcome the Scottish Government's response to the Education and Skills Committee report saying that there are serious issues to be addressed.

I turn to the review of the senior phase. We welcome the fact that there will be a focus on some of the key issues that have been identified by the committee and, in particular, on secondary 4 curriculum choices, the prevalence of multilevel teaching, which we believe is as much to do with teacher shortages as anything else, and whether the plan to regard the senior phase as a three-year unit is working as it was intended.

In our view and in the view of most parents and employers, there remains a strong desire for more rigour in the teaching and examination of core subjects—the subjects that, as well as maths and English, represent the arts, sciences and social sciences. It has become an issue about the knowledge content and the ability of all pupils between S1 and S4, and probably also in S5, to have meaningful choices in each of those three faculty areas—not between them—so that there is breadth across the disciplines, as was always the

main strength of the Scottish education system. Whether by design or as an unintended consequence, as a result of the move to five or six subjects in S4 instead of eight, a growing number of pupils are finding it impossible to achieve such breadth, and we know from the Education and Skills Committee's survey of young people that they often end up unable to take the subjects that they want and which they feel that they need.

The Scottish Government's response is that we should not view the modern curriculum across different year levels but should look at it more as a block across the three years, so that what matters is what is available as a package between S4 and S6, which makes it possible to study subjects in all the faculty areas. However, I am not persuaded that that is working well.

In the committee, Alasdair Allan made a good point about that in relation to languages. It is not a coincidence that there has been a sharp downturn in the numbers of young people taking modern languages, which, just like science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—subjects, are so crucial to the future of the economy. He made the point that it is not an easy option for young people to drop a language in early senior school and to come back to it later, because they lose essential continuity.

There is another issue here, which is possibly unintended, although I am not so sure, given the comments that we have occasionally heard from SQA and Education Scotland. The issue is the desire to bring on board new subjects and skills. The pendulum has swung away from the more traditional curriculum, and knowledge-based learning has not had the focus that it deserves. It is important that we have a debate about that. Does it mean that we should be a little bit more prescriptive about the core curriculum? Yes, it probably does. It is important that the senior phase examines that issue. It is not about going back to old curriculum models for five to 14 or standard grades, but it is a case of resetting the curriculum for excellence. Let us remember that considerable concern has been expressed that we ended up with a curriculum design that was led by the qualifications agency rather than by teachers and curriculum specialists.

That is a serious point because, if the review of the senior phase is to be fully effective, we also have to look at the broad general education and how that articulates with the senior phase. Jenny Gilruth has raised the issue of articulation several times in the committee, and she was absolutely right to do so. On 3 April 2019, she asked some very reasonable and straightforward questions about national 5 courses comprising 160 hours—how effective timetabling would happen and whether that, in effect, meant that there was a

tension between the ethos of the broad general education and what the SQA was advising was appropriate for the structure of the senior phase. It is perfectly legitimate to ask about that, and I hope that that will also be considered very carefully.

Mr Swinney rightly acknowledges that he is ultimately responsible for decision making in education. The public agree. However, the public share our frustration that, despite all the undoubted talent in Scotland's schools, we are not performing as well as we should be. The OECD came to that conclusion back in 2015. Mr Swinney has seen the newspaper headlines, and he has read the many recent commentaries, including those from teachers on the ground, about where education in Scotland needs to improve. He must surely recognise, just like the rest of us, that there is a long way to go before Scotland can once again lead the world and before there can be indisputable justification for the Scottish Government to claim that Scotland's schools are producing

"a strong set of results".

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the acceptance by the Scottish Government that, following the unanimous conclusions reached by the Education and Skills Committee in its report, *Subject choices in schools*, which highlighted significant concerns regarding subject choice in many schools and their impact on hardworking teachers and young people, there should be a full review of the senior phase of the curriculum for excellence; calls for a full review of broad general education and how it articulates with the senior phase, but believes however that this review can only succeed if there is an accompanying acceptance from the Scottish Government that there are some key weaknesses in some key aspects of Scotland's school education and the qualifications structure that challenge its claim that Scotland's schools are producing "a strong set of results".

14:56

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I thank Liz Smith for the manner in which she has addressed the subject today, which enables us to embark on a constructive discussion. With just a little bit of tongue in cheek, I say to her that she need only vote for my amendment to get a Government debate on education.

For factual accuracy, I point out that the new narrative on curriculum for excellence was published on 9 September last year. I hope that Liz Smith is aware of that, because it is material to the issues that we are discussing.

Curriculum for excellence is designed to fulfil a range of young people's needs. It is about equipping young people with fundamental skills in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing;

developing the young person as a whole—their achievements and skills alongside exam results or qualifications; and providing a wider range of options and pathways to young people through their education up to and including S6. It is designed to be flexible—it can be tailored to the needs of every young person, no matter their background, interests, confidence or skill set—and it supports and promotes the highest standards of academic attainment and achievement.

Obviously, some of the issues that Liz Smith has raised in relation to inserting a greater degree of prescription into the curriculum would challenge some of those points. There is a debate to be had about where Parliament wishes to be on the issue, because it overwhelmingly supported the curriculum for excellence principles that I have just outlined, and it reinforced them in 2016, when it debated the OECD report on Scottish education and the Conservatives supported the Government's analysis of that report.

I put on record that I did not view the OECD report in 2015 as a glowing endorsement of Scottish education and that I did not think that there was nothing to be done to improve Scottish education—far from it. I have spent most of the past four years, as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, addressing the OECD's recommendations in order to strengthen the focus on learning and teaching and to ensure that there is a clearer understanding of what is expected in the curriculum through the publication of the benchmarks and by the simplification of the curriculum. I accept that, in its formulation period, the curriculum was wordy and more detailed and that it had to be slimmed down. We have done exactly that.

Liz Smith: The Conservatives have no problem—indeed, no party in the Parliament has any problem—with agreeing the principles of curriculum for excellence. What we have a problem with is the delivery. I think that many SNP members have a problem with that, too. If the cabinet secretary's officials are advising that there should be a new narrative, what does he think they are referring to?

John Swinney: It was the OECD that recommended that we should have a new narrative. The new narrative essentially reinforces what is, for me, the central element of curriculum for excellence, which is young people's achievement of the four capacities in becoming responsible citizens, effective contributors, successful individuals and confident individuals.

Those four capacities lie at the heart of curriculum for excellence. The advice that we received was to reinforce them, so that they would drive many of the aspects of interdisciplinary learning that are central to the effective broad

general education that must be the entitlement of every young person in Scotland. I have absolutely no desire to narrow the educational range of our young people; rather, I would vigorously defend the broad general education's being sufficiently extensive to ensure that they are able to achieve their full potential.

Liz Smith: I have a very brief question for the cabinet secretary. Does he accept that there has been a substantial narrowing of subject choices in S4?

John Swinney: That is a hard question to answer. In some circumstances, and if we look at the situation in an abstract way, fewer choices can be made in S4 in the sense that schools will have opted to present young people for six qualifications rather than for eight. Such judgments are left to educators at a local level, in our schools, which is one of the fundamental points of school—

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: If Jenny Marra will forgive me, I will not take her intervention just now.

A fundamental element of the principles of an empowered school system is that we enable educators at a local level to make the judgments that are most appropriate for young people. In an abstract sense, Liz Smith's point is true of S4. However, she also correctly explained my position. The senior phase is a three-year one, and young people's achievements should be assessed at the end of that process—not at one intermediary stage at the end of S4.

Jenny Marra: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: I will, in a moment.

Let me address the final point that Liz Smith raised with me, which was about the balance between knowledge and skills in the curriculum. I cannot imagine that there is a single person in the Parliament who does not believe that education needs to be founded on the acquisition of knowledge and skills. I completely accept that position. My view is that the balance is correct within curriculum for excellence, but I am always open to debate on that. I do not think that it is a question of—as is often put to me by commentators from south of the border—our needing to have a knowledge-based curriculum rather than one that is based on skills. I do not accept that that should be an either/or choice, because young people need to be equipped for a constantly changing world.

I am happy to give way to Ms Marra now.

Jenny Marra: I thank the cabinet secretary for giving way, but I take issue with his assertion that the point is abstract or limited to a school's discretion. In the Dundee City Council area, the local authority has mandated that schools should not offer more than six subjects at S4, because the cuts mean that they cannot afford to teach more than that number. What does the cabinet secretary say to that?

John Swinney: I enthusiastically and energetically support the empowerment of schools to make such decisions. However, local authorities around the country have taken different positions and have left different levels of discretion to individual schools. As we work our way through the empowerment agenda, we should stress the importance of putting control over making such decisions into the hands of educators.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: I am afraid that Mr Findlay will have to forgive me if I do not. I must cover a bit more ground first.

I would like to put on record a whole host of information about improvements in achievement of curriculum for excellence levels, the closure of the attainment gap and the qualifications that have been achieved by young people. I will come back to those points later in my remarks. First, let me address some of the issues at the heart of the Conservative motion, which calls for a review of the broad general education. This is where I say to members that we must be careful about what we support today.

In 2015, we undertook a review of the broad general education that commanded wide support in the Parliament. A report on the review was produced by the OECD, whose recommendations we are in the process of implementing. We have now committed to undertaking a review of the senior phase. I have consulted the Education and Skills Committee on the remit of that review, and I am coming to my own conclusions on it. One of the issues that we will consider is the articulation and the transition between the broad general education and the senior phase. The achievements that are expected of young people in the broad general education are crystal clear: they are encapsulated in the benchmarks that are available to all schools across the relevant curricular areas, which set out what we expect young people to have experienced before they embark on the senior phase.

The OECD completed a comprehensive review of the broad general education as a whole in 2015 and produced a 176-page report. We have been working with partners to take forward that review's recommendations, which included improving

assessment, strengthening standards through the development of benchmarks and developing a refreshed narrative for curriculum for excellence. Now is not the moment to revisit the broad general education other than with regard to its relationship to the senior phase. There are transition issues that we will look at in reviewing the senior phase, but they do not merit a separate broad general education review at this stage given that we have already tested the issues in 2015. I genuinely invite the Conservatives to support my amendment, which enables us to address that issue.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con) rose—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Swinney is closing.

John Swinney: I am happy to give way to Mr Mundell.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can, as long as it is a quick answer and a quick closure.

Oliver Mundell: It is five years since that review. Is it not worth seeing whether we have managed to properly address those points?

John Swinney: The Parliament has asked me to undertake a senior phase review and I have agreed to do that. The transition issues between the broad general education and the senior phase are the issues that we need to satisfy ourselves about, having recently undertaken a review of the broad general education. [*Interruption.*] I ask Mr Mundell to allow me to complete the point. He will appreciate that changing the education system does not happen instantaneously and that a five-year period is a relatively short period—educationally speaking—for us to see the development of progress in. I invite the Conservatives to reflect on whether it is necessary and justifiable to have another review of the broad general education when we have just completed such an exercise and are currently implementing its recommendations.

The Government believes that important progress has been made in Scottish education. Performance is increasing—that has been independently validated and we have seen the evidence of it—and we are open to the challenge of strengthening and improving Scottish education as is necessary. That is what I spend my time trying to deliver. I invite the Parliament to support my amendment, which proposes a coherent way of addressing those issues that does not disrupt the Scottish education system.

I move amendment S5M-20415.3, to leave out from “calls for a full review” to end and insert:

“recalls the OECD review of broad general education in 2015 and the steps taken to implement the recommendations, including improving assessment,

strengthening standards through the development of benchmarks and developing a refreshed narrative for the curriculum for excellence; notes ongoing work to reduce the burden of assessment and teacher workload through improvements to qualifications; welcomes the wider range of pathways, awards and qualifications available to young people, for example through Foundation Apprenticeships; notes ongoing improvements to learning and teaching, supported by regional improvement collaboratives; recognises the range of evidence of improvement published through the National Improvement Framework evidence report in December 2019, and believes that a full debate on a Scottish Government motion on improving Scottish education should take place to coincide with the visit in Spring 2020 of the OECD team to Scotland as part of their review of the senior phase, subject to the normal Parliamentary Bureau procedures and agreement by the Parliament.”

15:07

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a new year and a new decade, but here we are, still dependent on Opposition time for a debate on schools and education. Not only two parliamentary years but—Liz Smith is right—two full calendar years have passed before the Scottish Government has seen fit to bring its policy and performance on schools to the chamber for debate. After all that time, to lodge a Government amendment promising a debate “sometime soon” is a bit pathetic. That is too little too late, and it is too vague.

That reluctance to debate school policy has a certain irony about it, because—the cabinet secretary is absolutely right—there is widespread agreement on the principles of curriculum for excellence, which have commanded broad and enduring support, including cross-party support, throughout the years. That is because they emerged from a comprehensive and open national debate that was launched by Cathy Jamieson 19 years ago, which engaged across Scottish society and beyond. The strength of curriculum for excellence has always been the breadth of support for its principles. Its weakness has been in its implementation during a period of sustained cuts to resources and teacher numbers, which have caused enormous strain on teaching staff and created distortions in the curriculum.

The situation has been exacerbated by the late introduction in policy making—before the SNP was responsible for such matters—of the three-year general education phase, which did not emerge from the national education debate, and by the later reform of the exam system, which took place once the SNP had taken over stewardship of our education system. As Larry Flanagan of the Educational Institute of Scotland made clear in his evidence to the Education and Skills Committee, reform of the exam system was not a requirement of curriculum for excellence and has struggled to fit with it.

The consequences—unintended, perhaps, but consequences nonetheless—of all that have been laid bare in the Education and Skills Committee's report on subject choice and the evidence behind it. As a result of the fact that pupils can choose fewer subjects to study to exam level, the breadth of the curriculum, which the Scottish school system has always been so proud of, is being narrowed. If the current trend continues, some subjects will be squeezed out of the curriculum altogether.

John Swinney: Does Mr Gray accept the evidence that I presented to the Education and Skills Committee that, in the three-year senior phase, as I mentioned to Liz Smith, young people have the opportunity to complete more certificated qualifications than was the case when Mr Gray and I were at school, as a result of the nature of that three-year phase? Does he accept that that approach provides young people with wider opportunities?

Iain Gray: What matters is not just the studying of subjects but the level to which pupils can study them. All the evidence that the Education and Skills Committee received pointed to a narrowing of what it was possible to achieve within the school year. I will come back to that.

A second consequence is the fact that the teaching in a single class of exam courses at two, three or even four different levels has become endemic and, in some schools, the norm.

As the cabinet secretary has just demonstrated, he has not been open in his response to those problems. First, he denied altogether that subject choice was narrowing at all. He then diverted to claiming that pupils could choose from a wider range of courses—which is a different thing altogether, as he well knows. Today, he dismissed the concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum by saying that it was only an abstract narrowing. What on earth does that mean? For pupils who get only one chance at school, the fact that they can do fewer exams is not abstract; it is real.

John Swinney: I highlighted to Liz Smith the difference between looking at one year—S4—and looking at a three-year senior phase. Mr Gray is wrong to say that young people cannot study for qualifications at different levels if they participate in a three-year senior phase. They might do six national 5s in S4, but they can do other national 5s at other stages in their senior phase if they choose to do so.

Iain Gray: I understand that that is the theory, but the evidence that the committee received is that that is not the reality. For example, we were given very specific evidence that that is not the reality in modern languages.

The Government claims that multilevel teaching has always happened, which is simply not true except in the case of standard grade courses, which were specifically designed for that style of teaching. The truth is that not one shred of evidence has been presented to the committee that multilevel teaching is desirable for educational reasons. All the evidence suggests that it is covering for a lack of teaching resources. Only this week, Professor Yellowlees of the learned societies group on Scottish STEM education has written of the learned societies' concern about the damage that multilevel teaching is doing to STEM teaching.

The Government claims that what matters is outcomes, yet it has dismantled the long-term statistical runs of performance data that we had by abolishing the literacy and numeracy survey and pulling out of some of the international surveys. National standardised tests have proven to be neither national nor standardised, so we are left with PISA scores and exam results. Our PISA literacy scores are 22 points lower than they were 20 years ago, and our maths and science performance is the worst that it has been since PISA began. Meanwhile, as Liz Smith said, pass rates at higher have declined for the past four years in a row.

Worst of all, those unintended consequences of the implementation of curriculum for excellence are not uniformly felt. The evidence shows that schools in deprived areas are more likely to limit the number of subjects that can be studied. The educationalist James McEnaney recently demonstrated that schools in the most affluent and high-performing areas generally avoid multilevel classes, whereas elsewhere all schools have such classes. In Dundee, for example, nearly 60 per cent of senior phase classes are multilevel.

Any dispassionate consideration of the evidence must conclude that, despite all the great work that goes on in schools and the efforts of teachers and pupils, they are being held back by the structure of the curriculum and the use of multilevel teaching, and that an insidious gap is developing to the disadvantage of those who face the greatest barriers anyway. That is at odds with the Government's sincerely held policy of reducing that inequality.

The result is a slow but significant decline in some critical aspects of attainment. Until the cabinet secretary accepts that and the need to address it—his amendment would specifically remove from the motion such an acceptance—we will struggle to have confidence in the forthcoming review.

I support the motion, and I move amendment S5M-20415.2, to insert after "which highlighted

significant concerns regarding subject choice in many schools”:

“, the systematic use of multi-level teaching.”

15:16

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): In November, I asked the First Minister when the Government would bring forward a debate on school education. At that point, it had been almost two years to the day since the previous Government debate on what is happening in our schools. The Government’s avoiding debates on what it declares is its “defining mission” should be a cause for self-reflection, as should the fact that such issues have been aired and voted on only due to the work of Opposition parties.

More than two months after I asked the First Minister that question, no Government debate on school education has come forward. Today, we have a frankly bizarre scene, with the Deputy First Minister using an amendment to an Opposition motion to announce that there will be a debate at some point this spring. I will be generous and assume that there will be one this spring, regardless of whether the Government amendment is agreed to.

John Swinney: Vote for it.

Ross Greer: That is not going to happen, Deputy First Minister.

If that is how things work now, I would appreciate it if Mr Swinney could, this afternoon, confirm when the next debate after that will be, or maybe the one after that, too. After two years of avoidance, it seems only reasonable that the Government should catch up with the public demand for us to grapple with such issues. When will he bring forward debates on the crisis in additional support needs provision, on teacher recruitment, retention and workload or on the performance of the SQA and Education Scotland? I ask that question sincerely. On some of those issues, we can find common ground, and we have done so in the very recent past. Whether it will be defeated on the final vote should not be the Government’s primary concern.

Given the uncertainty over our next opportunity to discuss education issues, I would like to touch on a number of them today, starting with those referenced in Liz Smith’s motion. Last September, the Education and Skills Committee published our report on subject choice in schools. We agreed to undertake the inquiry because, despite investigations by journalists and academic analyses on narrowing subject choice and its apparent link to deprivation, the public bodies that are responsible were simply not taking the issue seriously.

When we discuss subject choice and availability, we tend to talk about two issues interchangeably: the number of subjects that students can take at any one time; and the number of subjects that are on offer to them from which they can select. Those issues are separate but related, and both were covered during the committee’s inquiry.

There is now clear evidence that the curriculum has narrowed in S4, at the start of the senior phase, with what appears to be a link between the relative affluence of an area and, for example, the number of national 5 courses that can be taken. Of equal concern is the evidence of restrictions in subject availability at higher level, which seem to map even more clearly against deprivation levels. S5 and S6 pupils in poorer areas simply have fewer higher subjects to select from. That situation has come about despite greater choice and opportunity in Scottish education being a key goal of curriculum for excellence when it was first developed. It looks as though implementation has achieved the opposite in some areas.

It was particularly clear from the committee’s inquiry into subject choice that we have barely scratched the surface. A range of lingering problems with the implementation of curriculum for excellence remain. There is a distinct lack of clarity in Scottish education about who is responsible for issues such as subject availability, and there is certainly continued confusion over the role of Education Scotland, which failed to provide adequate support for the implementation of CFE.

A defining theme, not just of the inquiry but of my three years on the committee, has been Education Scotland’s desire to shirk all responsibility and its refusal to acknowledge that problems even exist. Once we discount everything that it has tried to disown, I have been repeatedly left wondering what it is responsible for.

That lack of clear responsibility and ownership has led to inconsistencies in the structure of the curriculum, with some schools continuing the two-plus-two-plus-two model of the previous structure, rather than moving to the three-to-15 BGE and three-year senior phase of curriculum for excellence.

The disconnect between Education Scotland and the SQA was striking.

John Swinney: Does Mr Greer think that whether a school operates a two-plus-two-plus-two model or a three to 15 model should be prescribed?

Ross Greer: I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for asking that question, as it is directly related to the point that I am about to make on the disconnect. Before we move ahead to resolving them, we need to ask questions about the

inconsistencies in the current structure. As a result of that disconnect, one Government agency is responsible for deciding how many national 5s it is possible to take—whether there is a cap or a minimal threshold—and the other is responsible for setting the 160-hour course requirement. During the committee’s inquiry, that resulted in incoherent responses as to whether the 160-hour course requirement starts once pupils begin the senior phase or whether it begins before the senior phase, and thus moves into the BGE. We do not have clarity of distinction between those two areas.

John Swinney: I am not asking Mr Greer to give me an opinion on one or the other; I am interested in whether he thinks that that should be prescribed by the Government.

Ross Greer: When curriculum for excellence was developed, we had a broad national conversation and reached consensus. I am not minded to move towards prescription, but I want us to identify the problem and address seriously whether there is another solution. If there is another coherent solution, I would be minded to move towards it. However, until the Government concedes that there is a problem, how can we debate solutions?

This is where it comes back to political accountability and our ability to debate these issues in Parliament. The Scottish Government is ultimately responsible for the lack of leadership in the implementation of curriculum for excellence. Therefore, the Greens welcome the senior phase review and the indications that its remit will be wide enough to encompass the issues that we have raised—particularly the link between subject availability and deprivation. I would welcome unambiguous confirmation from the Government that that link will be examined.

However, we are clear that such issues cannot be examined in isolation. We must acknowledge that the implementation of curriculum for excellence took place—and continues to take place—in a period of austerity. That issue was raised repeatedly with Education Scotland in committee sessions, as it comes down whether it is possible for Education Scotland—during its inspections, for example—to acknowledge the financial reality and the impact that that has on subject choice or availability, or on teacher recruitment and retention. If we continue to address those issues in silos—that is, if we address them at all—there will not be a coherent response. I hope that, where Education Scotland has often failed, the senior phase review succeeds in being able to acknowledge those issues. I also hope that we will be back in the chamber soon to continue this important debate.

15:23

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The Education and Skills Committee’s important inquiry into subject choice in schools offered the opportunity to share across the country the innovative work that is happening in curriculum design. It also highlighted the unintended consequences of the implementation of curriculum for excellence and where teacher shortages, lack of resources and a confused chain of accountability are creating a postcode lottery of opportunity.

I agree with many of the points that Liz Smith and Iain Gray have raised in the chamber today. I also welcome the review into the senior phase.

I want to use my time to highlight concerning evidence that came from the committee’s inquiry, which I believe has not been properly addressed.

Page 60 of the committee report states:

“It is the unanimous view of the Committee that there is continuing confusion about the responsibilities of Education Scotland”

and that Education Scotland

“is failing to provide adequate support for the continuing implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.”

Education Scotland describes its role as

“to support improvement; to provide assurance to parents and other stakeholders about the quality of education; and to provide evidence-based advice to Ministers.”

Last April, the Education and Skills Committee learned that Education Scotland holds worryingly little information on a number of key areas. On teacher numbers, one Education Scotland representative said:

“It is not our responsibility to know about teacher numbers in each school.”

On the number of pupils taking short courses, the same representative said:

“Education Scotland does not keep that information.”

On the reason behind the fall in pupils taking languages, we heard from another representative that

“It would be interesting to find out whether they do pick languages up later ... However, I do not have the data.” — [Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 3 April 2019; c 11, 9, 32.]

On the number of multilevel classes, which Labour’s amendment highlights, Education Scotland has no view on the consequences, and it does not keep information on the prevalence of such classes. It has done no equality impact assessment of consortia arrangements, despite calling them a good thing.

Those responses raise serious questions about Education Scotland’s competence. They are

substantial policy areas, with potentially serious repercussions. For example, in response to a survey carried out as part of the subject choices inquiry, one pupil told the Education and Skills Committee about the consortia arrangements that they were working with:

“this year is my Advanced Higher year and I am having to sit two AH (Physics and Chemistry) at the neighbouring school while my third is AH maths which I am teaching to myself. I have had to take an extra higher just to have any subjects at all in my own school.”

Yet, without any impact assessment, Education Scotland is certain that consortia are a good thing. I struggle to see how that conclusion can be justified.

Staff working in Education Scotland are doing a lot of good work to drive improvement.

John Swinney: Is Beatrice Wishart going to reflect on the relevance and responsibility of the local authority in all the issues that she is raising? Will she reflect on the local authority’s statutory obligation to deliver education?

Beatrice Wishart: Local authorities are mandated to deliver the policies that come through from Education Scotland and the Government.

John Swinney: I am simply making the point that the statutory responsibility for the delivery of education at the local level lies with a local authority. That is what the law says.

Jenny Marra: John Swinney is washing his hands of it.

John Swinney: It is true; it is simply a fact. I am asking whether Beatrice Wishart will reflect on the role of local authorities in delivering education at the local level.

Beatrice Wishart: The advice comes from Education Scotland and that is what local authorities put in place.

Staff in Education Scotland are doing a lot of good work to drive improvement in our schools, but by replacing the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy with Scottish national standardised assessments, the Government has already created a data gap—perhaps unintentionally. In the context of that black hole of understanding, the body overseeing the implementation of the curriculum must have a better understanding of the policies that it recommends. There must be responsibility and accountability.

The quango is marking its own homework. It both sets the Scottish Government’s policy and carries out inspections. There is a fundamental conflict of interest, and Liberal Democrats do not trust that arrangement.

Only 28 per cent of Education Scotland’s employees said that they have confidence in its

leadership. This is not the first time that Education Scotland’s competence has been questioned. In a Lib Dem debate in 2017, the Parliament voted for “serious consideration” to be given to separating Education Scotland’s inspection and policy functions, but there is little evidence that the Scottish Government gave that serious consideration.

On a similar note, the Parliament voted to cease standardised testing, so I am disappointed to see the Government fall back on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report of 2015 as a justification. The Government’s view has since been called a misinterpretation of the report by experts. I hope that the Government will not attempt to reassert that misinterpretation when it holds its first education debate in front of the OECD in the spring.

Surely the evidence presented to the Education and Skills Committee by pupils, parents, teachers, academics and officials, alongside the Scotland’s worst-ever programme for international student assessment results in science and maths, means that it is time for the Government to reconsider its opposition to re-establishing separate policy and inspection bodies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): That concludes the opening speeches. We move to the open debate, with speeches of up to six minutes.

15:29

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate. As the convener of the Education and Skills Committee, I am very proud of the work that the committee undertook on subject choice and agree that we produced a consensual report that reflected concerns that had been raised in the media.

The committee produced a robust report that asked the Government to undertake independent research on the senior phase, from third year to sixth year, of the curriculum for excellence. The Government agreed to the committee’s ask. I am therefore surprised and more than disappointed at the motion, which seems to seek to pre-empt the work being done by the Government to better understand that phase. As I said, the report was a robust piece of work. Had we been able to conclusively show that young people’s outcomes were being significantly damaged by the senior phase, that would have been in the report. We did not reach that conclusion and we did not see evidence to support it.

Liz Smith: I am grateful to the convener of the Education and Skills Committee for taking an intervention. I entirely support the work that she

has done in this area, but I am sure that she will agree, not least because it was a unanimous decision, that the committee asked serious questions that were not answered by the education agencies. Would she agree that that is part of the issue?

Clare Adamson: I agree that the committee's work was robust and that those answers should be forthcoming. Nonetheless, the main goal was to establish a review of the senior phase, to understand the impact of the senior phase on young people and to see what was happening with the different curriculum models. We have to look at this in the context of outcomes and recognise the positive evidence that the committee took on curriculum for excellence. Our report showed that there was a narrowing of subject choice in S4 in some schools, but whether that was damaging or limited young people's ambitions is something that we have yet to establish and is what the review will show.

When we look at outcomes and the Office for National Statistics results on leaver destinations, we see an increase in the benefits to our young people. The leaver destinations statistical report published in June 2019 showed that 93.2 per cent of our young people were in positive destinations, which is up from 85.2 per cent in 2009-10.

Iain Gray: Will the member accept that as long as that report counts work in zero-hours contracts as a positive destination, it is not worth the paper that it is written on?

Clare Adamson: That issue has been raised before and I know that the Government is undertaking to look at zero-hours contracts in that context.

The statistical report also shows that the number of pupils going on to further and higher education destinations has increased. The number in higher education destinations has increased from 34.2 per cent in 2009-10 to 39 per cent. That is really important: it is an increase in the number of our young people who move on to an articulation route that could take them on to complete degrees and enter professions. The number of young people going into the workplace has also increased.

If we continually paint a picture of a failing education system, we are doing our young people, their schools and the hard work of our teachers an injustice.

Daniel Johnson *rose*—

Clare Adamson: I will not take another intervention, sorry.

The issue of teacher numbers has been raised. The Scottish Government has taken action on that, and we must recognise that the number of

teachers has increased, that the teacher to pupil ratio is higher in Scotland than it is in any other part of the United Kingdom, and that work is being done to ensure that we have teachers in the areas where we are struggling. For example, our STEM bursaries, which offer support with career changes to people coming in to teach STEM subjects, have been greatly oversubscribed. Those bursaries support university initiatives to develop alternative routes into teaching STEM subjects.

Nothing is being done in a vacuum and no one is standing still as we examine how curriculum for excellence is working and progressing in reality.

Last week, I was delighted to visit Braidhurst high school in my constituency with the Deputy First Minister. Braidhurst, in North Lanarkshire, has a challenging catchment area and is very proud to be one of the Scottish Football Association's performance schools, where pupils who are talented in football have an opportunity to undertake intensive training alongside their school studies.

It was absolutely clear from the visit that instilled in the participants in the SFA academy is a personal discipline and resolve that is carried into the ethos and life of Braidhurst as a whole. Indeed, the SFA team captain was also a house captain in the school. Curriculum for excellence has enabled the training to be timetabled in a column of choices to limit the impact of football training on the academic subjects that were chosen by the young people. That is an example of curriculum for excellence working in partnership with the school.

In all these debates, we have to recognise the developing the young workforce programme. Two of the captains took me on a tour of the school, and I was delighted that they wanted to talk to me about the foundation apprenticeship in digital media that they were taking at the local college. That is an example of how this is all working together. Skills and achievements in the final phase build capacity in young people and equip them for the world of work—through, for example, Duke of Edinburgh awards, volunteering and team building, as well as foundation apprenticeships. If we do not see those skills and achievements as being in the same category as the academic subjects, we do a disservice not only to our pupils and hard-working teachers but to the principles of the developing the young workforce programme and the Wood commission, which all parties in the chamber consensually signed up to.

15:36

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent

that the delivery of the curriculum for excellence is in need of reform.

Today's motion mentions

"key weaknesses in some key aspects of Scottish school education".

One of the most prominent issues is the fall in attainment at Scotland's gold standard, the higher, which we have witnessed over the past four years. In 2016, the proportion of A to C grades was 77.6 per cent. It has fallen each year since, and 2019's percentage stood at 74.8 per cent. Although I agree that single-year figures can vary, the sustained trend is the concern; if it continues unaddressed, within the next 10 years we will see a 10 per cent drop from 2016.

The rhetoric that is used by the SNP when the figures are announced is unhelpful. For example, it often brings up the number of pupils who have achieved at least one higher pass, but Reform Scotland's commission on school reform said recently that there is "no explanation" for the SNP's continued use of that measure. It said:

"One Higher pass does not seem to give access to opportunities in further or higher education that are not open to people without such a pass."

An on-going issue with Scotland's education system is the lack of system-wide data. In the past decade, the SNP has withdrawn Scotland from international surveys such as the third international mathematics and science survey and the progress in international reading literacy study. That was followed by the scrapping of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy.

The SNP's MSPs will say that standardised assessments provide us with more data than ever, but that is not quite accurate. Those assessments may provide teachers with diagnostic information that they can use to inform individual classroom decisions, but in terms of evaluating the education system, the commission on school reform said that they have

"done nothing to improve the quality of information available".

It would be worth considering one factor that was raised several times in the Education and Skills Committee inquiry into subject choice: the disconnect between broad general education and the senior phase of senior school, about which there needs to be more transparency. The two phases do not sit alone, yet they do not complement each other. That is why the motion is right to call for a review of BGE with a particular focus on

"how it articulates with the senior phase".

One of the concerns that arises from the disconnect is the reduction in the number of subjects that pupils can take in S4 and, through

that, the increase in the use of multilevel teaching, in which different levels of education are combined into a single class—a problem that has been exacerbated by teacher shortages. Committee witnesses discredited that form of teaching. Larry Flanagan, the EIS general secretary, said:

"I do not think anyone on this panel would defend multilevel teaching in any subject area."—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 8 May 2019; c 19.]

I know that SNP members are getting ready to say that multilevel teaching has been a long-standing part of Scottish education. That is not what I am talking about—I am discussing the recent explosion in its usage. That is one of the biggest complaints about the senior phase that the EIS receives from its teacher members. That was reinforced by the learned societies group on Scottish STEM education, which said in a written submission to the Education and Skills Committee that multilevel teaching is a

"prominent issue for the teaching of the sciences".

It also said that science teachers have expressed concern that such teaching

"does not allow them to fully support the needs and aspirations of pupils undertaking different levels of national qualifications."

Here are the facts. The EIS general secretary has said that teachers are concerned by the recent explosion in the use of multilevel teaching. Science teachers say that combined classes are "prominent" and that they do not support the needs and aspirations of pupils. Finally, although I accept that we cannot solely use PISA as a guide, Scotland has now fallen to a record low of 29th in the international science rankings. Surely there has to be a link between those facts, which any future review into BGE should examine.

As Liz Smith said in her opening speech, often when we come to the chamber and highlight the areas that need to be worked on, the Scottish Government tells us that we are talking down Scotland's schools. All the while, the same Scottish Government, in a quiet panic, is asking its officials what is going on.

Constructive criticism and debate must not be stifled. Now is the time for honesty and transparency from the Scottish Government about our education system's weaknesses. Weaknesses cannot begin to be addressed until there is an open acceptance that they exist. It is time that the Scottish Government took off the blinkers and did just that, so that we can all work together. I do not doubt that we are all seeking the very best for Scotland's children.

15:42

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes)

(SNP): As we have heard, last year the Education and Skills Committee undertook a robust inquiry into subject choice. For context, the committee noted its support for the ethos and principles that underpin the curriculum for excellence and the work that is being undertaken to develop the senior phase.

One of the key drivers of the curriculum for excellence was the change to a localised approach that would best suit the needs of learners in a given area. It would make use of horizontal management, as opposed to a top-down, vertical structure. “Empowerment” is how the cabinet secretary described it earlier. As the OECD report noted in 2015:

“CfE needs to be less managed from the centre and become more a dynamic, highly equitable curriculum being built constantly in schools, networks and communities with a strengthened ‘middle’ in a vision of collective responsibility and multi-layer governance.”

The committee considered articulation between the broad general education and senior phase; as Liz Smith noted, I explored that issue with witnesses. Although I was reassured by the cabinet secretary mentioning today that articulation is being considered by the senior phase review, it is worth noting that challenges have always existed in that area. As Tony McDaid of South Lanarkshire Council advised the committee:

“The learning that took place in the history class in first year did not necessarily connect with the standard grade experience or, indeed, the higher experience, where different skills were involved.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 15 May 2019; c 10.]

As noted by the Government’s amendment, direct action has been taken to reduce teacher workload. The removal of outcome and assessment standards is an example of a key change. In my former national 5 modern studies class, I had responsibility for tracking 390 individual assessments, and that was just for one class in one year. That workload has now been removed, following the cabinet secretary’s instruction, which was warmly welcomed by our hard-working teaching population.

On the numbers of subjects that are routinely available for pupils to choose from at national 4 and 5 level, the committee heard of some variance nationally. However, much like articulation, that variance is not new, as it existed under standard grade. Fundamentally, however, as Professor Jim Scott advised the committee:

“on schools offering six, seven or eight qualifications, assuming that the child manages to carry forward five subjects, they will be able to get five highers.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 24 April 2019; c 7.]

That is where our focus as parliamentarians should be: on equality of opportunity to succeed.

Additionally, of course, we must be cognisant that subject choice is driven by the learners themselves. Pupil uptake has always been a driver of subject availability. In 2015 I had two pupils who wanted to study advanced higher modern studies, and I wanted to teach them the course. However, the course could not run with only two pupils present and, I would suggest to the Conservatives, nor should it have done. Considering that I was a faculty head on a good salary, it would not have been the best use of taxpayers’ money to pay me for five periods a week to teach two pupils. Instead, those pupils attended the course at another local school, which was able to justify its delivery of the course due to the uptake.

Curriculum for excellence has undoubtedly evolved since its inception. New pathways now exist for pupils.

Iain Gray: I agree that facilitating pupils to study a subject by attending another school when there is a small uptake at their own school is not a new idea; that has happened for a long time and it can be extremely valuable. However, does Jenny Gilruth agree that a lot of the evidence that has been received has shown that that is not what would happen? Instead, the two pupils who were studying at advanced higher level would be stuck at the back of a class of students who were studying at higher level—possibly even a class of pupils studying for both highers and nationals—and left to get on with it. That is not acceptable.

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that that is reflective of all the evidence that we have heard. We have heard evidence that is contrary to that, and we have heard evidence from some people who are teaching now and for whom the advanced higher hub model works—for example, I know that it works at Glasgow Caledonian University, and I know that it works in Fife, including Dunfermline, so I do not accept that.

Pathways are open to pupils, but it is no longer only about school education: it is about partnerships. In 2017-18, Fife had an impressive 7 per cent of the national total of modern apprenticeship starts, with more than 27,000 taking up that qualification. Crucially, those pathways to achievement are about opening up equity in Scotland’s education system.

Fifth and sixth year were not for everyone when I was at school; they should have been, but the system, and certainly my state school, strongly encouraged certain individuals to leave at the end of S4. If those individuals chose to stay on, they were often prevented from studying for a higher qualification—the gold standard of Scottish education.

The head of education at Aberdeenshire Council advised the Education and Skills Committee:

“I was a headteacher in Maryhill for a number of years, and the school for which I was responsible had fewer than 10 per cent of the youngsters in S5 and S6 achieving five highers. When timetabling, we set a timetable that started with five different columns, so that the youngsters who were doing five highers could progress clearly through a column structure and then onwards from that. When doing that timetabling exercise, I always asked, ‘What about the remaining 90 per cent of children?’—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*; c 3.]

What about that 90 per cent? What about equity? What about acknowledging that not all children achieve five highers in one sitting? What about poverty?

Too often in education debates, we speak of school as an isolated institution that is immune from societal inequality, but Glenrothes high school, which is in my constituency, has benefited from an additional £116,400 in the 2019-20 period through pupil equity funding. That funding has allowed the school to invest in creating a nurture base, known as the glen, which provides support for pupils with social and emotional issues. The benefits of that investment have been increased attendance and greater resilience and confidence. Many of those pupils cannot cope in class for extended periods of time. Many of them come to school hungry—in a town where nearly one in three children grows up in poverty. The staff at that school are not in revolt about subject choice; rather, they are dealing with the grim reality of the impact on their cohort of 10 years of austerity.

I fear that the political debate around Scottish education has become overtly focused on academic badge collecting—as one headteacher described it to me—but what about those who take longer than one year to collect those badges? For far too long, many pupils were excluded from the Scottish education system. They were told that they were not clever enough to sit highers. They were told they were not clever enough to stay on at school. They were told that school was not for them.

Our school system and our education system should be about getting the best results for all pupils, and if they face disadvantage it should be the responsibility of the state to help them achieve. Give them a nurture room. Give them different pathways. Allow all of them to have the opportunity to succeed. That is what curriculum for excellence is about.

15:48

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank Liz Smith for bringing this debate to the chamber. If education did not come under the powers of this Parliament and it was still reserved

to Westminster, I am sure that we would see a tenfold increase in the number of debates on education, with SNP motions telling us how much better it would be if the power rested in the Scottish Government’s hands.

As it stands, the power is here and since the establishment of this Parliament in 1999 we have seen a decline in the standards of our education system that many developed nations simply would not tolerate. What other developed nation would withdraw itself from the international surveys on literacy, numeracy and science that allow countries to draw wider conclusions about their teaching practice and policies? I could not find one country, other than Scotland, that has withdrawn from those surveys.

Everyone knows that the wider the statistical survey, the more reliable the data and policy conclusions. What exactly leads our Government to think that Scotland is better off out of the surveys? Scottish Labour’s policy of re-entering them as a matter of priority is one of the first of many things that should be done to reverse decline.

The Labour amendment focuses on

“the systematic use of multi-level teaching”,

which has already come up in the debate. The last time that we touched on the matter in the chamber—in Opposition party time, I should say—John Swinney told me that multilevel teaching is a good thing. Teachers and pupils do not agree.

Iain Gray said that multilevel teaching is a problem in Dundee. Let me set out for members a bit of what is going on. Some 42 per cent of English classes are multilevel—English, the most core subject that a pupil can take—and 67 per cent of physics classes, 69 per cent of biology classes, 58 per cent of chemistry classes, 65 per cent of geography classes and 64 per cent of history classes are multilevel.

The information comes from the analysis that *The Times* published in October. It is worth quoting extensively from the piece in *The Times*. It said:

“Dundee, with high levels of poverty, is at the sharp end of the staff crisis with only one in four pupils getting five Highers. Dwindling teacher numbers have left high schools operating at ‘bare bones’, they have said ... In total teachers of 23 subjects, including biology, physics, modern languages and English, are forced to accommodate up to three lessons in one class, mostly for National 4, 5 and 6.

One teacher, who asked not to be named, said that pupils taking National 4, usually in S4 and at 14 to 15 years old, work alongside students preparing for their Highers, who may be up to 17. ‘Sometimes you’re effectively teaching two classes at the same time,’ he said. ‘It’s very challenging. They aren’t always covering the same topics. This can mean teaching one group of children while the others read or work quietly and independently, then

switching over,' he said. 'Smaller schools with multi-level classes are at a disadvantage.'

Dundee, whose council is run by the SNP, has lost more than 200 teachers in the last decade, including 159 secondary school teachers. A large secondary school has closed despite a slight increase in pupil numbers.

The area has some of the lowest attainment rates in Scotland, with only one pupil in ten from a deprived background achieving five Highers. At one Dundee high school two thirds failed to pass a single Higher last year."

I would like the cabinet secretary to reflect on whether he ever sat in a multilevel English class. I did not. Even at standard grade, classes were split clearly into credit, general and foundation levels, although pupils sat two papers. I contend that multilevel English classes are unprecedented. I do not think that today's pupils should have to experience them.

Let me hark back to my school days again, because I want to touch on city campuses and advanced higher hubs, which are really just a dressed-up way of saying, "sitting on a bus all day". In my day, advanced higher level was known as sixth year studies, and classes were always small. [*Interruption.*] John Swinney is looking at me with a disgruntled expression; let me explain this to him. People always wanted to study at that level to deepen their knowledge before university. I remember studying sixth year history in a class of five; in biology I was the only candidate. Such were the options that the school made available, 25 years ago.

If I were to take those advanced highers in Dundee today, I would not be allowed to study them in my school. Dundee City Council prohibits schools across the city from offering advanced higher courses to classes of fewer than 10 pupils. Classes from across the city are pooled in one location. If members visit a secondary school in Dundee today, they will find that, in the middle of the school day, pupils make their way across the city, often on two buses, to attend classes in a different secondary school, and then make their way back again. A senior pupil who must take the bus to school in the morning and home again at night, as I used to do, is spending a huge amount of their day sitting on buses and travelling, rather than learning and studying.

What incentive is there to deepen one's study if a pupil has to leave the warm school on a miserable and freezing January day and make their way half way across the city? [*Interruption.*] If Jenny Gilruth would like to intervene, I would be more than happy to take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are closing, Ms Marra.

Jenny Marra: The situation is frankly ridiculous and is simply a consequence of continual cuts from this Government, even though SNP members

can dress it up with any phrase that they like. That is the practical consequence, and of course there is a knock-on effect on attainment. I invite any SNP member to address the situation, which undermines the whole comprehensive offering.

15:54

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As a member of the Education and Skills Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak positively about our schools' hard-working teachers and pupils. I am pleased that the Conservative Party welcomes the review of the senior phase of the curriculum for excellence; it is nice to hear it welcoming something.

However, Liz Smith's motion quickly descends from the positive to the negative, in predictable fashion. We know that pupil attainment levels are generally rising, with more young people going on to positive destinations such as further education or apprenticeships, but still the Opposition focuses on the negative. Just for once, it would be good to hear them praise the achievements of our young people, instead of crying "education is in crisis", "failing schools" and more hysterical outpourings that must be really hard for teachers, parents and pupils to take.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Rona Mackay: Not at the moment; I want to make progress.

The senior phase headteacher survey was commissioned by the Scottish Government last summer. The 159 respondents were broadly representative of secondary schools in Scotland in terms of size of school, urban or rural location and proportion of pupils from the most deprived areas. The majority—85 per cent—of the headteachers responded that they are achieving an

"integrated, progressive and coherent experience for young people in the senior phase";

and 77 per cent were confident that their school provides a sufficient variety of learning pathways to meet the needs of all their young people across the senior phase.

Daniel Johnson: I have two questions. Does Rona Mackay accept that in order to make progress we must acknowledge where there are issues that need to be addressed and weaknesses that need to be strengthened? Secondly, she is quoting statistics, but does she not accept the Education and Skills Committee's survey responses, in which 75 per cent of school pupils said that they did not have the choices that they desired at school? Is that not the fundamental point in this debate?

Rona Mackay: I was just coming to the first point: of course we need to constantly monitor and make improvements. Will Daniel Johnson remind me what his second point was?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I cannot give you any extra time.

Daniel Johnson: In the Education and Skills Committee's survey, 75 per cent of pupil respondents said that the choices that they wished to have were not available to them.

Rona Mackay: That was the case, but there was also discussion of the variation between local authorities on pupil choices. It was often the headteacher or school that instigated what choices were available.

Schools offer a wide range of courses and qualifications including college provision, the Duke of Edinburgh award, foundation apprenticeships and Saltire awards and the majority of headteachers have established long-term partnerships with colleges and employers in order to develop their senior phase curriculum.

The key element of all that is the flexibility that is being offered to senior pupils, such as individualised timetables to study the topics that interest them. We know that if young people are interested in a subject, they will do well. The majority of schools offer pupils six or seven courses in S4, five in S5 and in S6 and have long-term partnerships with colleges and employers.

In my constituency, which is in East Dunbartonshire, the latest Skills Development Scotland report shows that between 2016 and 2019 the gap between the 20 per cent most and least deprived areas, in terms of young people who are participating in education, training or work, has decreased from 9.3 to 5.4 per cent. Last Friday, for the fourth year in a row, I attended a celebration of the Chinese new year at St Ninian's high school in my constituency. As ever, it was an amazing performance from the pupils, with feeder primaries taking part. We even heard a rendition of the song "Loch Lomond" in Mandarin and Scottish. As ever, I thought about how much learning has expanded since my school days.

I am aware that I am fortunate to have high-achieving schools in my constituency, but their results fluctuate too and that is not a crisis. Ross Greer talked about deprived schools in deprived areas, but I believe that that is down to some areas being hammered under the relentless Tory austerity agenda. It is entirely socio-economic. Universal credit, food banks and living daily hand to mouth are the things that reduce attainment and foster inequality.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Rona Mackay: No. It is because the Scottish Government has placed education at the top of its agenda that a review of the curriculum for excellence in the senior phase is taking place. We are not saying that everything is perfect, and we must constantly monitor and improve on areas where that is necessary and we can. That is what a responsible Government does. A responsible Government does not, as Boris Johnson's Government did, cut the Erasmus programme, which has helped millions of young people throughout the UK to broaden their education and life skills, and then reinstate it after an outcry.

Jenny Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Mackay is in her last minute.

Rona Mackay: Before the reinstatement of the programme, the UK Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, asked civil servants to consider plans to replace the Erasmus programme provided it was in Britain's "interest to do so." What planet is he on to even suggest that? What utter nonsense. It is in all our young people's interests to have the opportunity to take part in such a wonderful scheme and shame on the Tories for threatening it in the first place.

The Education and Skills Committee concluded that there was a lack of leadership from Scotland's public education bodies, such as Education Scotland and the SQA, around the curriculum structure, which may in some cases have resulted in some narrowing of subject choice. As other members have said, during our evidence taking we encountered a lack of awareness from such bodies. Those organisations need to step up to the mark and embrace changes by integrating with schools and communities, in order to fulfil their remit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Come to a close, please.

Rona Mackay: While talking to people during the general election campaign, we heard frequently that they were fed up with education and health being used as political footballs. I am, too. Every system needs constant monitoring and improvement, and constructive criticism and debate are always welcome.

Jenny Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Mackay is just closing.

Rona Mackay: To use emotive language and distort facts does no one any good. The Government continues to place education at the top of its agenda, but the Opposition parties in here really must do better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need to tighten up on timings, please.

16:01

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): At the start of the debate, my colleague Liz Smith set out the number of times that we have debated education in the chamber in Government time in the past five years. We have also seen a great many debates in Opposition time, which often highlight what the Opposition sees as some of the weaknesses in the education system.

I say to Rona Mackay, who raised the point, that there are many good things in Scottish education. A lot of great work is being done in our schools and many pupils perform well. However, there are also weaknesses, and it is not unreasonable for the Opposition in Parliament to highlight them to the Government. In any political system, we would reasonably expect those who are in power at any given time to highlight what is generally going well and to dismiss the concerns of the Opposition, and those who are in Opposition will generally highlight the weaknesses. If, as I sense is the case, members on the Government benches are frustrated that the Opposition is using such debates to highlight weaknesses in the education system, the answer is in the Government's hands. After all, it controls the large majority of parliamentary time, and there is nothing to prevent the Government from scheduling more education debates to highlight what it sees as the positives.

In approaching such debates, we should also dump the nonsense claim that we hear too often, that any criticism of what is happening in education is a criticism of hard-working staff or pupils. It is not, and I can say that with some authority, because I am married to a teacher. Those members who know Mrs Fraser will know how brave an individual in my position would have to be to seek to blame teachers for the current ills of the education system. The teaching profession is as frustrated as many others are about some of the things that are happening in our schools, particularly issues with the curriculum, subject choice and shortages of teachers.

The focus of this afternoon's debate is the curriculum for excellence; a curriculum that was introduced with the best of intentions. In a world in which future careers depend upon flexibility, adaptability and the ability to problem solve, the curriculum for excellence was intended to develop the skills of individual pupils. It therefore represented a shift away from traditional Scottish education, which focused more on knowledge than skills. It was no longer so important for young people to know things; it was more important for them to be able to work things out. That was a laudable objective, but there is increasing concern

that the shift from knowledge to skills has gone too far, and that it has left too many pupils without a basic grounding in the knowledge that they will need for their future lives and careers. That concern is recognised even among those who were fundamental in the development of curriculum for excellence.

John Swinney: What is Mr Fraser's view on whether the acquisition of knowledge and the acquisition of skills are a question of either/or, or a question of both?

Murdo Fraser: That is a reasonable question. The point that I was trying to make is that it is all about the balance between the two. It is not about either/or, it is about finding the right balance.

Keir Bloomer, one of the architects of curriculum for excellence, said in April last year,

"One of the purposes of CFE was to broaden pupils' education, but instead the way in which it is being implemented is narrowing it significantly."

Keir Bloomer has also criticised the complexity of the curriculum and the mountain of guidance that has accumulated, which I know the cabinet secretary has endeavoured to address.

Another educationist, Professor Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh, put it clearly last April when he wrote:

"Scottish educational policy—though not the Scottish tradition—is behind the times on this. Advanced thinking about the curriculum in many countries accepts that knowledge comes first. Breadth of knowledge stimulates the skill people will need to cope with an unpredictable world. Narrowing the curriculum is a tragedy because it closes the minds of young Scots. That's not the way to build an outward-looking nation."

It is education experts such as those to whom we need to listen.

They have also raised concerns about the restriction of subject choice, which has already been debated this afternoon. Most worrying of all, the restriction of subject choice impacts most on pupils from the most deprived backgrounds, while those from better-off backgrounds do not face the same limitations, as Ross Greer pointed out.

According to research that was conducted last year by Reform Scotland, the schools that cut the number of exams on offer are typically those that serve our more deprived communities, which further limits the life opportunities of children who might already be disadvantaged. If the Scottish Government is serious about closing the attainment gap, it needs to address that matter.

This Parliament's Education and Skills Committee, in its report in September, unanimously expressed concern about the disconnect between education and the SQA with regard to responsibility for the structure and

design of the new qualifications in Scotland, which has unintended consequences for the implementation of the curriculum for excellence in the senior phase. When a committee of this Parliament concludes that unanimously, on a cross-party basis, the Government needs to pay attention.

What needs to happen now? As Liz Smith set out at the start of the debate, a review of the senior phase is welcome, but does not go far enough. There needs to be a wider look at broad general education and its articulation with the senior phase, because if we cannot get the first three years of secondary education right, we are not laying the right foundations for S4 to S6.

The Scottish Government has to recognise that there are issues to be addressed. In the papers today, I was concerned to see comments from the SNP MP Carol Monaghan in which she described the PISA report as “crude and corrupt”. That level of denial on the part of a member of the party of government in Scotland does the Scottish Government no service whatever. I hope that the cabinet secretary will distance himself from those remarks.

It is not good enough to say that Scottish education is doing better. It is doing better in some areas, but it needs to be better than it is now, and the starting point is understanding what needs to be improved.

I have pleasure in supporting the motion in Liz Smith’s name.

16:07

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. As members will know, I have not sat on the Education and Skills Committee, but I have been interested to read the committee’s report, “Subject choices in schools”.

In its report, the committee states that the crux of its inquiry was on

“the number of subject choices available to pupils”

at S4. I think that we all accept that that is one angle on the curriculum for excellence. However, it is only one angle, and I wonder whether there is a risk in focusing too much on that, which is an input, rather than on outputs and outcomes. At times, it seems that the Conservatives want to return to the so-called golden days, with a more traditional curriculum structure and young people sitting seven or eight exams in S4. I accept that fewer qualifications are being achieved now, but it seems that the more important question is about outcomes for young people. Are young people coming out of the senior phase with more or fewer opportunities?

The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland produced a report in November entitled, “Excellence & Equity: Raising Attainment, Improving Life-chances in Scotland’s Schools”. Among other points, it states that

“attainment continues to be linked to deprivation”,

but that the

“attainment of school leavers ... in the 20% most deprived postcodes is improving at a faster rate than that of those living in the 20% least deprived postcodes.”

The report also looks at positive destinations for school leavers, which are HE, FE, employment, training or an activity agreement. From 2009-10 to 2017-18, there was an overall improvement from 87 to 94.4 per cent in achieving positive destinations. Whereas in 2009-10 there was a 14.7 per cent gap between the 20 per cent most and least deprived areas in terms of those entering positive destinations, that gap had reduced to only 6.8 per cent by 2017-18. So it seems to me that we have some very positive figures for outcomes from the senior phase.

Education Scotland is quoted in the committee’s report as saying:

“the right time to view the overall achievements of young people is at their point of exit from the senior phase, rather than in any individual year.”

The SQA is quoted as having made the point that, whereas

“Some children benefited a lot from the old system”,

not all did, and

“there is a now a wider range of options.”

Oliver Mundell: Does John Mason recognise that it is a problem when young people themselves complain that they do not have access to all the subjects that they would have had access to in the past and say that they are concerned about that?

John Mason: I think back to my experience at school. We had to choose between history and geography—we could not do both—there was no modern studies, biology, finance or accountancy, and we got a modern language only because my father went to the school and argued for it. I am not sure that choices were better in the past. There are now more and different options with colleges; I do not think that there used to be as many.

There is another point that I will try to come on to later, if I have time. What young people want is all very well, and we should absolutely respect that but, at the same time, we want more people in STEM subjects, and we want more women in traditional male employment. Therefore, there has to be guidance for young people as well as listening to what they want.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills made the point to the committee that there is

“an inevitability of subject choice in any education system”

and that neither he nor any council or school

“can guarantee unfettered choice for every pupil in the country.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 29 May 2019; c 14.]

Again, the Conservatives have to be a bit more realistic. The Conservative Party wants lower taxes. If that happened, there would be less money for schools, fewer teachers, larger class sizes, and a further reduction in subject choice.

Murdo Fraser: Is Mr Mason aware of the fact that, in England, spending per head on education is substantially lower than it is in Scotland? We benefit from the Barnett formula and the union dividend, of course. Does Mr Mason recognise that it cannot entirely be about resources, because educational outcomes in England are in many cases ahead of those in Scotland, despite lower spending?

John Mason: That depends on how the outcomes are measured. I go into schools fairly frequently, and I see young people who are a lot more confident and able in a whole range of skills that I did not have when I was at school. They can stand up and do public speaking, which I would not have done at their age. We have to be very careful about how we measure outcomes and not just focus on the things that we can measure. I accept that that is a problem with my accountancy profession at times.

On how much freedom individual schools should have, the report says:

“The Committee recognises that there is an inherent tension between providing schools with the freedom to set their own structure and expecting our young people to have a consistent experience and opportunities.”

I asked Glasgow City Council about that, and it said that it does not prescribe to schools what they should do in S4 to S6. Schools are asked to design a curriculum that is broad and balanced and enables them to achieve positive outcomes. Almost all young people now stay on in school beyond S4, and there is a variety of models, particularly in partnership with colleges. I accept that that may be easier in a city context.

I will have to miss out a few things that I was going to say, but I will give one example of the balance between academic and vocational. We sometimes say that some schools have too much emphasis on the vocational and that others have too much emphasis on the academic. One of my younger relations was pushed by his parents to go to university, but he felt that it was not for him, and he resisted. He is now working in the renewables

sector with wind turbines, and he seems to be doing extremely well.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I thank Mr Mason for keeping to time. There is very little time, so all members will have to keep to their limit. If they take an intervention, they should try to do so within their timeframe.

16:14

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I will begin by being the classroom sook and wishing you a very happy birthday. Maybe I will get some extra time for that.

This has been an important and reflective debate. Although it was prompted by the Education and Skills Committee’s report on subject choices, a much more fundamental question has been broached, particularly by Liz Smith at the beginning of the debate, about the context in which we want to discuss education in Scotland and the tenor of that discussion.

To certain members on the Government back benches I say gently that it is simply not credible to bemoan the Opposition’s approach but not then to reflect on the weaknesses in Scottish education that currently need to be addressed. Even if we had the best-functioning education system in the world we would still have such issues.

More importantly, it should come as no surprise that we want to discuss education, for two important reasons. First, it is of fundamental importance to Scotland—for our own children and for the future of our country. Also, the curriculum for excellence has been a bold and radical change. When we embark on such a change we always need to reflect on and review how it has gone, which requires frankness and the identification of any issues.

Liz Smith is right: we should celebrate the fact that more pupils are staying on until the end of their sixth year.

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I will in a moment.

We should celebrate the fact that more pupils are achieving more than one higher. However, we should also acknowledge that higher pass rates are declining and the number of highers being achieved in S4 is falling. Only by acknowledging those facts can we make progress in our schools and our education system.

I will take Mr Swinney’s intervention now.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Johnson for giving way and for the spirit in which he is expressing his views. Does he accept that the

Government's decision in 2015 to commission the OECD to review CFE and the broad general education was an indication of our honestly facing up to the issues that the OECD found and of our implementing the challenging actions that it recommended that we take to remedy them?

Daniel Johnson: The review was positive, but it took the report from the Education and Skills Committee for it to be commissioned. Since the commissioning of the review, we have also seen a Government attempt to stonewall the very statistics that I mentioned earlier, on higher pass rates and the number of highers being achieved. I acknowledge the positive tenor of the cabinet secretary's opening remarks. However, we need to go further. We need to see much more frankness in the Government's approach.

On the issue that is at the heart of the debate—the breadth of the curriculum—there are a number of other areas in which we need to hear such candour. Those have been laid bare in the report and I think were examined in some depth earlier in the debate, but I will now bring my own reflection on them. In essence, we have seen something of a collision between the aims and ambitions of the curriculum for excellence—on providing the maximum number of choices—on the one hand, and the practicalities of delivering such a range of choices. That starts with the design of the qualifications themselves and the concept of 160 notional hours of learning for each subject. Although it was intended to have two-year teaching blocks, the reality is that most schools deal with one year at a time, in the expectation that pupils will sit a tranche of exams, year by year, through the senior phase.

There has also been a lack of clarity on how the senior phase should be implemented. Although Mr Swinney has, rightly, questioned whether we should be prescriptive or leave such decisions up to local schools, the reality is that, for most schools, it is not up to them; it is mandatory that they deliver only six subjects for each S4 pupil. Sometimes such mandatory requirements are not even consistent within the same local authority area. I have personal experience of some schools in a local authority area being mandated to teach six subjects, whereas others have been allowed to continue with eight subjects for pupils in S4.

Ultimately, the issue of breadth is about the division between theory and practice. In some senses, Mr Swinney is correct. More potential pathways are open to young people in our schools today than there were in the past. That might be true at a system level, but the key question is whether all those pathways are open to every pupil in every school. The reality is clear from the conclusion of the Education and Skills Committee's report, which says:

“it is evident that there has been a reduction in the number of subjects available to pupils in S4”.

That reality is that the list of subjects available to pupils, which is put in front of them when they make their choices in S3, is shorter than it used to be.

Whether the Government's approach is correct even in theory might also be questioned. Although more choices might be available in S4, is the same number available in S5 or S6? Breadth is about more than simply how many options a young person might have in S4. To me, it is about how many they have when they leave school. The key question for the OECD should be whether that has improved or got worse.

I have very little time remaining, but I would like to mention the other key issue that the report found, which was in multilevel teaching. On that, I echo the reflections of my colleague Iain Gray.

It is simply untenable to try and teach three subject levels within a certain class, especially within a particular area.

There are key structural issues, both in relation to the senior phase itself, and to the broader system that the Government has put in place around our education system, as well as questions around institutions such as Education Scotland. We need the real change of a different, more reflective and more open approach from this Government if we are going to make progress in Scottish education.

16:20

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the review of the senior phase, which seems an appropriate response to the Education and Skills Committee's report. Clare Adamson said earlier that it was a unanimous and considered report. I urge Opposition parties to pay heed to the convener of the committee's comments that the committee inquiry did not conclude that young people were being damaged. That is what the review was set up to investigate and I believe that we need to give it time and space to do its job.

As well as the convener of the Education and Skills Committee, other respected voices welcome the senior phase review, including the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which I thank for its briefing for the debate. Its document states that the

“RSE supports the Scottish Government's commitment to commission an independent review of the senior phase of curriculum for excellence”

and that the

“senior phase review should seek to develop a forward-looking, shared vision for Scottish education and provide a practical focus for how it is to be achieved. In that way, it

should take account of the existing evidence base, including the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee inquiry into subject choice and the OECD report on "Improving Schools in Scotland". However, in doing so, it must be focused on the future."

The RSE seeks assurances on the review's independence, particularly as it already includes—as it should—organisations such as Education Scotland and the local authorities that are deeply embedded in the delivery of CFE.

The RSE also suggests that consideration should be given to the relationship between the senior phase review and the University of Stirling's two-year Nuffield-funded research into the impact of different secondary school phase pathways on educational outcomes. The society agrees with the Government that the review should not be focused on national qualifications but should be geared towards generating a shared agenda for the senior phase.

I support the RSE's advice to focus on the future. We should not be afraid to adapt and change but, at the same time, we must not throw away what we have been doing well. In Scottish education, as members across the chamber have acknowledged, we are already doing many things very well.

One of those areas is that of vocational provision, which is growing for young people in the senior phase. The number of school leavers who attain vocational qualifications of level 5 and above has increased from 7.3 per cent in 2013-14 to 14.8 per cent in 2017-18. More than 54,000 skills-based qualifications, awards and certificates have been achieved in 2019—more than double the figure attained in 2012.

That is a remarkable change and something that the people whom I speak to as an MSP—pupils, teachers and parents alike—tell me that they want for their children. They want alternative pathways that are not necessarily traditional academic ones. The growth of foundation apprenticeships and the collaboration between schools, colleges and employers in developing the young workforce is a great testament to the progress that we have made in delivering a modern outcomes-focused educational offering.

The reality is that our young people are achieving a breadth of awards, giving them the best chance of success in further learning, life and work. A survey in June last year asked secondary headteachers for their perspectives on implementing the senior phase curriculum. Of those who responded, 97 per cent accommodated requests for more or fewer course choices, by offering flexibility. The majority of schools offer pupils six or seven courses in S4 and S5, and five in S6, and have long-term partnerships with colleges and employers.

More than half of headteachers said that they start planning for the senior phase when young people are in S2, and 90 per cent of them believe that they are able to ensure continuity of learning. Almost nine out of 10 headteachers said that they had the autonomy to determine the senior phase in their school.

The action that the SNP Scottish Government is taking on vocational education and in offering teachers and headteachers more flexibility is resulting in progress. Another area in which progress is being made is teacher recruitment. In 2019, teacher numbers increased for the third year in a row, rising to 52,247. Scotland has more teachers per pupil than elsewhere in Britain. According to the latest school census figures, in Scotland there are 7,485 teachers for every 100,000 pupils, whereas in England there are 5,545 teachers for every 100,000 pupils, and in Wales there are 5,038 teachers for every 100,000 pupils. Therefore, Scotland is delivering way ahead of the rest of the UK nations.

Many good things are happening in Scottish education. It is true that concerns have been raised, including about the curriculum for excellence and how it is being implemented in the senior phase, but that is not for this debate—that is for the independent review. We should wait and see what those experts conclude, and I very much look forward to hearing about that.

16:26

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): It has been heartening to listen to what has been, across the chamber, an interesting discussion and, in the majority of cases—this has not been true of all speeches—a genuine debate about education in Scotland. We often forget that at the heart of that debate are three distinct and very important groups of people, whose voices need to be heard: teachers, pupils and parents.

I will start with teachers. About 18 months ago, the First Minister told teachers that her door was always open to them and encouraged teachers across Scotland to write to her about their concerns and experiences in Scottish education. Freedom of information requests revealed that the First Minister received more than 100 submissions from teachers, in which they described a wide range of issues from the incredibly long hours that they work to the abuse that they face in our classrooms.

I am not a parent, but I have had the benefit of dealing with numerous local cases of stressed teachers who are off work and whistleblowers who have told me what is really going on in their place of work. They have told me that they are too afraid

to complain or that they feel that no one listens to them when they do.

I am confident that members across the chamber will join me in saying that nobody deserves to face physical or verbal abuse in their place of work, but it is true that the number of assaults on teachers rose by 10 per cent last year. That statistic should worry us all. I mention that because that is where the first group—teachers—interacts with the other two.

The theory that we talk about in education debates in this chamber quickly meets the reality that is faced in schools. We could not have a debate such as today's while failing to acknowledge that many classrooms are simply too full, that many teachers are teaching multiple levels in the same class, that many schools are oversubscribed and have teacher shortages, and that many young people simply cannot choose the subjects that they want to study. I am not talking anything down; I am providing a simple reality check.

That takes me to the second group—pupils. Regardless of who said what over recess about the SQA results, the arguments on which have been rehearsed, it is clear that, behind closed doors or elsewhere, ministers concede that things are not entirely well, because they have instructed civil servants to investigate. It is a fact that pass rates at higher and advanced higher have fallen to their lowest levels since the curriculum for excellence was introduced five years ago. It is also a fact that those figures were hailed as a strong set of results. It is a fact that reduced subject choice reduces the destinations and options that are open to young people. Whatever one's ideological views on the curriculum for excellence and its complexities or otherwise, alarm bells must surely be ringing.

Any investigation that is announced today is welcome, but I say from the outset that, when they are available, the full results and findings of the report should be published in their entirety. Liz Smith was right to say that we want to know why the rates are falling. What is the root cause? How do we get underneath what is happening? More important, what will the Government do about it?

My problem is that I am nervous that not only will ministers fail to fully acknowledge the findings but, if failures are identified, they will fail to accept responsibility for them. There is already a precedent in Parliament for questioning those who question the Government, as we have heard from some of the ridiculous statements that SNP members have made today.

However, behind the bluff and bluster, I believe that the Deputy First Minister cares deeply about the outcomes for Scottish young people. I believe

that he understands that we are experiencing problems with CFE, and I think that he worries that, unless action is taken, there is the real risk that the defining legacy of this Administration will be a decline in Scottish education. If he is not worried about such a legacy, he should be.

The third group that I want to talk about is parents. Much has been said about multilevel teaching, which jumps out at me as an issue that worries parents. It is difficult enough for teachers to teach students in one year who have varying levels of ability—never mind teaching two, three or even four levels. How can that be acceptable to parents? We heard the example of Dundee, where multilevel classes accounted for 60 per cent of secondary teaching. In North Lanarkshire, all schools use some form of multilevel teaching. Schools are making extensive use of the practice in Argyll and Bute, East Renfrewshire, Aberdeen and Inverclyde, in my region, but it is a postcode lottery. How is that acceptable? The fact that numerous independent and respected bodies have critiqued the policy says a lot. Why is that? It simply cannot be argued that multilevel teaching is improving outcomes. That cannot be acceptable to parents, teachers or pupils.

The whole point of the senior phase of curriculum for excellence is surely to equip our young people with the skills, knowledge and experiences that they need in order to offer them the widest possible range of opportunities—be it academic, further or higher, or non-academic—after they leave school. It is as simple as that.

I will end as I started, by asking the Government to listen to those to whom this matters—pupils, teachers and parents. If the Deputy First Minister will not listen to us, he should, please, listen to them.

16:32

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): In 2007, when I was first elected as a regional MSP for Glasgow, there was a significant focus by the Government and the Parliament on curriculum for excellence and the emerging new national qualifications framework. Indeed, in the months and years that followed, a number of Labour MSPs, some of whom had served in the previous Scottish Executive, urged the SNP in Government to get on with those reforms. They were right, because that was the right thing to do. Those MSPs said privately—and, sometimes, publicly—that there had already been far too much delay. I namecheck Cathy Jamieson, as Iain Gray did earlier.

The underlying principles of curriculum for excellence are strong, and there are many good examples of exemplary practice. Very briefly, I will

namecheck schools in my constituency that offer a variety of choices. Of course, there are always constraints, but John Paul academy, Springburn academy, St Roch's secondary school and Cleveden secondary school all do exceptional jobs.

It is, of course, right to review the implementation of curriculum for excellence, particularly in the senior phase of S4 to S6. I thank the Education and Skills Committee for its work on the matter, and I commend the Scottish Government for announcing the review of the senior phase. Even if there had not been a compelling committee report, that would still have been the right thing to do; it is time to see how things are getting on out there.

I have listened carefully to today's debate. There seems to be a tension in relation to prescribing subject provision in the senior phase at local authority or Government level, but flexibility can be shown by schools and headteachers. We have to be very honest about the tension between local flexibility and there being a postcode lottery. They can be the same thing, depending on how we look at them.

On that note, the headteacher survey found that 97 per cent of headteachers had accommodated requests for more or fewer subjects or course choices. I also note from that survey that more than half of headteachers start planning for the senior school stage as early as S2. Of course they should do that. I will make some observations about those statistics.

First, I would be keen to compare a headteacher survey on the senior phase subject choices—as valuable as it is—with a survey of department heads. Timetabling and provision in S1 to S3 can drive student footfall for choices that are made for the senior phase. We have to understand that connectivity better. Department heads will have meaningful insight into that.

Many years ago, when I taught modern studies, it was difficult to get kids to take modern studies in S3 because teachers would have seen them only for six classes over two years—they would have had only 12 classes of modern studies, but two entire years of geography. The decisions that we make on timetabling in S1 to S3 often dictate and drive subject provision in the senior school. We have to understand that connectivity better.

It is not actually that good that “more than half” of headteachers are planning for the senior school stage from S2: far more of them should be planning for senior phase provision from S2 onwards. They should understand that connectivity better. We have to do better.

However, potential senior phase changes come with a health warning. In terms of having the right

numbers of teachers, the right skill sets and the right subject choices, there is a long lead-in time for changing senior phase subject provision. Teachers want change, but they want it to be considered and planned. They want incremental change, rather than a big-bang approach. Let us look carefully at what the senior phase review shows.

There are outstanding educational outcomes in Scottish schools. As members would expect, SNP back benchers have been given a list of statistics on good educational outcomes. I will not rehearse them: they exist and we have all acknowledged that today.

However, no matter who is in power, we can always do better. That is self-evident. I want to make some requests of the senior phase review that the Government is carrying out. That is where the debate should be. Some of the asks relate to multilevel teaching. I have taught standard grade. It was bog standard, quite frankly, because of low school rolls in some of the secondary schools that I taught in over the years. I taught foundation, general and credit levels all in one class, and they all had an important exit exam.

Iain Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: I will, if I can get a little time back.

The Presiding Officer: You will not get much time back.

Iain Gray: Will Bob Doris acknowledge that standard grades were designed to be taught in the way that he described?

Bob Doris: I was going to make that point. The key thing is that the syllabus and the content mirrored each other. Foundation, general and credit levels were using the same content, at that time. The situation was similar with access 3, intermediate 1 and intermediate 2. Multilevel teaching is not, in itself, a bad thing, but we have to look at the national qualifications framework and the syllabus of various subjects and make sure that they articulate and mirror that multilevel teaching in order to support it. I am not against multilevel teaching, but we have to get the content right in order to support teachers in challenging circumstances.

I also ask the Government to look again at national 5 provision. Some kids will want to do national 5 in S4 rather than a two-year higher. It might be borderline whether they will secure the higher; if there is not a mirroring or articulation of the syllabus and they do not get the higher after two years, they might not get their national 5. We have to look at that, as well.

Finally, there have always been limitations on the range of highers that young people can do, but

we have to understand better that, if young people are seeking to go into higher education, the types of highers that they do at the first sitting might dictate whether they get into their university courses of choice. This is not an appeal for every kid to be able to do everything all the time. They cannot, and any party that pretends that they can is wrong. However, let us maximise those opportunities. The Government review is the way to do that. A lot of good work is being done in schools, and there is a lot of consensus in Parliament.

16:39

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): On Education, the First Minister once said, that she would

“put her neck on the line”

and asked “to be judged on” it. Five years on, the First Minister and her party are doing all that they can to backtrack on that commitment. Education appears to be low on the SNP priorities list, which means that children, parents and teachers continue to be let down.

Member after member has today expressed concerns and frustrations about the problems in our education system. Liz Smith opened the debate by covering in detail the many concerns, and highlighted the lack of responses from the Government to many questions that have been asked, both in committee and in the chamber.

Ian Gray spoke at length about the narrowing of the curriculum and the problems that that causes. Ross Greer rightly spoke about lack of leadership. Opposition member after Opposition member has raised our very justifiable concerns. That is in stark contrast to the Government party’s members, who have minimised or dismissed the problems.

I thank the Conservatives for once again using their debate time to allow us to debate education, which the Government has not done for a number of years.

A report card on the SNP’s handling of our education system would show Fs on every measure: attainment, class sizes, investment, teacher numbers and subject choices. It is very clear that the crisis in Scottish schools and the problems in colleges and universities are of the Scottish Government’s own making. That is why it is disgraceful that the only way to bring the Government to the chamber to answer on its record is for Opposition parties to drag it here using their allocated debating time.

The Scottish Government’s spin machine will try to hoodwink members and the public that education is in great shape in its hands. Pupils, parents and teachers know otherwise. The

Education and Skills Committee inquiry into subject choices in school, which is highlighted in the motion, confirms that education in SNP hands is letting our children and young people down.

The committee rightly expressed concern about the extensive increase in the use of multilevel teaching. We agree, and believe that it is systemic, which is why we lodged our amendment. Multilevel teaching leaves pupils at a disadvantage, and should not be driven by the lack of resources in our schools. A review of education should include use of multilevel teaching, and address why it is happening and how widespread it is.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): In evidence to the committee, Gerry Lyons from the Association of Directors of Education advised us that they

“try to create courses that articulate well, so that, when necessary, bi-level teaching can take place without any disadvantage to the young people.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 15 May 2019; c 28.]

Does Mary Fee not trust Scotland’s teachers to differentiate their lessons as they always have done?

Mary Fee: The issue is not the teachers. We can talk about the theory of how the senior phase should work, but practice in schools is completely different, and the Government must acknowledge that.

As the committee noted, there is a lack of data on use of multilevel teaching. In order to assess why fully, it is right to ask questions of Education Scotland on its handling and knowledge of multilevel teaching.

S4 onwards—the senior phase—is a crucial part of a child’s education. Those formative years shape a young adult’s future. It is a positive thing that the number of pupils who leave after their fourth year is decreasing. However, my concern is that schools are unable to offer a wider range of subjects in S5 and S6, which leads us to question use of multilevel teaching and implementation of curriculum for excellence.

Care-experienced young people are more likely to leave school at the end of S4, so more can and must be done to ensure that they have the opportunity to thrive in S5 and S6 and then move into further or higher education, if they choose that path. However, I concede that that ambition cannot be down to schools alone. It requires a multi-agency approach, so I will support the Scottish Government and local authorities in their efforts to support care-experienced young people to achieve better opportunities.

Attainment levels remain a growing concern for Scottish Labour. The figures that were released at

the end of 2019 revealed that the attainment gap in literacy and numeracy has increased throughout the stages of primary school, despite there having been a slight narrowing of the overall attainment gap.

In secondary schools, the attainment rates for highers has fallen for four years in a row. That is an unwanted trend, regardless of the spin through which John Swinney attempts to cover up the facts.

Of course, statistics tell us that more pupils are leaving school to go on to positive destinations. However, when those positive destinations include zero-hours contract employment, the statistics should be treated with caution.

On subject choices, pupils are missing out on opportunities to expand their education. As the Education and Skills Committee found, the majority of parents—73 percent—stated that their child was unable to take all the subjects that they wanted to take. Children in private schools are being offered more subjects, which is resulting in systemic inequality for young people.

Finally, I repeat my appreciation of the Tories having brought the motion to the chamber for debate. I hope that the Scottish Government will listen carefully, and not just to Opposition parties, but to pupils, parents and teachers, and that it will conduct a full review of Scottish education that will open up, for pupils in the future, opportunities that pupils now are missing out on.

16:45

John Swinney: I do not, in any way, want to do more than I have already done to damage the political career of Daniel Johnson, but I think that his speech was reflective of the good tenor of the debate. I hope that members feel that I, for my part, have engaged in that spirit.

I very much welcome Jamie Greene's contribution, because I take deadly seriously issues of performance in the Scottish education system.

Neil Findlay rose—

John Swinney: I will give way to the member in a moment, because I did not do so earlier.

Daniel Johnson made the point that, when we undertake bold and radical change in the education system, we have to be prepared for independent validation. We have exposed ourselves to that once already with the review of the broad general education, which reported in 2015, and we are doing it again with the senior phase review. I hope that that satisfies the Parliament about the Government's willingness to address the issues. I have concentrated on

implementing many of the recommendations of the 2015 review by reducing bureaucracy, slimming down guidance and clarifying the standards that are expected at different stages in the education system so that teachers are clear about what is expected of them. That is part of my recognition of the challenges in Scottish education. I am perfectly open to stating those challenges clearly and acknowledging the need to take action to address them.

Neil Findlay: Will Mr Swinney make it absolutely clear that he will play no part in dismissing MSPs bringing forward very serious concerns about Scottish education as talking Scotland down? Education is the most serious issue affecting young people in our country, and we cannot have that. It is the role of the Opposition to hold the Government to account.

What is the Government doing about class sizes for pupils who are starting their education? We are seeing 26 per cent of young people in P1 to P3 in classes of over 26 students. Only yesterday, I met a teacher with a class of more than 31 pupils.

John Swinney: We have reduced the number of P1 classes that are in excess of 26 pupils so that there are now only 10 such classes in the whole of Scottish education. I do not have the figure that we reduced it from, but we have reduced that number significantly.

On Mr Findlay's substantive point, I am all for an open debate about performance—actually, I am going to come on to the debate about performance. Yes, there are challenges in Scottish education—I am not ducking that at all—but there is also good performance.

That is where I part company with Jenny Marra. She said that we have presided over a 10-year decline in performance in Scottish education. I will go through what has happened. The percentage of students achieving a level 5 qualification such as a national 5 has increased from 71 per cent when we came to office to almost 86 per cent now. The number of students gaining a level 6 qualification such as a higher has increased from less than half when we came to office to almost two thirds.

Daniel Johnson rose—

John Swinney: Mr Johnson will forgive me.

For the first time ever, more than 30 per cent of pupils are achieving at least five higher passes, which is up from just 20 per cent in 2009, and the number of young people who are achieving skills-based qualifications has increased from 47,747 to over 64,000 in 2019. That is the progress that has been delivered. Yes, let us face up to the challenges, but let us also have an honest debate about performance.

John Mason said that he sees coming out of our schools young people who are much more confident and more engaged in our society. Clare Adamson spoke about our visit last week to Braidhurst high school, where we saw the contribution of young people who were able to fulfil their potential because of the flexibility that is offered through curriculum for excellence. It has enabled young people to pursue their dreams of becoming professional footballers while securing the education that is necessary to enable them to prosper in life if their football career does not progress for as long as they would like.

Curriculum for excellence has many attributes that meet the needs of learners. Listening to the voices and views of learners—as I did this morning at Musselburgh grammar school, where I listened carefully to the pupils' points of view—is what should shape our thinking as we address those needs. The Conservative amendment speaks about

“a review of broad general education”.

We will see what Parliament votes for tonight, but I have placed on record some of the dangers in that, which are why a review of the broad general education, at this stage in implementing the previous review of it, is not necessarily a priority.

In highlighting some points of dispute in the debate, I will cover four issues. The first is the question of whether we should make a judgment about what young people achieve at the point of exit or whether we should focus on the content of what they do in S4. That is a point of genuine dispute.

The second issue is the debate between prescription and flexibility. Bob Doris was absolutely correct in saying that one person's flexibility is another person's postcode lottery. We should be alive to that. I am on the side of flexibility. I got the sense that Mr Greer is not necessarily on the side of more prescription in principle but recognises that there is a debate to be had.

Daniel Johnson: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

John Swinney: I am afraid that Mr Johnson will have to forgive me.

The third issue is the debate about knowledge versus skills, although I point out that we said in the refreshed curriculum narrative, which was published last year,

“Scotland's curriculum ... helps our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century.”

I stand by that statement. They need the knowledge, skills and attributes. The question is

whether those are all in the right balance, which is the issue that I was trying to address.

Lastly, there is the question of whether there is sufficient breadth in the curriculum. I believe that a broad general education for young people up to the end of S3 is a longer, broader general education than I got when I was at school. We have to make sure—which is what the benchmarks are designed to do—that young people are getting that broad general education, which then articulates into the senior phase.

Those are some of the issues. I do not think that we need a review of the broad general education to consider them further, but I am very happy to discuss them with members of Parliament and the Education and Sport Committee as we take forward the review of the senior phase and make sure that Scotland's curriculum delivers what we have said it should deliver for every young person in Scotland. We should help our young people to gain the knowledge, skills and attributes that are needed for life in the 21st century. That is our promise and that is what we must deliver.

16:53

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): It may be a new year and we may be another year older, but we have certainly not seen anything new from the Deputy First Minister. It has been another example of wheeling out the rhetoric and not explaining the lack of delivery. It is the same old trio of delay, dither and denial. We have only to look at the Government's amendment to see that.

Listening to today's debate, it is almost impossible to remember—although I do remember—when teachers were excited that John Swinney was taking over the education portfolio; that this SNP Government's most competent and able performer had been put in charge of their national priority; that the days of pretending that everything was well with educational reforms were over; that there would be bold and decisive action; and that no barriers would be put in the way of delivering the world-leading education of which Scotland has such a proud history. However, as we enter 2020, the reality is that those same teachers now see the cabinet secretary as being part of the problem instead of the solution.

Over the past year, in particular, he has come to personify the SNP Government's central approach to education policy. That is to come into the chamber and proclaim confidently that everything is fine, that we are on track and that we have all the information that we need, and then just to hope that no one notices that that is not correct. Indeed, it has become hard to know whether John Swinney has even started to believe his own spin.

Let us take, for example, the claim that the recent drop in the number of higher passes was just annual variation. For absolute clarity, the pass rate in 2015 was 79.2 per cent. In 2016 it was 77.2 per cent; in 2017 it was 77 per cent; in 2018 it was 76.8 per cent; and in 2019 it was just 74.8 per cent. Of course, those figures do show a variation year on year: what screams out to anyone who wants to see the facts is that there is a clear downward trend.

Under the old system, in some years the pass rate was up and in some years it was down. What it did not do was drop consistently year after year. It is a pretty sorry state of affairs when the man who used to run this country's finances can come here and pretend that that is not a problem—that he can come here and say that there is not a trend. There clearly is, and it is pretty depressing that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills cannot identify a depressing line on a graph for what it is.

Like me, Mr Swinney was lucky enough to go to school when there was not a shortage of maths teachers in Scotland. Surely, rather than hear him peddle linguistic gymnastics, the least that our hard-working teachers, as well as pupils and their parents, deserve is the truth.

Instead, as on every issue that has been raised in the chamber today or recently by Opposition members—from subject choice to teacher numbers, from multilevel teaching to additional support needs, and from music tuition to support for small rural schools—all we get is dither, delay and denial, as well as the blame for asking serious questions.

Then, when the cabinet secretary is dragged, kicking and screaming, into this chamber, or when he is embarrassed by another unanimous damning Education and Skills Committee report, he tries a different approach of offering a series of excuses, lengthy explanations and the promise of debates some time in the future. He hopes that, by kicking the can a little further down the road, he will not have to take responsibility for the fact that his Government has been in charge throughout this whole period.

Even his own colleagues are starting to get restless. *[Interruption.]* A number of them are clearly getting restless because they do not like to hear this. However, if they had been here to hear Bob Doris's speech, they would have heard that there are sensible voices in their party who are willing to question—at least around the edges, as Rona Mackay also did at the end of her speech—whether everything is as rosy and perfect as we would like. I know that other members see these issues in their communities but feel, out of a sense of party loyalty, that they cannot raise them in

public. Although that is disappointing, it is at least understandable.

Bob Doris: As I am the sensible voice from the SNP benches that the member was drawing attention to, let me say that the crux of what I said is that we should back the senior phase review to test what is working well so that we can make improvements. I take it that, on that basis, the member supports the Government's amendment and will back the Government's position this evening.

Oliver Mundell: I will not do that, because of some of the points that Bob Doris raised. We need to look at the broad general education as well, because, as he said, some decisions that are related to the senior phase start much earlier in school and it takes a long pathway before those changes can be made later.

Bob Doris: Mr Mundell is absolutely right—I said that the senior phase review should look at connectivity with the lower school. As long as that connectivity is examined, can he support the Government's amendment?

Oliver Mundell: I have had too many experiences of hearing the cabinet secretary promise something in this chamber and another thing happening in reality.

I welcome his commitment to publish the report on higher pass rates, but members should note with caution that he promised that partial information would be published rather than the full report. If he wants to publish the full report, I would be very happy to take an intervention to allow him to confirm that—but he is not going to bother, so there we go.

While some members blame the cabinet secretary, others try to blame local government. Then there are our favourites, whom we heard about from Murdo Fraser—those SNP politicians who would rather rubbish internationally accepted PISA scores. That is because, in SNP Scotland, absolutely nothing could be wrong. What is most worrying for me is that, even if we accept the crazy view that it is a crude measure, if PISA shows a problem, surely that is worth investigating. More embarrassing still is that anyone representing a party of government in Scotland could think that PISA is a comparison between us and China or South Korea when it actually looks at our performance now in comparison with our past performance.

Although it concerns me that we are failing to keep pace with other global leaders in education, it worries me more that we are failing to keep pace with ourselves and make progress, and that we are seeing absolutely no evidence of any significant benefit from recent reforms.

Today's debate, which was once again held in Opposition party time—a point that has been raised again and again—offered the cabinet secretary yet another opportunity to hit the reset button not only in terms of policy but in terms of building the political consensus that is required to address the challenges that have been outlined today.

The motion asks simply for an acknowledgement that all is not well and that reviewing the senior phase in isolation is unlikely to resolve all the issues that have been identified and raised today. Given what we have heard, not just in today's debate but from educational experts and the Education and Skills Committee, that should not be too much to ask for.

It is always possible to paper over the cracks and try to save face, but the problem for the SNP is that this problem is not going away. The Government cannot say that something is its top priority and then happily ignore the facts and allow young people to pay the price for its lack of leadership.

Perhaps we have got it all wrong and the cabinet secretary really is proud of having thousands fewer teachers in Scottish schools. Perhaps he is proud that young people cannot take the subjects that they want to take. Perhaps he is content that core, knowledge-based learning is diminished. Perhaps, when parents in his constituency come to him with concerns about learning support, he tells them that it is okay because we live in a progressive country and that equity and excellence are—at least notionally—at the heart of our education system.

I suppose that all of that is possible, because we have a cabinet secretary who is unable to accept the will of the Parliament—I think that we will see that at decision time—who is unable to concede any ground and who does not want to hear what members are saying. I am worried that that is the same treatment that parents, teachers and pupils get as he travels around the country. I ask him to think again and to reflect on what he has heard today.

Business Motions

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-20446, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a revised business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 21 January 2020

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: The Strategy for Our Veterans – Taking the Strategy Forward in Scotland

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish National Investment Bank Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 22 January 2020

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Government Business and Constitutional Relations; Culture, Tourism and External Affairs

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 23 January 2020

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Consumer Scotland Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 28 January 2020

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Wednesday 29 January 2020	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Health and Sport; Communities and Local Government
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 30 January 2020	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Security and Older People
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 20 January 2020, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-20447, also in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out the stage 2 timetable for a bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 31 January 2020.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-20448, in the name of Graeme Dey, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Social Security Assistance (Investigation of Offences) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: Alison Johnstone wishes to speak against the motion.

17:04

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Benefit fraud is a serious issue and the Scottish Government is right to put in place a system to combat it. However, in the vote on the draft regulations today the Greens will abstain, because we have several concerns. Organisations including Child Poverty Action Group and NHS National Services Scotland have expressed concern about an approach whereby information may be required from any person or organisation, with some exceptions. That is broader than the United Kingdom approach, which specifies the type of person and organisation that may be required to give information.

The Scottish Government maintains that, while the devolved benefits system is developing, investigatory powers need to be flexible. However, it would be better to provide for only the powers that the Scottish Government knows that it needs and to ask the Parliament for broader powers later, should new benefits be established.

The regulations should be more specific about the training that authorised officers are required to undertake, given the sensitivity and complexity that are involved in investigating fraud. Inclusion Scotland and others raised that issue during the consultation.

We have also expressed concern that not everyone who is investigated will be informed that they have been investigated. That will hinder such people's right to complain.

Given those concerns, Greens are not able to support the draft regulations and will abstain.

The Presiding Officer: I invite Shirley-Anne Somerville to respond for the Government.

17:05

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The regulations, as drafted, are proportionate and

necessary. They will allow information gathering to differentiate, in the most efficient way possible, between people who make genuine errors and those who seek assistance to which they are not entitled. We worked closely with our stakeholders to understand the issues that were raised in the consultation and we amended the proposed regulations accordingly.

We comply with all relevant data protection legislation and think that we have addressed the points that the Information Commissioner's Office raised in its consultation response.

On balance, we think that telling a client about an investigation in every case would have unintended consequences, particularly given that there are cases in which no evidence of fraud is found. Doing so would lead to worry and distress and would outweigh any benefit. Indeed, it might increase the number of vexatious allegations.

The privacy notice informs clients in advance about who data will be shared with and says that data may be collected for the purposes of prevention, investigation, detection and prosecution of criminal offences. If an individual makes a subject access request after an investigation is closed, information that relates to the investigation will be released if it does not prejudice on-going proceedings.

When we were developing the regulations, we considered including a list of organisations from whom information could be required. We rejected the approach for a number of reasons. First, we are in the process of developing the social security system, and the detailed eligibility criteria for benefits are unknown at this time. Social Security Scotland must be able to respond swiftly to new methods and types of fraud, and the need to wait for organisations to be added or removed from a list would impact on its ability to do so.

Secondly, we engaged with many other Government agencies and local authorities, a number of which noted that their efforts to tackle fraud are hampered by a lack of statutory information-gathering powers.

As I said to the Social Security Committee, we will review the regulations after they have been in operation for two years. If the review indicates that a discrete list would be more appropriate, such a list can be created at that time.

Information will always be gathered by trained professionals who have the appropriate skills and who will proceed on the basis of a presumption of innocence in all cases. Counter-fraud officers will work towards meeting the standards in the new Government counter-fraud profession, which provides for a common set of professional standards and competences for employees of public bodies who investigate fraud.

The regulations will restrict the pool of staff who can obtain sensitive information and ensure that powers can be exercised only by those who are authorised to do so. Authorisation can be withdrawn at any time if an officer is found to have fallen short of the high standards that are required.

Fraud investigators will have to satisfy authorised officers that requests for information are necessary and proportionate before requests are approved. That will serve as a safeguard against misuse of the information-gathering powers.

We welcome the Social Security Committee's recommendation that the draft regulations be approved by the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that amendment S5M-20415.3, in the name of John Swinney, which seeks to amend motion S5M-20415, in the name of Liz Smith, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-20415.2, in the name of Iain Gray, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbaraton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinrossshire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-20415, in the name of Liz Smith, on education, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)

Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the acceptance by the Scottish Government that, following the unanimous conclusions reached by the Education and Skills Committee in its report, *Subject choices in schools*, which highlighted significant concerns regarding subject choice in many schools, the systematic use of multi-level teaching, and their impact on hardworking teachers and young people, there should be a full review of the senior phase of the curriculum for excellence; calls for a full review of broad general education and how it articulates with the senior phase, but believes however that this review can only succeed if there is an accompanying acceptance from the Scottish Government that there are some key weaknesses in some key aspects of Scotland's school education and the qualifications structure that challenge its claim that Scotland's schools are producing "a strong set of results".

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-20448, in the name of Graeme Dey, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 117, Against 0, Abstentions 6.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Social Security Assistance (Investigation of Offences) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

World Wetlands Day 2020

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-20295, in the name of John Finnie, on celebrating Scotland's wetlands on world wetlands day 2020. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament celebrates World Wetlands Day on 2 February 2020; believes that Scotland's wetlands are sites of important biodiversity, providing a habitat that is a unique home for a wide array of species of birds, fish, mammals and invertebrates, and provide vital hunting grounds for many other predator species; notes that these sites across Scotland are designated for their protection under the Ramsar Convention; understands that Scotland's wetlands produce significant benefits to the overall environment and provide vital flood control and water filtration; believes that the climate emergency and continued development on these sites pose an existential threat to the future of Scotland's wetlands and the species that call them home, and welcomes calls on the Scottish Government encouraging it to support continued and greater protection for Scotland's wetlands.

17:14

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank members from across the chamber for their support, and I thank the many organisations that provided briefings for the debate.

Like many others, the Scottish Government has declared a climate emergency, so we know that the status quo is not an option. We must review everything that we do and, most important, we must change our outlook and our actions. People have seen the graphic and disastrous consequences of climate breakdown in Australia and Indonesia. We have all seen the horrendous pictures on our television screens, which have prompted a lot of discussion that might not otherwise have taken place. We need to focus our attention on the need to protect Scotland's precious environment.

World wetlands day is on 2 February, and the debate is part of it. I commend the Scottish Government for its active promotion of the year of coasts and waters.

I do not think that too many people set out to destroy our environment; however, there are some selfish individuals, organisations, corporations and Governments whose flawed priorities remain unchanged and whose unwillingness to take any responsibility for addressing the global emergency must be condemned. They must be taken to task.

Ramsar sites are classified under the convention on wetlands of international importance. The mission of the convention is:

“The conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international co-operation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world.”

The United Kingdom signed up to the convention in 1976. Globally, 2,200 sites across 169 countries are included on a list of wetlands of international importance: the Ramsar list. We in Scotland are honoured, as we have 521 Ramsar sites covering a total of about 313,000 hectares that are designated as internationally important wetlands.

Most Ramsar sites in Scotland are linked to the Natura 2000 network, either as a special protection area or a special area of conservation, and all of them are underpinned by designation as sites of special scientific interest.

The sites are of importance for many reasons, not least for their wide variety of water birds, bogs, lochs, coastal wetlands and other water-dependent habitats and species. Such habitats are a unique home for a wide array of birds, fish, mammals and invertebrates and they provide hunting grounds for many other predator species. Scotland’s wetlands also produce significant benefits to the overall environment by providing flood control and water filtration.

The climate emergency and continued development of such sites pose an existential threat to the future of Scotland’s wetlands and their species. Therefore, the motion

“welcomes calls on the Scottish Government encouraging it to support continued and greater protection for Scotland’s wetlands.”

Scotland is also globally important for peatlands and the world’s largest expanse of blanket bog is at Forsinard in the flow country in the north of my region. In 2020, Scotland’s important wetlands will be celebrated with the year of coasts and waters.

Wetlands can provide nature-based solutions to climate change by storing carbon and helping to mitigate more frequent storms and droughts. Globally, peatland stores nearly 30 per cent of all the carbon that is stored on land. Although the Scottish Government’s peatland action fund, biodiversity challenge fund and agri-environment climate scheme have helped to improve them, wetlands are still threatened by climate change and changes in land use, which are two of the key drivers of biodiversity loss that were identified in the “State of Nature 2019” report.

Our wetlands are also under threat from the spread of invasive non-native species. Scotland hosts most of the water catchments in the UK that are yet to be affected by the spread of invasive species; however, effective biodiversity security measures are needed now to avoid damage from that intensifying threat.

Sadly, nature is in decline, with 11 per cent of species being at risk of extinction. A step change in narrative, policy and practice is necessary to reverse that situation and to address the climate emergency. As I said, climate change and changes in land use are two of the key drivers of biodiversity loss identified by the “State of Nature 2019” report.

Imagine that someone had 14-plus hectares of internationally important, unique and irreplaceable dune habitats and that there was a proposal that could cause significant disruption to the natural dune processes and ecosystems. If that proposal would bring about the spread of fertilisers and pesticides across the site, and prompt the widespread risk of disturbance to many of the sensitive species and habitats from increased human use of the site, I hope that all members in the chamber would have grave concerns about it.

We know that hydrological change and pollution are two key drivers in the decline of natural diversity, which is also identified in “State of Nature 2019”. The global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services identifies that changes in land and sea use are the most important drivers in the loss of nature.

If such a destructive proposal existed, we would hope that the Scottish Government would recognise the site’s national importance in relation to our natural heritage; I am gratified to say that it has. We hope that the Scottish Government would call in a planning application that would have such disastrous consequences, and it has. The site is Coul Links in east Sutherland, which I represent, and the proposal is to build a golf course on that site of world significance. The proposal has been considered at a public inquiry, the reporters have submitted their recommendations and the planning minister, Kevin Stewart, is now deliberating. I accept that ministers cannot comment on live planning matters, but they can discuss the generalities, as outlined in my motion.

Why is that planning decision so significant? If that damaging proposal were given the go-ahead, it would send a clear signal to those around the world who are watching the case. It could have implications for the future of all protected sites in Scotland.

I readily accept that each planning case is considered on its merits, but if consent were given to such a proposal, it would be more difficult to refuse future applications to develop sites with similar levels of protection and conservation designations. It would also cast doubt on the Scottish Government’s commitment to address the climate and nature emergency. It could affect Scotland’s performance against the Aichi global nature targets—in particular, it could affect performance on target 11 regarding conserving

protected wildlife sites, but it could also affect targets 5, 12 and 14. It would also suggest that the Scottish Government does not have regard to the views of Scottish Natural Heritage—a Government organisation that takes an evidence-based approach to all matters and has opposed the proposal.

Scotland has declared a climate emergency. The Scottish Wildlife Trust—one of the many organisations that provided information for the debate—tells us that progress on sustainable development goal has stalled; a joined-up approach is needed to fully achieve those goals; the goals are designed to be interconnected, but the current approach is fractured; and a natural climate solution can help to achieve the goals and reflect the interconnectedness of climate change and biodiversity in rural and urban areas.

Ministers should show decisive action in protecting our wetlands and coasts. They should reject the Coul Links application so that it does not set a precedent for unsustainable development.

I draw members' attention to a report—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Mr Finnie. You have had eight minutes. I will give you another minute.

John Finnie: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will be brief.

The report is entitled "Reasons for the proposed partial denotification of Foveran Links SSSI". Foveran Links is an area of dune habitat and intertidal sand. Paragraph 2 of the report says:

"The construction of Menie Links Golf Course within the SSSI has adversely affected the Coastal Geomorphology of Scotland and Sand Dune habitat notified natural features as well as interrupting natural dune processes."

There has been a "loss of habitat" and there are

"potential indirect impacts from the use of irrigation, fertilisers and herbicides which in time may affect plant communities".

I accept that no two sites are the same, but there are stark similarities.

The Scottish Government is actively promoting the year of coasts and waters. We must learn from past mistakes, and ministers must reject the application for a damaging golf course at Coul Links. What better way for Scotland to celebrate the start of the year of coasts and waters and in the run-up to world wetlands day?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are quite tight for time. I gave John Finnie a little longer, because it is his members' business debate, but I ask other members to keep to four minutes.

17:24

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I congratulate John Finnie on bringing this subject to the chamber.

In my constituency, we have a wetland that is recognised in the Ramsar convention of wetlands. I am proud to represent the Loch of Strathbeg, which is a shallow, nutrient-rich loch and the largest dune slack pool in Britain. It is a rich habitat for flora and fauna, with reed beds, freshwater marshes and much more besides. Most importantly, it is a wintering habitat for many wetland bird species, including geese, the whooper swan and other varieties of waterfowl.

Wetlands are, of course, among the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet and our most productive ecosystems. In the United Kingdom, they make up 3 per cent of our land cover and 10 per cent of our total biodiversity. They create resilience in a changing environment—that is why they are critical. Their benefits include acting as nature's shock absorbers in the face of extreme weather. They store rain during storms, reduce flooding, and delay the onset of droughts. That may be obvious, but I will talk about it a little more.

We have already heard a little bit about Australia. We should think about California. Over the past decade, both have faced years of droughts, which have been punctuated—particularly at the moment—by tragic wildfires. That is happening even as we speak. It is telling that it has been estimated that California has lost 90 per cent of its wetlands over the past century. In Australia, the figure is similar.

That raises the question of what role the presence of those lost wetlands would have played in the tragic situation that we see playing out. Perhaps there would have been better storage of rain during storms rather than water being lost to evaporation. Perhaps the onset of drought would have been delayed. I accept that the destruction of wetlands is far from being the sole contributor to those tragedies, but it is one of a range of factors.

Destroying wetlands has consequences, and we must accept that those consequences are not yet fully realised. It is critical that we ensure that we reverse the destruction that we can reverse.

I have certainly visited peatland that has been rewetted, and I have been astonished to see how quickly some parts of its diversity have come back. Not necessarily all of it came back, but certainly a great deal of it did.

On the global issue of the destruction of wetlands, we have to think big. We think that as much as 64 per cent of the world's wetlands have been degraded since 1900. It is significant—John

Finnie referred to this—that they are immense carbon sinks. The issue is therefore highly relevant to the climate emergency and, of course, to creating the circumstances in which dry land promotes fires and allows them to continue. We cannot continue with that approach.

This debate will make its small contribution to all of us recognising the importance of restoring wetlands, and I hope that it will lead the way for others to challenge themselves on wetlands in other countries. Crucially, humanity's collective ignorance of wetlands is the greater challenge. We are engaged in the subject, but most of our population is not. We must overcome that ignorance, and persuade our friends and colleagues and people across Scotland and the world that it is now time to act on the subject of wetlands.

17:28

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I thank John Finnie for bringing it to the chamber. As my party's spokesman on the natural environment, I naturally take an interest in safeguarding our wetlands, and I recognise the role that they play in providing a habitat for a huge range of species and in protecting our wider environment.

In my constituency, we have a wealth of wetlands to rival anywhere else in Scotland or, indeed, the world. We have a number of Ramsar sites that are internationally important wetlands and places of interest, with a wide variety of waterbirds, bogs, lochs, coastal wetlands and other water-dependent habitats and species. The Loch Ken and River Dee marshes contain areas of swamp, fen, grassland and carr woodland. That is one of the best examples of a semi-natural freshwater system in north-west Europe. The site supports internationally important roosting numbers of Greenland white-fronted geese and Icelandic greylag geese. Four nationally important aquatic plants and three nationally important aquatic invertebrates are found within the wetland complex.

Silver Flowe is a broad glacial valley in the Galloway hills. It is a nature reserve and a site of special scientific interest. The series of patterned blanket mires constitutes the least-disturbed and most varied extent of acid peatland in southern Scotland, and it is one of the most important systems of blanket mire in Great Britain.

Close to my home in Newton Stewart is the Wigtown Bay local nature reserve, which is the largest of its kind in Britain. With its large areas of salt marsh and mud flats, the estuary is vital for many of the species that live there, especially salt-

tolerant plants and wintering wildfowl. The reserve is a popular venue for a range of recreational activities, including angling, wildfowling and bird watching. Kirkcowan Flow is an area of blanket bog that is considered to be one of the best in the United Kingdom. However, the disappointing fact is that such nationally and internationally important sites are not well known even to locals, and most people generally do not appreciate the importance of wetlands.

I would like to highlight a wetland garden that does its bit to raise awareness. It is an accessible wetland that the vast majority of people can visit and is located in Leswalt, near Stranraer. The wonderful Aldouran wetland garden—the name of which means “glen of the otter”—has become a real tourist attraction for the village. Members of the community maintain the site voluntarily, having created the facility themselves. There is much to do and see there but, most important, it has a wonderful wetland featuring a wide range of plant and animal life. Among those making Aldouran their home are mallards and moorhens. Geese regularly nest in the wetland, where there are frogs, newts, butterflies, dragonflies, damselflies and numerous other pond dwellers. The wetland has a bird hide where other wildlife species are frequent visitors, including red squirrels, deer, woodpeckers and birds of prey. Members who visit might be lucky enough to spot the main attraction after which the facility is named—the otter.

I must give special praise to the Aldouran wetland watchers group, which consists of young people who eagerly volunteered to help after an initial appeal from the community association. Youngsters aged between seven and 17 are involved in many aspects of the running of the garden and developing ideas for how they would like it to operate in the future. Since 2013, the group has been registered with the world wildlife volunteering scheme, which rewards youngsters according to the amount of volunteering that they carry out. Its mixture of community engagement, enhancing and protecting the natural environment and hugely important awareness raising has resulted in a whole host of great positive work going on.

Recently, the Parliament has focused on tackling climate change, but we must ensure that areas such as wetlands are not forgotten about. They play a huge role in addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies that we face. We must reverse the decline in our wetlands. Actions that we can take include raising awareness of and supporting the community efforts at places such as Aldouran and Wigtown local nature reserve, which are so vital for their communities and showcase a whole host of wildlife and wetlands to locals and visitors alike.

17:32

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank John Finnie for bringing the debate to the chamber so that we can all celebrate world wetlands day. These watery habitats deserve tribute for the invaluable service that they provide to carbon sequestration, flood prevention, water filtration and supply, our biodiversity and much more—and, indeed, for the solace that we find through visiting them.

For thousands of years, humans have managed and manipulated our watercourses and the subsurface and surface hydrology of our land to enable development and infrastructure. The “State of Nature 2019” report explains the poor legacy that has left for wetlands. Today, we have far less wetland cover than we had in the early 20th century. Sadly, we also find that 30 per cent of our remaining designated wetland features are classed as “unfavourable” or “unfavourable but recovering” due to the ways in which they have been managed. They are yet another signifier of the ecological crisis that Scotland faces, along with the rest of the world. Many of our habitats and their flora and fauna are under pressure from climate change, extraction, burning, pollution and invasive species, to name but some. Protections and enhancements for biodiversity need investment and policy certainty from Government.

The obvious current example, which John Finnie has already highlighted, is Coul Links, which is a fantastic place for wildlife that is protected under three designations. Mr Finnie also highlighted the commitments that have been made because of its being a Ramsar wetlands site. Many people across Scotland have concerns about the proposed development there and await the minister’s decision on it. I have heard from many of them myself and so have already written to the minister, urging that due consideration should be given to biodiversity. As we keep saying, we face climate and environment emergencies, and that decision is all the more significant given that 2020 is the Scottish Government’s year of coasts and waters.

I do not underestimate the importance of bringing new jobs to a rural area and that development could boost the economy to some degree. However, it is important to strike a fair balance with environmental protections, and the ecological significance of Coul Links must be taken very seriously. Let us also remember the opportunities for ecotourism—and the benefits thereof—to be developed if the application fails. As John Finnie said, that decision will be carefully watched in Scotland and globally.

Wetlands in all their forms are places of great natural beauty, and my thanks go to Ramblers Scotland for its briefing, which highlighted the

public health outcomes of outdoor recreation in those wonderful landscapes. Wetlands include peat bogs, swamps and peatlands; those terms sound a bit soggy, but the fantastic and rare wildlife that lives there is often worth the risk of wet socks. My region of South Scotland has exactly that, as Finlay Carson highlighted.

In the climate emergency, sequestration capabilities are hugely important and those of peatlands—which globally make up almost 30 per cent of all carbon land stores—particularly so. Members may recall that I attempted to modernise the system of permission and extraction rights for peatlands in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. In the climate emergency, that system is no longer fit for purpose. The planning minister is pursuing that through the chief planner to seek clarification with planning authorities, and I await the results.

We as a Parliament are committed to reaching net zero emissions by 2045—the “net” part is important here. Let us not neglect our natural allies in doing so, and let us protect our wetlands, for so many reasons.

17:36

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I thank my Green colleague John Finnie for bringing a debate on Scotland’s wetlands to Parliament.

We have heard about the importance of wetlands to our biodiversity and the wealth of fantastic and rare species that they support. That is why, this past February, I raised concerns about the Scottish Government’s new guidance on the protection of our 51 Ramsar sites. The Scottish Government’s response was to insist that the fact that those are designated as sites of special scientific interest gives them adequate protection, but the evidence suggests otherwise, as the impact of Donald Trump’s golf course, and many other developments, has shown.

In my region, there is still a question over whether the guidance will protect Southannan Sands, a fantastic marine environment at Hunterston, which is threatened by a dredging proposal. The Southannan situation should illustrate starkly the inadequacy of relying on SSSI designation for protection. If 0.5 million tonnes of dredging to decommission oil rigs in the same location does not automatically trigger the need for an environmental impact assessment, those regulations clearly need to be strengthened.

Looking at our 51 Ramsar sites around Scotland, we get great insight into why wetlands are such a vital part of our environment. The two designated wetlands in my region are strong examples of that. First, there is a string of wetland sites along the Clyde, from Clydebank and Erskine to Helensburgh and Greenock, that are mainly

tidal mudflats with an internationally important population of redshanks. Last month, that part of the Clyde featured heavily in reports of a new map that was produced as part of peer-reviewed research by Climate Central, which showed a number of sites that are threatened by flooding before 2050, due to the unfolding climate crisis.

Most reports focused on the human impact, which is understandable, given that most of Clydebank and Dumbarton to Partick and Govan, as well as a large part of Glasgow airport, could be under water. The rising tide is not good news for existing wetlands, either. Changes in tide levels can make fantastic mudflat habitats, such as those that are found along the Clyde, uninhabitable. The climate emergency threatens biodiversity in Scotland, and it is doing so now. We need to take urgent action to stop climate chaos; in Scotland, that means a Scottish green new deal.

The other Ramsar wetland site in my region is at the mouth of the Endrick, on the edge of Loch Lomond, in the south-east of the loch. Most of that site is part of RSPB Scotland's Loch Lomond reserve. The winter population there includes 2 per cent of the world's Greenland white-fronted geese, and a beaver has recently been spotted in the area. The RSPB organises brilliant events there, such as guided walks and school visits, to let families and communities know and learn more about that amazing habitat.

I have spoken in the chamber a few times about the save Loch Lomond campaign, which has fought successfully—so far—to save a site in Balloch from an inappropriate and environmentally destructive Flamingo Land Ltd tourist development. The campaign and I have often talked about the need for a plan to showcase the natural beauty of Loch Lomond and to help visitors and tourists to enjoy the nature and the landscape without destroying it. Just 5 miles up the road from Balloch, there is an example of exactly that at the mouth of the River Endrick, but at other sites across the loch, aggressive and destructive resort and other development proposals are increasingly coming into play.

The climate emergency and pressure from commercial developers are major, live threats to our wetlands here in Scotland. World wetlands day is a time to reconsider the importance of our wetlands and to recommit ourselves to tackling those global and local threats to their future.

17:40

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I thank John Finnie for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate, and I congratulate him on his excellent speech, which powerfully illustrated the importance of wetlands.

As other members have said, we face two significant crises: the planet is heating up and our wildlife numbers are decreasing. The twin climate change and biodiversity crises go hand in hand. Over the past few years, the focus of our politics has rightly been on the action that is needed to halt climate change, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report at the end of 2018 was the precursor to some real soul searching in every Scottish political party, as our citizens rightly demanded that we prioritise tackling climate change in our work.

Around the same time that the IPCC report came out, another hugely significant, but perhaps less headline-grabbing report on the global biodiversity crisis was produced by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—IPBES, for short. In addition, the "State of Nature 2019" report made for upsetting reading. It said that 11 per cent of species are threatened with extinction and that there are decreasing populations in 49 per cent of species.

Our wetlands hold a pretty big key to tackling climate change and species loss. They are rich habitats whose soil and vegetation lock in carbon—that is especially the case in peatlands—and they are hugely significant habitats for aquatic bird, plant and insect species. They are often at risk from development, from agriculture and, in Scotland, from badly managed sporting estates, in particular those that have driven grouse moors. Their protection and restoration, and their consequent potential to provide a large part of the solution of sequestration of carbon, must be a priority. Their existence is why we can get to net zero emissions faster than anywhere else.

I want to single out and celebrate a coastal wetland area and Ramsar site that members will have heard me mention many times, because it is very close to my heart. The Ythan estuary is, I can confidently say, my favourite place on earth. I grew up in a house whose front windows looked on to its dunes. Even although I do not live in that house any more, I am a frequent visitor to the estuary in my capacity as a member of the Scottish Parliament, to visit my Scottish Natural Heritage colleagues, to involve myself in the odd beach clean and meet constituents who are concerned about the estuary, or to talk about seals, in my capacity as the grey seal champion. More often, however, I just go there to enjoy the estuary with my family and my new wildlife watching scope, which I got for my birthday last week.

Over the past couple of years, the Ythan estuary and the dune ecosystems around it have been under threat. Some of the threats have been corporate. They include threats from the Trump

golf course, which has been mentioned, which irretrievably ruined the once-protected dune ecosystems along the coast at Menie. They also include threats from the salmon net-fishing companies that massacred grey seals on sight, to the extent that, when I was growing up in the area, I would never see a seal. They also littered the waters with fixed fishing gear that endangered marine life and seabirds. The salmon nets have gone and our protected seal haul-out zone regularly hosts more than 1,000 gloriously noisy basking grey seals, which have become quite a tourist attraction.

However, the biggest threats to the estuary are global in origin. There is no doubt that seabird numbers have declined as a result of climate change. The once record-breaking eider duck population of the Ythan estuary is now a tiny fraction of what it was when I was growing up there. I do not need to see graphs or charts to know that: I can see it with my own eyes.

Wetlands are the first places where we see evidence of climate change and biodiversity loss, but they are a big part of the solution to both. By protecting and restoring a wetland, we allow the lost life not only to come back but to feed life beyond the wetlands, including our lives as human beings. If we do not have the carbon sinks and rich habitats that wetlands are, we will not have a planet that can support our lives.

17:44

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am delighted to participate in John Finnie's debate, and I thank him for bringing this very important topic to the chamber, given the immense potential for wetlands to improve biodiversity and tackle climate change. They are vital to our ecosystems and to carbon sequestration, flood management and water purification.

From the peat bogs of Greenlaw Moor to the swamps of Coldingham Common, my Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire constituency has some fine examples of wetland environments. I commend Scottish Borders Council and the Tweed Forum for their work. Both have recognised the important role that wetlands play and the need for all stakeholders to be round the table in order for them to be protected.

The Tweed catchment in my constituency enjoys a long history of partnership working, which should be harnessed to tackle the crisis of declining salmon stocks. I want to take the opportunity to talk about a highly important issue that is a little bit different, but is relevant to wetlands. Wild salmon stocks rely on wetlands. I held a members' business debate several months

ago to highlight the decline of salmon stocks and the serious impact that that is having on our biodiversity and rural economy. When we look for possible solutions that would reverse the decline in stocks, we should note that wetlands should form part of an effective catchment management plan to help to boost stocks.

If we look at the life cycle of a salmon, we see that wetlands play an important part in almost every stage of a salmon's life. Let me take members through the life cycle of the salmon very quickly. By no means am I David Attenborough, so please bear with me.

Salmonids lay their eggs in gravel beds called redds. The gravel must be small enough to be moved by the female to create her nest, but large enough to provide sediment-free openings for the eggs and fry—the small salmon—to develop. Silts and sediments can, unfortunately, coat the eggs, thereby depriving them of oxygen. That is where wetlands come in. Wetlands slow the speed of water before it enters a main river channel, so sediments settle in the wetland and not in the salmon redds. That reduces the chance that eggs will be deprived of the vital oxygen that they need.

During inclement weather such as we have been having, wetlands also help to reduce peak flows in rivers after heavy rainfall. That slows the river and, in turn, reduces redds being washed away. A fine example is on the Philiphaugh estate in my constituency, where peat bogs have been preserved in order to slow the flow of water from the Kirkstead Burn into the Tweed catchment.

Let me get back to salmon. Wetlands continue to play a role once the eggs have hatched into fry. Fry feed on insects that might drop into the river from overhanging trees, or they might live in the wetlands. Trees on stream banks shade the river and keep the stream cool enough for the fry. Wetlands help to keep the water cool by releasing cool ground water into the stream flow.

Downstream, nearer rivers' mouths, smolts—the young salmon—stay in estuaries for a while to acclimatise to salt water, and they use the estuary wetlands for food and shelter. The time that is spent in the estuaries varies by species, but some smolts rear extensively in wetlands near the sea before entering the saline water of the open sea.

Once they are back in the streams, adult salmon move quickly upstream to spawn, as their bodies begin to deteriorate. Blockages such as dams and culverts, and low water levels, slow their movement upstream. Wetlands help to maintain in-stream flows by holding water from wetter seasons and releasing it during drier summers.

There you have it. That was a quick explanation that shows the importance of wetlands, and how they are involved in every stage of a salmon's life.

That is why we must do our utmost to protect such environments in order to protect salmon stocks. On world wetlands day, and given that there is a climate emergency, it is right that we acknowledge that without our precious environment, our landscape and our ecosystems, the survival of many great species would be greatly under threat.

17:48

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, thank John Finnie for bringing his important motion to the chamber to allow us to discuss world wetlands day, which will take place on 2 February. This year's theme is wetlands and biodiversity, and it is important to note that, globally, 40 per cent of all species live or breed in wetlands. As John Finnie stated, this year marks nearly 50 years of the Ramsar convention, which was established in 1971 in Ramsar, in Iran. It is an international treaty that protects wetlands that are important in conservation terms.

I would like to focus my remarks on the environmental, social and ecological importance of wetlands, and I will highlight some examples in Galloway. Our wetlands in Scotland, and those across the UK and Europe, serve many purposes.

Wetlands are home to thousands of species of birds, fish, mammals and invertebrates. Worldwide, they are responsible for the employment of around 1 billion people. As members have discussed, wetlands clean our water, act as natural flood defences and play a crucial role in our actions to tackle the climate emergency.

Although Dumfries and Galloway does not have wetlands that are protected by the Ramsar convention, we have special protection areas and special areas of conservation that are protected under European Union law, including in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere. Our biosphere, which is supported by Dumfries and Galloway Council and South Ayrshire Council, is co-ordinated by Ed Forrest, who keeps me in the loop about biosphere activity. The biosphere is home to peatlands. As members have mentioned, peatlands store 30 per cent of worldwide land-based carbon.

Last year, I visited a peatland restoration project in the biosphere at Carsegowan, near Wigtown, with local peat restoration expert Dr Emily Taylor, from the Crichton Carbon Centre in Dumfries, to see her work. Carsegowan is recorded on the world Ramsar map. Dr Taylor demonstrated how the peatland restoration works. We measured the depth of the bog, which was 5m deep. That is a lot of carbon storage space. We spoke about how the peatlands in the wetland areas are protected

under EU law because of their important contribution to decarbonising our environment.

Dr Taylor and colleagues from the Galloway Fisheries Trust are concerned that we might, after we leave the EU, lose some of those protections. Therefore, I seek assurances from the minister that the Scottish Government will continue to protect our wetlands and peatlands and call on the UK Government to ensure that that is a priority.

Situated on the scenic north shore of the Solway coast, RSPB Scotland's Mersehead nature reserve and Caerlaverock national nature reserve are extensive wetland and salt marsh areas. Both are havens for breeding waders, wintering waterfowl and year-round bird and wildlife watching.

Mersehead is home to the most northerly populations of a special amphibian—the natterjack toad, for which I am species champion. That wee beastie needs support and protection. Continued survival of the natterjacks is determined by protection of their dune habitats and the ability of dune systems to shift with the tides and winds. That is important, because long-established ponds that are inhabited by natterjacks can quickly fill with predator fish, or with dragonfly larvae, which consume natterjack eggs and tadpoles, thereby contributing to the decreasing numbers. For natterjacks, breeding in temporary ponds means breeding in an environment that is free from predators.

Protection of our wetlands is important for the existence of some of our endangered species, including natterjacks, and for supporting continued biodiversity. Therefore, in closing, I seek assurances from the minister that, in the light of Brexit and the potential loss of EU environmental protection laws, we in Scotland will do all that we can to protect our woodlands—I mean, our wetlands.

17:53

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): I am grateful to have the opportunity to close this important debate, which celebrates world wetlands day with its theme of wetlands and biodiversity. I thank John Finnie for bringing the debate to the chamber and for putting a focus on it. As he rightly pointed out, I cannot talk about some of the live applications that have been referenced tonight. Points have been made that are more relevant for the planning minister, who is responsible for those applications.

Tonight, I will focus on why wetlands are vital to us in Scotland, although members across the chamber have done a good job of that. It is also timely that we discuss the issue this year because,

as John Finnie stated, it is Scotland's year of coasts and waters, which will promote a range of opportunities to experience and enjoy our unrivalled seas, shores, rivers, lochs and wetlands. As Finlay Carson said in his speech, a lot of people might not be aware of what is on their doorstep. That is why this themed year and this debate are so important.

Life thrives in wetlands. We have heard about that tonight. In his contribution, Stewart Stevenson mentioned that wetlands represent 3 per cent of land cover but are home to 10 per cent of our biodiversity. As Emma Harper stated, 40 per cent of the world's plant and animal species live or breed in wetlands. More than 100,000 freshwater species have been identified in wetlands so far, and coastal wetlands especially are among the most biologically diverse places on the planet. We have also heard about the wider impacts and benefits that they have. Rachael Hamilton mentioned their importance with regard to wild salmon, for example.

Our 51 Ramsar Sites cover more than 300,000 hectares, from the windswept expanses of the Caithness and Sutherland peatlands to the slightly more modest 50 hectares of Westwater reservoir in the Pentlands. Our Ramsar sites are important, and they host a huge array of species and habitats that are probably too numerous to list today.

Ross Greer raised concerns about protections for Ramsar sites. We are currently reviewing national planning framework 3 and the Scottish planning policy, and we want to hear thoughts about priorities for national planning framework 4. The consultation for that is currently open, and I encourage members to get involved and make their thoughts known.

I have one of those amazing Ramsar sites in my constituency, in the form of Montrose Basin. The basin is home to more than 80,000 migratory birds, including pink-footed geese, Arctic terns, knots and sedge warblers, and it is a Scottish Wildlife Trust reserve. To witness those birds at the site is something to behold. The geese were featured on the BBC's "Autumnwatch" at the end of last year.

Our wetlands range from coastal salt marshes and wet dune slacks to fens, marshes and wet woodlands in river valleys and loch edges, and springs and flushes, wet heath and blanket bogs.

I hope that you will allow me to diverge a little bit, Presiding Officer, and talk again about Montrose Basin, because, in December, I watched an important citizen science initiative relating to blue carbon there, together with Professor Bill Austin from the University of St Andrews and a class from my old school, St Margaret's primary in Montrose. I mention that because our wetlands

are vital not only in terms of the wide variety of species and biodiversity that exist on them but in relation to climate change. John Finnie talked about the capacity that wetlands have for storing carbon, and I loved Stewart Stevenson's phrase about our wetlands being nature's shock absorbers. The project that I observed aims to encourage schoolchildren and students to collect soil samples from our coastal wetlands to contribute to a national carbon stock assessment, in order to see how much carbon our wetlands store and to help us assess exactly how important they are in the fight against climate change. It also provides a fantastic opportunity to get our young people actively involved in tackling climate change and gives them a chance to have a tangible impact. I was interested to hear in the debate about other initiatives happening elsewhere, such as the wetland watchers initiative that Finlay Carson talked about.

Over the summer, I also visited the flow country. I was impressed by the wide-ranging work that is being carried out there to manage and promote areas of peatland, which are of national and international importance. Claudia Beamish and others talked about how important those areas are for carbon storage.

Much of the peatland restoration work in the flow country has been funded by the Scottish Government through Scottish Natural Heritage, which has helped to maintain that important habitat while also mitigating the effects of climate change. The Scottish Government recognises the important role that wetland restoration can play in responding to the global climate emergency, and that is why, this year, we are funding peatland restoration to the tune of £14 million. I note that Emma Harper called on the Scottish Government to commit to doing what we can to protect our wetlands—and also our woodlands. I think that we can commit to protecting them both, and the funding that we have put in place will emphasise that work.

The peatland action project, which is managed by SNH, involves public, private and third sector landowners and is restoring damaged peatlands as an important part of our climate change plan. More than 19,000 hectares of previously damaged peatland habitat has benefited directly from restoration activities since 2012, and up to 10,000 hectares has been restored in this financial year. Of course, peatland restoration also has many other benefits, such as improving water quality, reducing flood risk and aiding the ability to store carbon within the peat. We are also funding several exciting wetlands projects through the biodiversity challenge fund, under SNH's management.

Further, through our agri-environment climate scheme, we have committed almost £5 million for wetland management, in addition to the £31 million that we have committed for targeted support for wading birds.

As important as it is to talk about some of the funding and initiatives that are happening with those organisations, it is also important to recognise other work that is being done by other organisations. Rachael Hamilton mentioned the work that is being done by the Tweed Forum, which I visited with you, Presiding Officer. It was fantastic to hear about the incredible work that it is doing.

However, as we have heard from Claudia Beamish and Gillian Martin, in particular, the recent IPBES and "State of Nature 2019" reports have thrown the condition of global and domestic biodiversity into sharp relief. The IPBES report characterised the current global response as "insufficient" but concluded that it is "not too late" to make a difference through transformative change. The links between climate change and biodiversity loss are clearly exemplified and mirror the findings in the Committee on Climate Change's net zero report. In response, the First Minister committed to considering the IPBES report's findings and to ensuring that our actions produce the transformative change that is needed. She also committed to analysing what we are already doing, where we need to do more and what we need to do differently.

We also know that biodiversity loss and the climate emergency are interconnected and that, as with climate change, we need to raise the bar on global leadership. The nature all around us helps to regulate our climate, and the changing climate is a major factor affecting the state of nature. Nature-based solutions, such as tree planting and peatland restoration, mitigate climate change and flooding and improve water quality and biodiversity. The protection of our natural environment is a priority and, just as with climate change, it requires us to look afresh at how we carry out many of our activities.

We have already announced that we will hold a biodiversity conference in Scotland in April 2020, which will contribute to the development of the post-2020 framework. Our programme for government includes measures to continue to address the loss of biodiversity in Scotland. We announced that we would increase and extend the biodiversity challenge fund by a further £2 million over this financial year and next. That further targeted investment will help to deliver the Aichi targets and to combat the contributors to biodiversity loss, which have been highlighted in the various reports.

It is right that we celebrate and focus on world wetlands day. It is also important to remember that 2020 is a vitally important year for Scotland, with the focus on our coasts and waters, biodiversity and climate change, and with our hosting of COP26. I want to see us lead the world and I believe that we are, in many ways, already doing that; but there is always more that can be done. I am committed to driving that work forward, as is the Scottish Government.

Meeting closed at 18:01.

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