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Scottish Parliament

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

Point of Order

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Rule 3.1.3 of standing orders says:

“In exercising any functions, the Presiding Officer and deputy Presiding Officers shall act impartially, taking account of the interests of all members equally.”

I understand from a media report today, which has been confirmed by the Government, that the First Minister will be afforded time prior to the start of First Minister’s question time to make remarks about the resignation of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work. I contacted your office to ask about extra time for party leaders to respond to whatever the First Minister wishes to say about the issue, but I was advised that they would have to use their normal allocation of time.

Although I appreciate that making preamble remarks is allowed, it cannot be right that party leaders have to use their time for scrutiny of the First Minister to comment on the issue, while the First Minister is, in effect, given extra time to do so, because that will eat into the time for scrutiny of the questions that follow.

I ask that members are treated equally in this regard and that extra time be given to party leaders.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I thank Elaine Smith for advance notice that she intended to raise a point of order.

I reiterate that this is the normal procedure that we follow. After we abandoned the previous process that we had, in which party leaders had to read out a diary question, we introduced a procedure that allowed the First Minister or other party leaders to make a short statement on a matter of importance before the questions. The First Minister asked my office whether she could make such a statement, to which I agreed. However, it is a statement by the First Minister to which the Opposition party leaders may make a very short response, and it is not for the party leaders to make a statement on the matter.

As a business manager, if you wish to have a statement and parliamentary time to be devoted to the matter, it is up to you to make a proposal to the Parliamentary Bureau, which will discuss making parliamentary time available.

I emphasise that if any of the party leaders wishes to pursue the matter, they can use their question to do so, as is always the case.

I hope that that addresses the point of order.

General Question Time

11:42

Scottish Music (Promotion in Europe)

1. Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and, in particular, to my membership of the Musicians' Union.

To ask the Scottish Government how it promotes the Scottish music sector in Europe. (S5O-04111)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We fund Creative Scotland to support and promote Scottish music in the rest of Europe and the rest of the world. Since 2008, we have invested £25 million in the festivals expo fund, providing an additional platform for Scottish musicians to pursue onward touring, including in the rest of Europe. Every year since 2007, we have allocated £350,000 to support our national performing companies to perform in Europe and the rest of the world through the international touring fund.

Tom Arthur: I commend the Scottish Government for the support that it gives to the Scottish music sector.

The Musicians' Union is calling on the United Kingdom Government in Westminster to back a musicians' passport for musicians working in the European Union post Brexit. The MU believes that such a touring visa scheme should last for a minimum of two years, be free or cheap, cover all European Union member states, get rid of the need for carnets and other permits, and cover road crew, technicians and other staff who are necessary in allowing musicians to do their jobs.

As convener of the cross-party group on music, I will write to the UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Nicky Morgan, to raise the matter.

Will the Scottish Government support the calls of the Musicians' Union and the cross-party group on music to support continued ease of movement for Scottish and UK musicians in Europe, and to raise the matter directly with the UK Government?

Fiona Hyslop: This week, the UK Government and the European Commission set out their starting positions for the negotiations on the future relationship. The ability of UK citizens and companies to enter easily, move around and do business in the European Union is every bit as important as the arrangements for those from the rest of Europe to come here. We will listen very carefully to the position of the Musicians' Union and others who have an interest in the matter.

Last week, we launched our policy paper "Migration: helping Scotland prosper", which speaks of our desire to have an open and flexible agreement on mobility between the UK and the EU, which is what we will pursue. I will be very interested in the Musicians' Union's discussions with the UK Government. There might be an opportunity for the Musicians' Union's idea of a touring visa to be raised at the forthcoming festivals visa summit that we are hosting soon with the UK, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The music sector is vitally important in promoting Scottish culture. However, I am concerned, as are Sir James MacMillan, Sally Beamish, Phil Cunningham and other leading music academics, about the impact of music tuition fees in schools. There is the potential for pupils to be squeezed out of music tuition, especially those from a deprived background, meaning that a generation will miss out on representing Scotland on the music stage. Does the cabinet secretary realise that, and will she ensure that the upcoming budget better promotes music in our schools, particularly for kids on free school meals?

Fiona Hyslop: The member will be aware that the Scottish Government supports music through our youth music initiative, which we have maintained in recent years. It is very important to encourage and inspire young people in regards to music. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I have regularly met the music education partnership group. We are pursuing the issue with local authorities and, in particular, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to make sure that there is access to music tuition. Of course, with a very fair funding settlement for local government, we have repeatedly seen a number of councils, particularly Dundee City Council and Glasgow City Council, ensure that there is free music tuition.

It is recognised that free music tuition does so much for individuals. It can tackle attainment as well as provide the lifeblood for future musicians to tour and have careers in the music sector. Some very good proposals are coming forward from a number of individuals, not least among them Nicola Benedetti, with whom the member might be familiar, who has a proposal for a charitable trust. If we add those to the work of John Wallace and the music education partnership group, we can see positive developments that will ensure that we can maintain music tuition and that youngsters from financially deprived areas in particular will have access to it. I am glad that we have cross-party support in pursuit of that.

Levenmouth Rail Link

2. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress with the reinstatement of the Levenmouth rail link. (S5O-04112)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Following my announcement in August 2019, Network Rail has been commissioned to design and construct the new Levenmouth passenger and freight railway. It is currently undertaking survey work to inform the option selection that will determine the most appropriate scheme to reopen the Levenmouth branch. That will deliver new, fully accessible stations in Leven and Cameron Bridge. All partners involved in the delivery of the railway are committed to opening it as soon as possible. However, that is dependent on a number of factors, including planning, for which Fife Council is responsible.

David Torrance: What assistance can the Scottish Government give to progress further the formation of the Levenmouth blueprint group? To date, Fife Council has been unable to appoint a project manager to co-ordinate the additional £10 million investment in the area.

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that we have provided £5 million to the Levenmouth blueprint fund to assist further developments around the re-opening of the Levenmouth railway line. I know that that has been match funded by Fife Council, which is very welcome.

I understand that the council has been having difficulty recruiting a project manager to take the work forward but that it is due to re-advertise the post. However, should the council be unable to secure the right individual to take forward that particular element of the redevelopment of the Levenmouth line, the leadership group, which involves a number of Scottish Government agencies, will look at other options that can assist in making further progress on the matter, including options that can assist Fife Council to make progress on it.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There is a lot of interest in this question, but I cannot take supplementary questions from all the members who want to ask one. I will take just one, from Alexander Stewart.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I very much welcome the progress that is taking place on the Levenmouth rail link. With projects of that nature, training opportunities are normally provided to members of the local community. What assurances can the cabinet

secretary give that that will take place with the Levenmouth rail link?

Michael Matheson: The Levenmouth blueprint fund will assist that type of work, and Network Rail will be looking at how it can engage with a range of local businesses on training provision in the area. We want to ensure that the Fife and Levenmouth communities gain wider benefits from the reopening of the line. That is exactly why the fund has been set up.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Given that work has started on preparing the site, can the cabinet secretary facilitate a site visit for my colleague David Torrance and me to explore the progress that has been made thus far in securing the return of Leven's rail link?

Michael Matheson: I am more than happy to arrange for my officials to contact Jenny Gilruth's office in order to facilitate a visit to the site.

Police Scotland (Fingerprinting Policy)

3. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether Police Scotland has a policy of routinely fingerprinting dual nationals or British citizens born abroad. (S5O-04113)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): That, of course, is an operational matter for Police Scotland. However, it has advised me that it does not routinely fingerprint dual nationals or British citizens born abroad.

Police Scotland's fingerprinting policy is set out in the document "Fingerprints: Standard Operating Procedure", which sets out a number of reasons for a person's fingerprints to be lawfully taken, including voluntarily for elimination purposes, the identification of deceased persons and for emigration, employment and educational visas.

Daniel Johnson: I have been contacted by a very concerned constituent who is a naturalised British citizen born in the middle east. He came into contact with the police due to an altercation with a neighbour. He was not arrested, questioned under caution or charged, but he had his fingerprints taken. He was told that that was because he was born outside of the United Kingdom.

My correspondence with Police Scotland suggests that it is routinely fingerprinting foreign-born and dual nationals—apparently on the pretext of Home Office requirements. Surely it is not right for people to be treated differently and fingerprinted because they are a British citizen by naturalisation rather than by birth. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern about how such determinations are being made? I would be

grateful if he would undertake to examine the matter.

Humza Yousaf: I would be more than happy to meet Daniel Johnson and to receive details of the constituency case to which he referred. When it comes to Police Scotland, my understanding is that operation nexus was set up, as he probably knows, by the Home Office's immigration enforcement division and the Metropolitan Police with the intention of improving the management of foreign national offenders. Fingerprints can also be taken within that framework if a complaint has been made. I do not know whether that is the case here. That applies whether someone is a foreign national or, indeed, a dual national.

If Daniel Johnson believes, as he is suggesting, that fingerprinting is being done routinely, or being done for any other purpose, I am, of course, more than happy to investigate that. As I said, perhaps I can meet him to understand the specifics of the case that he mentioned.

Cervical Cancer (Testing Rates)

4. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to improve the rates of testing for cervical cancer. (S5O-04114)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): We know that screening remains the best way to detect cervical cancer early and help reduce health inequalities in cancer outcomes. Regular smear tests and the human papillomavirus vaccine are vital in the fight against cervical cancer, and we strongly recommend everyone who is eligible to take up their screening invitation.

From spring 2020, HPV testing will be introduced into the Scottish cervical screening programme. HPV testing is a more sensitive and effective test for identifying women who are at risk of cervical cancer. It will help to ensure that any cell changes are identified and treated earlier. When it is combined with the success of the HPV vaccine for girls and boys, and the implementation of HPV primary testing, we hope that cervical cancer can be eliminated in Scotland.

Gillian Martin: A study that was presented at the National Cancer Research Institute's conference in Glasgow last year involved a test called S5 that detects whether DNA from four types of HPV linked to increasing risks of cervical cancer can be modified through a process called methylation. The test can be self-administered at home. Has the Government assessed whether home testing would increase the rates of cervical cancer detection and improve testing rates?

Joe FitzPatrick: There is a lot of on-going research in that area. I am pleased to confirm that

a working group is being convened to establish a cervical screening self-sampling pilot, which will be introduced later this year. Crucially, that will be a national pilot across all areas of Scotland. In the next few months, the working group will scope out all the detail, including the length of the pilot, the numbers to be invited to take part, the communications and engagement strategies and so on.

I look forward to updating members on the issue in due course.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is interesting to hear about the human papillomavirus self-test pilot study. I know that NHS Dumfries and Galloway is taking part in that research. Will the minister keep us updated, either in the chamber or in writing, on the progress of the pilot study?

Joe FitzPatrick: Absolutely. This is an innovative way forward, which puts Scotland ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom. Because the pilot will be Scotland-wide, I am committed to ensuring that the Parliament is kept up to date on its progress and how it will be rolled out.

BBC Scotland (Meetings)

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met BBC Scotland and what issues were discussed. (S5O-04115)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The First Minister and I met BBC director general Lord Hall on 13 November 2018, when we discussed the services that we expected the BBC to deliver in Scotland and the BBC's consultation on free licences for over-75s. On 11 June 2019, I spoke by telephone with Ken MacQuarrie, director of BBC nations and regions, about the decision to stop free licences for all over-75s who are not on pension credit.

My officials have regular contact with BBC staff on a range of issues, including at meetings of the TV working group, which is a forum for public agencies and the industry to discuss developments in broadcasting and screen.

Claire Baker: It is almost a year since the launch of the BBC Scotland channel, which brought welcome additional funding to Scottish broadcasting. In the light of the United Kingdom Government's consultation on decriminalising TV licence fee evasion, has the Scottish Government considered the consequences for Scotland-based broadcasting if that was to go ahead, given the conclusions of the 2015 Perry review?

Fiona Hyslop: The member is correct to point to the consultation that took place in 2014-15.

Given that the BBC royal charter was agreed and will be in place until the end of 2027, the move to decriminalisation appears hasty and unnecessary. It could have potential costs and therefore impact on important programming.

It should be pointed out that, in Scotland, evasion cases are investigated by TV Licensing, but prosecutions are brought by the procurator fiscal. Under powers provided by statute, the procurator fiscal can decide to use an out-of-court disposal, which means that a defendant can avoid prosecution by agreeing to pay a fixed sum of money. In Scotland, significantly fewer cases are dealt with by the courts, because the majority of defendants utilise that out-of-court disposal option. At the time to which the member referred—2014-15—the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service indicated that a move to decriminalisation could actually increase the costs to not only the courts but others, and that the costs to the courts could be more than £200,000. I am not sure that there is a win for Scotland in what the UK Government has proposed.

Benefit Take-up (Single Consent Form)

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on introducing a single consent form to allow benefit claimants to agree to share their data for the purpose of benefit take-up. (S5O-04116)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are committed to maximising the take-up of Scottish benefits and we published our benefit take-up strategy in October 2019. The Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 places a duty on the Scottish ministers to inform applicants what other devolved benefits they may be eligible for when making a determination on an application.

We continue to collaborate with local authorities, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that, for clients in receipt of devolved forms of assistance, access to passported benefits is made simpler. There are a number of factors to consider in developing an approach to that, and we will always put the needs and experience of the client first.

Pauline McNeill: The cabinet secretary knows only too well that the DWP estimate of unclaimed benefits is £10 billion. One submission to the Social Security Committee's inquiry said:

"One of the biggest blockers to take-up is data protectionism, whereby data owners create pseudo data protection rules that"

block

"the appropriate sharing of data."

In view of that, will the cabinet secretary consider increasing awareness of why a single consent form could be beneficial for new claimants and the Scottish Government? Perhaps claimants could be given a booklet to raise awareness that when they share their data for social security purposes, it will be used only for those purposes.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Pauline McNeill and I spoke about this issue at great length when I was at the Social Security Committee earlier today to discuss benefit take-up. I take very seriously our responsibility on this issue and I recognise Pauline McNeill's continuing desire to push the Government, quite rightly, to do more on it.

The general data protection regulation should never be used as an excuse to do less in an area. It is the responsibility of Government and other agencies to work together to see how we can protect a client's data, but in a way that works for that client. It is difficult to share information. For example, we will require 32 information-sharing agreements with the local authorities to allow that to happen. However, it is something on which the Government is taking proactive action.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): We turn to First Minister's questions, but before I call Jackson Carlaw to ask the first question, the First Minister would like to make a brief statement.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Presiding Officer, before I take questions, I am grateful for the opportunity to make a very short statement.

Members will be aware that I have accepted the resignation of Derek Mackay as finance secretary. Derek Mackay has apologised unreservedly for his conduct and recognised, as I do, that it was unacceptable and falls seriously below the standard required of a minister. I can also advise that he has this morning been suspended from both the SNP and our parliamentary group, pending further investigation.

However, I also wanted to formally confirm to Parliament that the Government will proceed, as planned, with the Scottish budget this afternoon. It will be delivered by the Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy, Kate Forbes, and it will set out our plans to sustainably grow our economy, support our public services and step up action to tackle the climate emergency. All of that continues to be the very clear focus of the Scottish Government.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. We turn to the first question, from Jackson Carlaw.

Finance Secretary (Resignation)

1. **Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I had fully intended to ask questions on other matters this afternoon, but the First Minister's short statement does require follow-up by way of questions.

Given the evidence of the texts that are now in the public domain, what does the First Minister believe the behaviour of her former finance secretary does for the reputation of her Government, this Parliament and Scottish politics generally?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I think the conduct is unacceptable and I will not make any attempt to say otherwise or to minimise in any way its seriousness. Based on what I knew about this last night, it was clear to me then that Derek Mackay's conduct fell far short of what is expected of a minister. Indeed, he offered his resignation to me and I accepted. It was not an option for him to remain in Government.

This morning, of course, I have read the full transcript that was published in *The Sun*, and it is on that basis that he has also been suspended from both the SNP and the parliamentary group pending further investigation. Having taken that action, which I think is appropriate in the circumstances, it is now not just reasonable but important to allow that further investigation and consideration to take place without me pre-empting it. I hope that members will accept that course of action.

Jackson Carlaw: As Mr Mackay has 26,000 followers on Twitter alone, many parents will be concerned about what assurances the First Minister has received that this is the only example of his unacceptable behaviour and whether she believes that any assurances received are credible.

The victim in all this is a 16-year-old boy and I have heard no mention of his welfare. What contact has either the SNP or the First Minister's office had, or will they be having, with him and/or his family at any point, and what support has been offered?

The First Minister: I say very clearly that I am not aware of any further allegations or any conduct of a similar nature, but I should stress that I was not aware of this until last evening. I very much hope that Jackson Carlaw will accept that.

I very much want to make clear—I hope that members would accept that this is my view without me saying it, but I think that it is important that I do say it—that I do not condone in any way, shape or form conduct of this nature. I, and, I think, all politicians have to reflect on the need for us to say that when it is our opponents who are accused of such behaviour and also when it is people on our own side, in our own parties. I think that all of us have to be consistent in that, and I will always strive to be so.

Of course there is the issue, which is raised by these particular allegations and what is published in the newspaper this morning, of the welfare of a 16-year-old boy. I am not aware of the identity or the contact details of the family. If the family or the individual concerned wanted to speak to me, I would of course be happy to speak to them. That is my position.

All parties have in recent times faced difficult allegations about their own members. We all have to be prepared to apply high standards when allegations are about our own colleagues, and make sure that the action that we are demanding of our opponents is action that we apply ourselves. That is what I will strive to do.

Whatever questions are posed to me today, there will be no sense in which I seek to minimise the serious nature of what we are discussing.

Jackson Carlaw: I take that to be confirmation that neither the Scottish Government nor the Scottish National Party has had any independent contact with the young man or his family: their identity is not known, so that would not be possible.

The First Minister has previously said in the chamber that

“the internet can often be an unsafe place for young people. All MSPs can play our part in our communities in raising awareness and helping to educate parents about the steps that they can take to keep their children safe online.”—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2017; c 19-20.]

The Parliament has taken issues of exploitation seriously. I ask the First Minister whether the reputation of Scottish politics and of the Parliament can be maintained with the full confidence of the public, or even of Mr Mackay's constituents, if he remains a member?

The First Minister: Clearly, there are issues that Derek Mackay will need to reflect on. I am responsible for the actions that I take, firstly as First Minister in terms of the Scottish ministerial code. Based on what I knew last night, as I have already said, it was clear to me that Derek Mackay's remaining in Government was simply not an option. In any event—to be very clear—he offered his resignation, because he recognised that as well. The fuller detail of what appeared in the newspaper this morning having been seen, further action has been taken in terms of his membership of the SNP and of our parliamentary group.

There is a point to make that, no matter how upset and shocked we all are when faced with such situations, there is also a need for due process, and therefore Derek Mackay has been suspended pending further investigation—I believe that it is right and proper to allow that to happen. I do not in any way want to pre-empt the outcome of that investigation.

Clearly, there are very serious matters for me as First Minister to have had to deal with, contend with and respond to over the past few hours, and there will be matters that Derek Mackay himself is, I am sure, reflecting on, and will continue to have to reflect on.

Jackson Carlaw: First Minister, I appreciate the difficulty. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children defines grooming as follows:

“Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a ... young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them ... young people can be groomed online ... by ... someone who has targeted them ... This could be ... a dominant and persistent figure”

through the use of

“social media networks ... text messages and ... apps, like Whatsapp”

and

“Whether online or in person, groomers can use tactics like ... taking them on trips, outings or holidays ... young people may not understand they've been groomed. They may have complicated feelings, like loyalty”

and

“admiration”.

That is the NSPCC definition of grooming. I understand that the First Minister wants to defer to an investigation, but the full content of the text exchanges between Mr Mackay and the young man are available online. How difficult is it not to reconcile Derek Mackay's conduct with the very worst connotation?

The First Minister: I am not sure whether Jackson Carlaw has been paying proper and close attention to my answers. I am in no way minimising the seriousness of what we are discussing. It is not the case that I am deferring to an investigation before action has been taken. Derek Mackay is no longer a member of my Government. He is suspended from my party; he is currently suspended from my parliamentary group. From the action that has been taken already, it should be obvious to everybody how seriously I, my Government and my party treat the matter.

In terms of further action, for anyone in any circumstances where others have to consider future action, there is a degree of due process that has to be gone through. That would be the case for a member of Mr Carlaw's party just as it is for a member of mine.

From the action that has already been taken, I do not think that anybody could reasonably doubt the seriousness with which I treat, and will continue to treat, the matter.

NHS Tayside (Mental Health Services Inquiry)

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): This morning, Derek Mackay described his behaviour as “foolish”, but Derek Mackay's actions towards a schoolboy are beyond foolish. They are an abuse of power and nothing short of predatory, so the matter is serious. His suspension from the Scottish National Party is welcome, but he should go as a member of the Scottish Parliament.

I turn to another serious matter. This week, the long-awaited report from Dr David Strang, following his independent inquiry into mental health services in NHS Tayside, was published. It was released on the fifth anniversary of the funeral of Mandy McLaren's son Dale. He was 28 years old. The report vindicates Mandy, Gillian Murray and the other courageous families. It shows that, time and time again, NHS Tayside ignored their concerns and was defensive and dismissive in its

dealings with them. Will the First Minister apologise today to Mandy McLaren, Gillian Murray and the other families, and will she give them a guarantee that all 51 recommendations in the report that was published this week will be implemented in full?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As I have said previously in the chamber—I readily and unreservedly say it again—I offer apologies to any patients or families, including the families mentioned by Richard Leonard today, who have been in any way let down by the national health service. I know that the publication of the report will have been extremely difficult for those families, and my thoughts and sympathies remain with them and with all families who have been bereaved through suicide.

Richard Leonard will be aware that NHS Tayside has accepted in full the recommendations in the report. Those recommendations must be implemented and the concerns that the report sets out must be addressed. We expect NHS Tayside and its partners to respond with a plan describing how they will deliver the necessary improvements by the end of this month. We have made it very clear to the board and others how seriously we treat the report and that they must deliver the change that is required. The Minister for Mental Health will retain very close oversight of the actions that the board takes in the weeks ahead.

Richard Leonard: The reason why I ask for a guarantee on the implementation of all 51 recommendations is that I spoke to Gillian Murray this morning and she said:

“It is terrifying that these are only recommendations.”

NHS Tayside has a history of evading scrutiny, deflecting criticism and resisting change. It has repeatedly ignored recommendations from Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland. This week, Dr Strang revealed that the one and only recommendation of his interim report has still not been delivered. When I raised the matter with the First Minister last October, she said:

“I expect NHS Tayside to take account of the recommendations that David Strang has made thus far”. — [Official Report, 3 October 2019; c 13.]

It has not done that, so what confidence can families have that anything will be any different this time round?

The First Minister: We will continue to work with the health board and make that expectation very clear. I know that the Minister for Mental Health is willing and keen to make a statement on the issue after next week’s parliamentary recess. The Government has asked Dr David Strang to carry out an update on his report after a period of time, to make sure that the recommendations are

being implemented, which we expect to happen. We expect the full, detailed plan from NHS Tayside and its partners, setting out exactly how that will happen, by the end of this month. That will allow them to be held fully to account for those actions.

I absolutely understand the desire of the families to know how matters are being taken forward. The Minister for Mental Health will keep Parliament updated as the actions proceed.

Richard Leonard: We must listen to the families. David Strang’s report is entitled “Trust and Respect”. The families have told us that they have no respect for the health board or trust in it to deliver on the recommendations that are made in the report. They are angry that nothing will change. We know that those families have shown immense courage. It is now time for the First Minister to repay that courage.

Will the First Minister commit to giving real teeth to Healthcare Improvement Scotland, to the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland and to fatal accident inquiries so that their recommendations are enforceable? Will she instruct her cabinet secretary to re-escalate NHS Tayside’s mental health services to level 5 so that her Government steps in to drive the transformation of mental health services in Tayside? Will she do the right thing and put patients first so that no other families have to suffer in the way that these families have suffered?

The First Minister: The Government will continue to take the action that is already under way, which I think is appropriate, and we will consider all suggestions. In my view, the bodies that Richard Leonard cited have “teeth”, to use his term, but we will always be open to suggestions about how the powers that they have can be strengthened.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has already met some of the families, and she continues to be very willing to engage with them and to keep them updated as this work continues. We will continue to monitor the progress of NHS Tayside through the continuation of the Tayside oversight group, which is an important part of the picture here. As I said, the Minister for Mental Health will keep Parliament updated. We have proactively asked Dr David Strang to review the situation after a year and to provide an update on the progress that has been made.

The Government will continue to be very closely involved in the matter, with the Minister for Mental Health having direct oversight of it. As I said, she is very keen to make a statement to Parliament after the recess, when members across the

chamber will have the opportunity to consider these issues in even more detail.

The Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementary questions.

NHS Lothian (Negligent Diagnosis and Treatment)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Two weeks ago, my constituent Darren Conquer was awarded £500,000 in damages following negligent diagnosis and treatment of an injury that he sustained. The First Minister will recognise Mr Conquer's name, because he highlighted his concerns about his treatment to her as far back as 2007, when she was the health secretary.

Why were Mr Conquer's concerns not investigated? Given the circumstances surrounding the case, will the First Minister agree to an independent review?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am sure that Miles Briggs's constituent raised the issue with me when I was the health secretary, and I am happy to look into exactly what happened after that. As Miles Briggs will appreciate, I do not have the detail of that before me, but I will be happy to review the case and look at what action the Scottish Government took. I will get back to him with the detail of that, and I would be very happy to enter into further discussion about what lessons can be learned from his constituent's experience.

NHS Lothian (Resignation and Special Measures)

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): This week's appalling report on mental health services at NHS Tayside is evidence of the need for openness and transparency in our greatest public service, the national health service.

In that vein, does the First Minister agree that patients and staff of NHS Lothian have the right to know why the chair of the board has resigned and, more important, why the health board that spends their taxes and treats their children has been put into special measures? On Tuesday, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport refused to answer questions from members across the chamber on that extremely important issue. Will the First Minister now instruct the health secretary to release all information on Mr Houston's resignation and, more important, on the decision to invoke special measures for NHS Lothian?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As I understand it, the chair of NHS Lothian resigned because he disagreed with the assessment of his performance as chair that had been made by the chief executive of NHS Scotland.

Regarding the decisions around the escalation to level 4 of aspects of NHS Lothian's performance, the health secretary has spoken about that on many occasions in the chamber, and she continues to be prepared to answer members' questions. I give an assurance that, if there is particular information that the chamber wants, that information will be made available.

Low-emission Zone (Bearsden Cross)

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Two weeks ago, in response to questions from Rachael Hamilton, the First Minister confirmed that, although progress was being made on tackling air pollution around some schools across Scotland, it is not being made everywhere.

One of the places where progress is not being made is Bearsden primary school, in my region, where nitrogen dioxide levels have actually gone up in the past year and have breached the safe legal limit for at least 49 hours, often coinciding with the times when the children would be entering and leaving the school. A potential solution to air pollution that was mentioned by the First Minister two weeks ago is a low-emission zone. Will she therefore agree with me that East Dunbartonshire Council should consider implementing a low-emission zone at Bearsden Cross as soon as is possible?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is certainly open to the council to consider that, and the Government will be happy to discuss with the council how we can support it.

As Ross Greer is aware, we have already set out our plans in working with councils in our key cities to introduce low-emission zones, but there is no doubt that that is the start of a process, not the end. The Government and the environment secretary will be happy to discuss with that council—or with any council—the plans it wishes to take forward.

Fatal Accident Inquiries

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): It has been seven years since four people died in a helicopter that crashed while approaching Sumburgh airport, and seven years without a fatal accident inquiry. Families need to know what happened to their loved ones. Lessons cannot be learned, recollections fade and, all the while, people in Shetland and those who work in the oil and gas industry in the North Sea are anxious. At a preliminary hearing, Sheriff Principal Derek Pyle condemned the Crown Office for the delay and said that the wait for the families should be "deplored". Will the First Minister apologise? Is this not further evidence that the Crown Office is completely incapable of handling fatal accident

inquiries and that it should be removed from its responsibilities?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I start by conveying my thoughts and sympathies to the families concerned. I know how difficult the past seven years will have been for them, and I do not think that anybody can say anything—I certainly cannot—that will detract from their suffering.

Decisions on fatal accident inquiries are not for me. I do not say that in order to not answer the question but, constitutionally, decisions on fatal accident inquiries are for the Crown Office and the law officers. It would therefore not be appropriate for me to comment in any detail on the decision-making process, other than to say that we all appreciate that every specific fatal accident inquiry has its own associated facts and challenges.

I am sure that the Lord Advocate will take careful note of what the sheriff principal has said in this case and that he is fully aware of the impact on the victims of any delays in the justice system. I know that the Lord Advocate is committed to ensuring that everything possible that can be done is done to ensure the completion of these complex investigations as quickly as possible, and I am sure that he will be happy to correspond and discuss the matter further with the member on behalf of her constituents.

Hospital Opening Delays (Aberdeen)

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): The new Foresterhill cancer centre and family hospital in Aberdeen are now more than £60 million over budget. The cancer centre has been delayed for one year and the family hospital, which is to replace the city's maternity unit, has been delayed for two years. The overall cost of the work has increased by more than 40 per cent on the original estimates. Does the First Minister think that those delays and spiralling costs are acceptable? Does she regret the fact that the huge problems that have been uncovered in new hospitals in Glasgow and Edinburgh have caused my constituents to lose out on those vital facilities for a significant period of time?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is because of this Government's investment in the health service that new facilities such as those will go ahead. We have made sure that there has been a close review of the costs on that particular project, and I am sure that the health secretary would be happy to write to the member with further details of that. We are committed to the completion and delivery of new health facilities for the benefit of patients in the member's constituency and in other parts of Scotland.

NHS Waiting Times

3. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I am in no doubt that Derek Mackay's behaviour is appalling, and I appreciate that the First Minister does not yet know who the young man is, but it is essential that he and his family receive all the support they need.

Behind this week's statistics showing more people waiting longer at accident and emergency departments are stories that show the human impact that that is having on patients, doctors and staff. On Tuesday, we heard from a junior doctor about her experience of working one night in a Scottish emergency department. She said:

"Staff shortages, me and just 3 junior colleagues ... we can do busy, but when the department is so full ... there are no beds for any of these patients and I can't help but think I'm not giving patients the care they need. It's not safe."

The fact of the matter is that we are short of beds in hospitals and we are short of social care packages, community services and general practitioner appointments. Despite the heroic efforts of those working in our national health service, the system as a whole is not working, is it?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No, I do not agree with that. I absolutely recognise the intense pressures on our national health service and, as the Royal College of Emergency Medicine has rightly said, it is a whole-systems challenge, so we must bring to bear whole-systems solutions, which is entirely what the Scottish Government is working with health boards to do. As will be seen again in the budget this afternoon, we are investing in our national health service to the maximum of our ability.

I know that Alison Johnstone will recognise, as I do, the impact on the national health service of 10 years of austerity, which has not been the choice of this Government or this Parliament. However, we continue to make sure that there is record investment, and we continue to make sure that there are record numbers of staff working in our health service, including accident and emergency consultants and other staff who support the outstanding jobs that they do.

The reasons for the pressures in our health service are understood, and it is partly due to the changing demographics of our population. It is worth noting that, in the year to December 2019, the number of patients who were seen within four hours was at the highest level in any year since 2012—more than 1.5 million patients were treated within four hours. Although waiting times against our four-hour target are not where this Government wants them to be, we are working with health boards to improve them significantly. The context is also important: our waiting times for

the month of December were above 80 per cent against the four-hour target, compared with under 70 per cent elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We have to do better, but because of the efforts of the staff and the investment of this Government, we continue to make sure that we will see an improving picture in our accident and emergency departments.

Alison Johnstone: NHS staff do indeed do an incredible job. My concern is the impact that the strain is having on them. In 2011, when she was health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon published her 2020 vision, which pledged to deliver healthcare at home and in communities. Well, 2020 has arrived and, instead, A and E departments are busier than ever because people cannot get GP appointments. The community health facilities are simply not sufficient. Delayed discharge is as bad as it has ever been, as people wait for the social care packages that they need to enable them to leave hospital. Instead of having people treated at home, we have a health system that leaves people with no option but to go to hospital and then prevents them from leaving. That is another gap between the Scottish Government's rhetoric and its action. Can the First Minister see that her 2020 vision has failed?

The First Minister: No, I do not agree. More people are being treated in the community than ever before, and more procedures and operations are done on a day-case basis than ever before. Of course, that has an impact on the judgments that health boards make about the number of in-patient beds that are required. We have rising demand for our health service—that is not just the case in Scotland; it is the case across the UK and many other countries.

The other thing that has changed since 2011 is the decade of austerity that has been imposed on our budget and, by extension, our health service. We will continue with the investment in our NHS and we will see further evidence of that this afternoon, and we will continue to support record numbers of staff. We will also continue the hard work of reform to make sure that more people, where appropriate, are treated in the community and that our in-patient services are there for those who need them. We will work to make sure that that is done in the most effective way possible, which is why we are creating new elective care centres.

The situation is challenging in a climate of a changing demography and constrained resources: nobody suggests otherwise. That is the case not just in Scotland and, although there are big challenges that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and I take responsibility for in Scotland, I think that, comparatively, our health service deserves a great deal of credit for dealing with and

facing up to those challenges much better than health services in many other parts of the world.

Post-Brexit Fish Exports

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): A policy paper from Professor David Bell says that, post-Brexit, fish exports from the United Kingdom

“are likely to face a mixture of tariffs and regulation that will inevitably add to their costs, making them less competitive.”

The report highlights the “strong bargaining chip” that the European Union holds in negotiations over fishing, as continental markets are

“the principal destination both for fish caught by UK boats and for farmed fish.”

Does the First Minister have any confidence that the Tory party can keep the promises that it made to Scotland's fishermen?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No, I do not have a great deal of confidence in that. I hope that I am wrong, but I fear that the promises that the Conservatives made to our fishing communities will be broken in the months ahead.

Of course, it is important that we support our fishermen in their ability to catch fish in Scottish waters, but it is also important that we protect the export market, so that the fish can be sold into those markets. We must also retain the ability to attract labour to our country, so that the fish can be processed. This Government will continue to stand up for our fishing industry and we will continue to do all that we can to protect it from yet another round of broken promises from Conservative Governments.

Homeless Mortality Rate

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Figures that the National Records of Scotland released yesterday showed that 195 homeless people died in 2018, which is four people every week. With a rate more than twice that of England and Wales, Scotland now has the highest homeless mortality rate in the United Kingdom. It is a home-grown problem. Drug and alcohol use, suicide and exposure were the main reasons for those deaths. Nobody should be forced to sleep on our streets. The figures point to a problem, not just around housing or drug treatment but around how we support people who leave care, prison and our armed services—groups that are disproportionately represented in those tragic figures. What additional action will the First Minister take to bring those numbers down?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for raising this serious issue. The figures, which were published yesterday, are completely and utterly unacceptable. I inject one

note of caution—they are experimental figures and, therefore, there is a degree of estimation. However, that does not change the headline that we are discussing.

On the comparisons, the figures also showed an increase in other parts of the UK, and there has been a bigger increase in England and Wales than in Scotland, but the levels in Scotland are not acceptable. In terms of the work that we are already doing, the ending homelessness together fund is important, as is the work that we are doing on drugs deaths. Yesterday, I stood in this spot and talked about the work that we are doing to stop young people going into care and to support them as they come out of care. That is all interlinked. I assure the member and the chamber that—across all areas of this Government's work—it is a priority to address these figures.

We cannot escape the fact that one of the driving reasons for a rise in homelessness has been welfare cuts and austerity. We have to deal with the consequences of that but it is our responsibility and it is vital that we deal with those consequences. We are focused on doing that.

Glasgow School of Art (Governance)

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Gordon Gibb, the former head of professional studies in architecture, was instantly sacked for allegedly bringing Glasgow School of Art's reputation into disrepute, when he voiced his opinion on failings within the school, as he has said,

"after a bust-up with chair, Muriel Gray."

Surely it is the leadership of the board that has presided over reputational damage: 40 people have resigned from the school, Tom Inns was sacked without explanation, another seven people have been sacked and 30 people have been made redundant. Will the First Minister remind the chair of Glasgow School of Art that it is a public institution and that whistleblowing is not a sacking offence?

Will she also remind the school's leadership that it is accountable to the Government? Does the First Minister agree that it is time for the Government to step in, to use its powers to steady the ship and to review the governance of that widely loved institution?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Pauline McNeill is aware that Glasgow School of Art is an independent organisation. It receives funding from the Scottish Government through the Scottish Funding Council. The Scottish Funding Council is able to monitor the performance of Glasgow School of Art and other institutions that it funds, but Glasgow School of Art is independent of Government and is accountable to its own board.

In that or any other context, I have no hesitation in reinforcing the importance of whistleblowing and protecting whistleblowers. I unreservedly and clearly do that, whether the message is to Glasgow School of Art or any other institution. It is important that everybody who acts in any position in a public authority is mindful of that.

Environmental Standards (European Alignment)

4. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of the Prime Minister's statement that the United Kingdom will refuse close alignment with EU rules, whether the Scottish Government will remain aligned with EU environmental standards. (S5F-03928)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, we will. We have already made clear our intention to maintain or exceed environmental standards after European Union is a means to encourage trade or investment. As his predecessor did, the Prime Minister has set out a negotiating position, without any consultation of the devolved Governments, that offers no guarantees on environmental standards and which would take us out of the European single market and severely hit our economy, jobs and living standards.

Stewart Stevenson: Does the First Minister regret the failure by the Prime Minister to recognise that, far from creating opportunities, divergence from shared policies that have delivered benefits to workers, the environment and other policy areas will cost jobs, and that it is in the interests of Scotland to remain aligned with pan-national rules on such matters?

The First Minister: Yes, I very strongly agree with Stewart Stevenson on that. Whenever we hear UK Government ministers talk about the ability to diverge, we have to ask ourselves what the purpose of that divergence would be. The purpose would be to allow a race to the bottom, whether on environmental protections, consumer protections or workers' rights. That is absolutely the wrong direction of travel.

Although the EU is not perfect, EU membership has—in my view—been good for Scotland. It has helped to ensure that we have high environmental standards, significant consumer protections, and protection for workers. Those standards and protections apply consistently to all member states. A level playing field in law, based on existing EU standards, will provide certainty and continuity for our economy and businesses, and help our progress towards a net zero emissions economy.

I am determined that Scotland will remain aligned with our European partners on devolved

matters. We will not accept any regression of protections, and I still hope that we will see the same approach being taken across the UK.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party is set to miss a range of environmental targets this year, from biodiversity and active travel, to recycling and low-carbon vehicles. Why?

The First Minister: The SNP—I am sorry, the Scottish Government [*Interruption.*] The Scottish Government is a world leader on a range of environmental issues. We continue to make progress, and, where we have to accelerate that progress, we are open and frank about the need to do so.

However, we are talking about my desire, as First Minister and leader of the SNP, to remain within a context that obliges us to meet those high EU standards, and I am being questioned on that by a member of a party that wants to diverge from those standards and to lower those protections. I prefer my approach, which is to keep moving things up the way, in the right direction, and to resist the race to the bottom on the environment, workers' rights and everything else, which the Tories want.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): When will interim measures be put in place to replicate the oversight and enforcement roles of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice on environmental issues such as air pollution, in order to protect properly the future of Scotland's people and nature?

The First Minister: We will announce such measures very soon. The Cabinet this week discussed the issue in detail and looked at our final proposals on it at our regular meeting. We will outline the direction that we intend to take as soon as possible. I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform will confirm the precise date of that announcement shortly.

Mental Health Issues (Young People)

5. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to support young people dealing with mental health issues. (S5F-03948)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are determined to ensure that any young person who requires support for their mental health has their needs met. We are taking forward a programme of work to transform the children and young people's mental health system, with a focus on prevention and early intervention. We have invested £250 million over five years to support positive mental health for children and young people, in addition to £58 million over the past four

years, specifically to improve access to child and adolescent mental health services.

This week, we launched a new national CAMHS service specification, which was developed in partnership with young people and their families, and which outlines the level of provision that they can—and should—expect to receive when they are referred for help within the national health service. We will work closely with NHS boards on implementation of the specification.

Brian Whittle: Currently, one in five young people is rejected from CAMHS, and about 20 per cent have to seek multiple referrals in their attempts to get help. The audit of rejected referrals recommended that a multi-agency assessment system should be developed, which would, in effect, end multiple referrals. This week, the Government published its new CAMHS specification framework, which does not mention a multi-agency assessment system, gives no clarity on the referral criteria for CAMHS and offers no guarantee of a face-to-face assessment. Given those significant omissions, what assurances can the First Minister give to young people that they will get the help that they need at the first time of asking?

The First Minister: As I said in my original answer, this week we have launched the new service specification, which has been developed in partnership with young people and their families. I am sure that the Minister for Mental Health would be happy to have further discussion on particular details of that, if the member wants to pursue that.

More generally, I readily recognise the issues of rejected referrals and long waiting times for access to specialist child and adult mental health services. That is exactly why we are not just investing, but are seeking to transform, the nature of those services, so that more support is available for young people in the community. We are investing in more counsellors in schools, and in the creation of the new national wellbeing service, so that young people who need specialist services get quicker access to them, and so that those who do not need them are treated in the community. Currently, some young people are being referred to CAMHS because there is no adequate community provision. We are working on and investing in rebalancing that.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Studies from across the United Kingdom have shown that a significant proportion of individuals who are being treated with antidepressants actually have undiagnosed bipolar disorder. Given the Government's failure to tackle long waits for CAMHS, what will the Government do to ensure that young people receive appropriate mental health diagnoses and the specialist support that they need?

The First Minister: As Mary Fee will recognise, it is not for me, as a politician, to comment on prescribing decisions. It is important that clinicians decide on the appropriate prescriptions for patients. In essence, my response is the same as the one that I gave to Brian Whittle: we recognise the need for a broader range of services being available for people with mental health challenges, and for more services to be available in the community, which is particularly important for young people. That is why the investment—which I have already spoken about—in rebalancing provision of mental health treatment services is so important. As I said, individual prescribing decisions will always be for clinicians, but I hope that, in the longer term, that investment helps to address the issue that Mary Fee has raised.

Police Scotland Surveillance Officers (Centralisation)

6. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that Police Scotland is centralising specialist surveillance officer posts away from Dumfries and Galloway. (S5F-03930)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Obviously, keeping Scotland's communities safe from people who are involved in criminal activity remains Police Scotland's top priority. Decisions on how to allocate police resources are, of course, for the chief constable. Police Scotland has stated that the decision would not mean any reduction in the service from local policing, as officers continue to do their job to keep communities safe.

Although a final decision on the location has yet to be taken, specialist police surveillance resources that are fully capable of preventing and detecting a range of crimes will still operate fully and continue to support the fight against individuals and groups that threaten our communities.

Colin Smyth: When Police Scotland was established, Dumfries and Galloway was the first region to lose its police control centre, with the loss of 34 jobs. Anyone who walks the corridors of the police headquarters in Dumfries will not bump into many people, because so many local support jobs have been axed.

We now hear that the axe is about to land on the local surveillance unit, with yet more jobs being centralised and taken away from a region that is the gateway to Scotland and is on the front line in the battle against drugs. Why is the First Minister's message to young people in my region that they need to move out of the area and into the cities if they want a career in Police Scotland? Surely any definition of a national police force needs to include that force having a fairer

distribution of specialist jobs in every part of Scotland—or is South Scotland not part of the First Minister's Scotland?

The First Minister: I say with the greatest of respect that that is a ridiculous thing to say, and that it is not my message. Through our investment decisions, the Government is maintaining record high numbers of police officers in every part of our country. That is extremely important in relation to discharging our responsibility to keep communities safe.

It is also the case that it is—and must be—for the chief constable to make operational decisions about deployment of resources, including specialist resources, in different parts of the country. If I sought to dictate to the chief constable how he should deploy the resources that are at his disposal, I am sure that some members who criticise me at the moment would be up on their feet in the chamber saying how outrageous that was. I trust the chief constable and our operational police force to make the right decisions on deployment of resources, and to use those resources to maximise the safety of our communities. All members should trust them, likewise.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. We will move on shortly to a members' business debate in the name of Monica Lennon, on world cancer day 2020. We will have a short suspension to allow members, ministers and people in the public gallery to change seats.

12:45

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

World Cancer Day 2020

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-20184, in the name of Monica Lennon, on world cancer day 2020. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that 4 February 2020 is World Cancer Day, a global initiative that encourages everyone to put cancer on the global agenda; understands that one in two people will get cancer in their lifetime and that over the last 40 years survival rates have doubled, with half of people in Scotland now surviving cancer thanks to the great progress that research has made, and that Cancer Research UK's vision is to see three-quarters of people with cancer surviving the disease by 2034; believes that it is crucial to address variations in outcomes between cancer types and patient groups where they exist in Scotland; welcomes world-leading research funded by Cancer Research UK and others into those cancers with the lowest survival rates, including lung, pancreatic and brain cancers; notes what it sees as the persistent gaps in outcomes, especially for those in Scotland's most deprived communities and recognises calls for urgent action to address cancer health inequalities in any form; understands the need to ensure that cancer services in the Central Scotland region and across the country are planned to ensure the best outcome for every patient wherever they live, while allowing patients to decide what matters most to them on their cancer journey, and notes that Members can show their support for World Cancer Day through the wearing of the Unity Band.

12:48

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege to bring this debate to Parliament in recognition of world cancer day, which took place on Tuesday 4 February. I am proud to show my support for world cancer day by wearing my unity band and helping to play my part in making sure that the Scottish Parliament puts cancer on the agenda during this important week. I thank members who signed the motion and those who are in the chamber.

I thank and pay tribute to Cancer Research UK for being the driving force behind the motion and the debate, and helping to ensure that we have good information at our fingertips. I also thank Macmillan Cancer Support, the British Lung Foundation and Pancreatic Cancer Scotland for their helpful briefings and for the work that they do all year round.

Cancer is something that affects us all, either directly or through our family and friends. Half of us in Scotland will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lives. That sounds quite scary and very serious, but thanks to the commitment to

research and advancements in treatment, more and more of us are surviving.

Half the people diagnosed with cancer will survive—survival rates are now double what they were 40 years ago, which is positive. The ambition of Cancer Research UK is to double that progress by 2034, so that three quarters of those who are diagnosed with cancer will survive. That ambition is one that we can and must meet. However, doing so will not be an easy task.

As Macmillan Cancer Support has pointed out, the number of people who are living with cancer is increasing—it is already up by 15 per cent from 2015. We expect that in five years' time, 300,000 people in Scotland will be living with cancer.

To improve survival rates, we need to take serious action now to address the shameful wealth inequalities that continue to affect life expectancy in our poorest communities. Inequalities are a big factor in people's cancer experience. How can it be acceptable that people living in the poorest areas are not only more likely than those in the wealthiest to be diagnosed with cancer, but are less likely to receive an early diagnosis? We know that getting an early diagnosis is crucial to increasing survival rates.

A person's postcode should never determine their life expectancy and it beggars belief that, in 2020, it still does for so many people. In a country as rich as Scotland, it shames our society. We have been far too complacent. After more than 20 years of this Scottish Parliament, it is a matter of deep regret that we have been unable to reduce health inequalities in the way that is needed. Years of cuts to public services mean that poverty is growing instead of reducing and we continue to face huge challenges—but we have choices to make.

The work of Cancer Research and others in continuing to invest in and develop innovative treatments is vital. There is still so much that we need to learn, especially for types of cancer that continue to be difficult to treat and have low survival rates. Lung cancer continues to be a major concern and a driver of inequalities in Scotland. Not only is lung cancer more common for people living in the most deprived communities; it is likely to be diagnosed late and has a very poor survival rate.

In Lanarkshire—the area where I live and which I represent—almost half of patients with bowel, breast or lung cancer are diagnosed at stages 3 and 4. That is very worrying and we must act to improve that situation.

In preparation for today's debate, I have been speaking to constituents and people who work in our health service. One doctor said to me that if there was one thing that we could do, as a

Parliament, it would be to encourage people to get symptoms checked out and not to delay. We must tell people that they are not a burden on the health service and their doctor will be glad to see them.

I recall my mum's cancer diagnosis a couple of years ago. She went to the general practitioner because she had a sore throat that she just could not clear and was feeling run down. She went to the GP for a chat and her doctor took the time to listen and to ask other questions. That meant that, completely unrelated to her sore throat, she was put on a pathway so that she was diagnosed with bowel cancer within two weeks. If she had not made that trip to the doctor there and then, she could have had a much later diagnosis. My mum has recovered well and is a survivor. That reminds me that all of us have to let people know that they are not a burden on the health service and that they should go and see their doctor.

That leads me to thank the national health service staff. We must recognise the massive contribution of our NHS staff, who make it possible for people to be successfully treated for cancer. To those staff, I am sure that we would all say, "Thank you". I thank them for everything that they do.

However, cancer outcomes cannot be improved by good will and determination alone—staff need support. That is why we need increased, co-ordinated action from the Scottish Government and more investment in the diagnostic workforce. The cross-party group on cancer published its inquiry report in November. The report highlighted that diagnostic workforce pressure is the key issue for survival rates in Scotland and is responsible for the pressure on cancer treatment services.

Our NHS staff are simply remarkable, but growing pressures in our health service are only making their job more difficult. The cancer waiting times target has not been met since 2012—eight years ago.

The latest figures from Government reveal that more than 4,000 vacant nursing posts exist, which is the highest ever vacancy rate.

It is unacceptable that we are in a situation in which the NHS does not have enough staff to be as effective as it could and should be in diagnosing cancer. We can and must do better, which is what we can all focus our attention on in the coming weeks and months. I hope that the Scottish ministers will listen to the calls to create a plan to meet the current and future needs of cancer patients, and will do so as quickly as possible.

Cancer is a disease that, sadly, touches many of our lives, and world cancer day is a global effort to ensure that the focus on how we reduce inequalities, improve research and survival rates

and, ultimately, save people's lives, remains high on the political agenda.

I am proud to play a small part in that by bringing the debate to the chamber today, so we can focus our efforts in this Parliament on improving outcomes for cancer patients in Scotland.

12:55

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in today's debate highlighting world cancer day, and I congratulate Monica Lennon on securing it. Members might recall that I led the world cancer day debate last year and focused a lot on unity and the need for us all to stand together to truly win the fight against cancer.

I also spoke about my wee sister Buffy, who is also a nurse, and her breast cancer journey. Four years ago, on 4 February—world cancer day—my sister had her first chemotherapy treatment. She now describes it as having taken her four years to feel the same mentally and emotionally as she did before.

This year's world cancer day theme is "I am and I will", but unity is still vital. I am proud to again wear my unity band, and I will continue to engage, listen and pay heed to research to cure cancer.

We know that one in two people will get cancer in their lifetime. However, over the past 40 years, survival rates have doubled and half the people who are diagnosed with cancer now survive, thanks to the great progress that has been made in cancer research. There is still a long way to go and I am pleased that the Scottish Government is delivering on its promises to improve cancer services the length and breadth of the country.

In Dumfries and Galloway, we have 1,135 people currently living with cancer and around 530 cancer deaths each year. As D and G is a large rural region, we have several challenges in the delivery of cancer services.

Along with South Scotland MSP colleagues, since my election, I have been actively lobbying for a change to the cancer pathway arrangements for the region. Currently, NHS Dumfries and Galloway is part of the south-east Scotland cancer network—SCAN—which means that patients who require more complex treatments or radiotherapy often have to travel to Edinburgh. That is a 260-mile round trip, which leads to patient discomfort, distress and frustration, particularly for those from Stranraer and Wigtownshire in the west of the region,.

Continued campaigning by local residents and a local action group led to NHS Dumfries and Galloway last year agreeing to change the current arrangements to have a more flexible approach

that is focused on patient choice. That is welcome. However, many local people are concerned about the timescale for implementing the change. Therefore, I ask the minister whether the Scottish Government can assist the board in implementing appropriate changes to the cancer network arrangements, which is hugely important to local people and their families.

Although we have challenges, there is great work going on throughout the region. Research is being conducted in Dumfries and Galloway, and nationally, on a simple home self-test for cervical screening for human papillomavirus. Earlier, I was interested to hear the minister's response to my supplementary question on the national pilot programme for a self-test for HPV.

I want to touch on a recent cross-party approach with the local palliative care expert, Professor David Clark. A group, along with some local MSPs, are currently exploring the possibility of bringing a Maggie's centre to D and G to complement—not compete with—other services in the region, including those of Marie Curie, Macmillan Cancer Support and the local health board. The talks are still in the early stages, but we are excited about the prospect of pursuing the establishment of a Maggie's centre in Dumfries and Galloway, because Maggie Keswick Jencks lived near Dumfries. The group does great work putting on events, and we are trying to develop a process so that there is more support to enable it. I ask the minister to support us in progressing that.

Of this year's world cancer day theme of "I am and I will", my sister Buffy said, "I am a cancer survivor and I will be there to support others to survive their cancer, too."

12:59

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I congratulate Monica Lennon on securing the debate and on her excellent opening speech—in fact, we have heard two excellent speeches. As co-convenor, alongside Anas Sarwar, of the Parliament's cross-party group on cancer, I am delighted to have the opportunity to take part in a debate to mark world cancer day, which took place earlier this week. I also take this opportunity to thank all the organisations that provided useful briefings ahead of the debate.

The motion is right to highlight the progress that has been made over the past few decades in the doubling of survival rates. Half of people in Scotland with cancer now survive it, and Cancer Research UK aims to accelerate progress so that, by 2034, three in four people with the disease will survive it. What we need to see is an extra and significant focus on those cancers with lower survival rates, such as lung, pancreatic,

oesophageal and brain cancers. We also need to see more research into those types of cancer and innovative approaches to treatment.

All of us recognise the critical importance of early diagnosis to improving survival rates, especially in areas of high deprivation. I have been concerned by the waiting times in some parts of the country that have been highlighted recently, especially the waiting times for tests that will determine whether people have cancer. That issue emerged strongly in our CPG's report, as Monica Lennon highlighted.

I have challenged the Scottish Government to look to trying to change that position by, for example, piloting fast-track cancer diagnosis centres that are based on NHS England's rapid diagnostic and assessment centres. I hope that the minister will look at that issue again, because it is clear that we need to address the issues of late diagnosis and late presentation in our most deprived communities. We have achieved a great deal with public awareness campaigns in the past, particularly those for breast cancer and lung cancer. Such campaigns are needed to address cancers with very low early diagnosis.

I fully support Cancer Research UK's call for the Scottish Government to tackle issues in the diagnostic workforce across Scotland. That is essential, as demand for tests increases annually because of both the ageing population and staffing challenges. We need to see that workforce delivered, which is an issue that was outlined in the CPG's recent report.

Monica Lennon outlined specifically the concerning situation around lung cancer, for which only 27 per cent of diagnoses are for stages 1 or 2. The Scottish Government needs to make progress on some areas, as NHS England is doing, with a properly resourced pilot screening programme of lung health checks across the country. I know that the Government is currently engaged on that, but we need to see progress on it.

The Government must also renew its focus on minimising the time taken from diagnosis to treatment, and I hope that this debate can help take that forward. In December, official statistics showed that 654 cancer patients were still waiting longer than the 62-day standard for their first cancer treatment, with only two health boards meeting treatment targets. Ministers must now set out detailed plans to ensure that those targets are consistently met across Scotland.

I agree with the motion's recognition of some of the world-leading research into cancer that is taking place in Scotland, a lot of it in the academic institutions in Lothian, which is my region. That is something that, as a country, we should all

celebrate. The University of Edinburgh houses Cancer Research UK's brain tumour centre of excellence, which works alongside University College London on cutting-edge brain tumour research. Dr Steven Pollard and his team are to be hugely congratulated for their work in developing potential new treatments for the most common type of brain tumour in adults. Among many other notable successes achieved at the University of Edinburgh in the past year has been the programme of clinical trials that led to the approval of the new ovarian cancer treatment pathway.

Again, I welcome this debate and the focus that it and world cancer day bring to the treatment of cancer and support for cancer patients. We can rightly point to the progress that is being made and the importance of the world-class research that is going on in Scotland and across the UK. I hope that, as has already been highlighted in the debate, we can work together constructively to make sure that real strides forward continue to be taken over the coming years, especially for those cancers with the lowest survival rates, where we need to see more progress. That is going to take real investment and leadership by Scottish Government ministers, with the Parliament holding them to account on the way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I respectfully ask that members try to keep their speeches to four minutes, otherwise I will have to seek an extension to the debate, and that may not be appropriate.

13:04

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I, too, thank Monica Lennon for bringing this motion to Parliament today. I have spoken in many members' business debates on world cancer day over the years. I am always struck that this is a moment when party politics are truly left at the door of the chamber and we are all reminded that, including through members' tributes to colleagues, we share a common experience of friends and families who have been touched by cancer. The fact that so many of us can tell those stories speaks volumes about how important it is that we mark world cancer day and that we continue to raise this topic in the chamber.

As someone whose father died of bowel cancer, I highlight the plight of some of the less survivable cancers, such as brain, lung, oesophageal, stomach, liver and—I have raised this type of cancer many times in the chamber, so it is no surprise that I will raise it again today—pancreatic cancer. The Less Survivable Cancers Task Force charity does work in relation to those cancers. Some 44 per cent of cancer deaths in Scotland are caused by the less survivable cancers, only

one in five people are diagnosed early enough for life-saving treatment and the five-year survival rate is fewer than 14 per cent. I hope that the minister will be able to update us on how the Government is supporting research and better clinical outcomes for patients suffering from those cancers.

Today is also about highlighting the amazing work that is done in support of those affected by cancer. Under the theme, "I am and I will", each and every one of us is challenged by world cancer day to do something to support better outcomes for cancer patients in Scotland.

Like my colleagues, I am wearing my world cancer day unity band. I know that there is a call to do a 10,000 steps a day challenge in March. The brace on my knee means that I will not be doing that. However, last week, I attended a wonderful event in the home of Professor Andrew Biankin. He is the regius chair of surgery at the University of Glasgow and a Cancer Research UK clinician scientist. He is also the director of the Wolfson Wohl cancer research centre, which is focused on precision oncology, and he has leadership roles in national and international consortia in cancer genomics and therapeutic development.

Professor Biankin's work on precision medicine for pancreatic cancer—it is known as precision panc in this country—is truly world leading, and will make a huge difference in how cancer is treated in the future. The precision panc project was founded in 2017, bringing together expertise in pancreatic cancer from the University of Glasgow, Cancer Research UK's Beatson institute, Cancer Research UK's Cambridge institute, Cancer Research UK's Manchester institute and the Institute of Cancer Research in London, the University of Oxford and the national health service.

With 10,000 patients in the UK—and 330,000 worldwide—diagnosed with pancreatic cancer each year and 9,300 deaths a year in the UK, pancreatic cancer is predicted to become, by 2025, the second most lethal cancer after lung cancer. Pancreatic Cancer Scotland has asked that we recognise this as the decade of change, because we have to change those statistics and outcomes for less survivable cancers.

I spent a wonderful day with Professor Biankin in his house, where some 80 people celebrated Burns night and Australia Day and raised more than £5,000 for pancreatic cancer. He said:

"Fifty years ago, women didn't know how to examine their breasts, recognise breast cancer or have screening, but with a lot of investment of time, energy and money we have seen death rates from breast cancer fall from 50% to 10%. That's the difference we can make and that's what we need to do for all cancers, and particularly for pancreatic cancer."

13:09

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland)

(Lab): I, too, congratulate Monica Lennon on securing this debate to mark world cancer day, which is an opportunity for people everywhere to reflect on what can be done to support those with cancer and reduce the incidence of cancers in the future.

Today is a particularly important milestone in the battle with cancer in the north and the north-east of Scotland, with the board of NHS Grampian meeting this morning to approve the full business case for the ANCHOR centre at Foresterhill. The business case will now go to ministers for approval, with construction hopefully due to begin later this year. I hope that the minister can confirm that that final approval will be given very quickly.

The ANCHOR centre will allow joined-up services for patients with cancer and blood and bone marrow disorders. It will have specific provision for teenagers and young adults and it will facilitate clinical trials, research and teaching on the Foresterhill campus, which is shared with Aberdeen University medical school.

ANCHOR stands for Aberdeen and north centre for haematology, oncology and radiotherapy. The existing ANCHOR unit at Aberdeen royal infirmary has been providing care and support to cancer patients from across the north of Scotland since 1997, and the new ANCHOR centre will build on that fine legacy.

The Friends of ANCHOR is one of the north-east's foremost healthcare charities. I know that Jimmy Milne and his fellow fundraisers will continue to back up the work of healthcare professionals in the new centre of excellence that they have helped create and inspire, which will support patients in Aberdeen and Grampian, and across the north and the north-east. A regional approach has been critically important to cancer care in the north of Scotland for a generation, and it will be critically important in reducing waiting times and improving outcomes for cancer patients in the future. Prompt decisions and an early start on the new centre would certainly send all the right signals about the intentions of the board and the Government.

It is important to acknowledge the challenges that the project has already faced. Those challenges have not been made in the north, but have come from the calamities that in recent months have overcome the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow and the new children's hospital in Edinburgh, which caused further investigation in Aberdeen. Those serious setbacks to NHS care in Scotland's two largest regional centres inevitably had implications for Foresterhill, and they have added to the costs and

the time required to complete the ANCHOR centre and the Baird family hospital, which has also been given the go-ahead by NHS Grampian today.

Public bodies and, indeed, ministers are rightly called to account when projects go over schedule and over budget, as we heard at First Minister's question time today. In this case, it is far better that we have ensured at this stage that there will be no repeat of the things that went wrong elsewhere, and I hope that the Baird and ANCHOR plans can now go forward with support from all concerned.

I want to mention the latest fund-raising initiative of another locally based cancer charity, CLAN, which stands for Cancer Link Aberdeen and North. It supports patients travelling to Aberdeen for treatment and their families. CLAN's light the north initiative will create a trail of lighthouse sculptures in public places across Grampian, Orkney and Shetland, to raise awareness of and funding for cancer care. The sculptures will be auctioned at the end of the year.

Tackling cancer is a job for Governments and health boards, but not for them alone. CLAN, Friends of ANCHOR and the many other cancer charities that we have heard about today also do a fantastic job on behalf of us all.

13:13

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

I endorse Lewis Macdonald's remarks about the excellent work that is done by Friends of ANCHOR, CLAN and other charities in the north-east of Scotland. Of course, I thank Monica Lennon for the opportunity to discuss this important subject.

I had a look at my previous speeches on the subject, and I found four: one on breast cancer, one on lung cancer, one on skin cancer and, most recently, one on young people's cancers. We are all aware that there is a wide variety of cancers.

I turn to the number of cancers that we are diagnosing. By 2027, we will be looking, perhaps, at as many as 40,000 per year, and 110 people will be diagnosed with cancer every day.

Both my parents died of cancer, some considerable time ago: one of breast cancer and one of prostate cancer.

Mortality rates have decreased by 12 per cent in males and 7 per cent in females over the past 10 years, so we are making progress. As we increase our diagnostic capability, we are improving our treatment capability and outcomes.

The lowest survival rates are those for lung cancer and small cell lung cancer, smoking being the cause in many cases. Of course, people being

overweight is also a significant cause of cancer. I sit on the very edge of the normal range of body mass index, occasionally dodging out of it and then struggling to come back in. However, too many people in our communities—for all sorts of reasons, and particularly in areas of social and economic disadvantage—are suffering from problems due to being overweight or greater consumption of tobacco. There are a wide range of risk factors that we have to address, as other speakers in the debate have mentioned. Deprived communities are part of the inequalities that we have to tackle.

Cancer Research UK tells us—it is an exact figure—that 41.5 per cent of cancers are potentially preventable. Beyond the prevention work that we have to undertake to get smoking, obesity and our consumption of alcohol under control, one thing that is helpful is early detection. I am in the age group of people who get an annual postal thing that allows them to test for blood in their stool, which is a primary indication of potential bowel cancer. I welcome the fact that the number of samples that one has to take went down from five, as it was when I entered the system, to three, and that it is now just one. The process is not highly engaging or exciting, and the more that we can deconstruct barriers to people doing the test, the better.

That is particularly important for me because I have another condition that tends to give false positives. NHS Grampian has been extremely good in showing in the follow-up that there was a false positive. I have far too intimate knowledge of one of its cameras, which has looked at my innards. I hope that NHS Grampian will continue to give me support as and when it may be necessary. Most recently, it offered me an appointment on a Sunday, which I thought was superb because it did not interfere with other things. That is an example of the innovative approaches that are being taken.

The Scottish Government's detect cancer early programme, which has been running for a number of years, is a major contributor to detecting early signs of cancer, and I hope that it continues to do so. I hope that we all manage to avoid cancer or, if we get it, that we get the treatment that we need. I am sure that we shall.

13:17

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank Monica Lennon for bringing this debate to Parliament and I thank all the organisations that have supplied us with briefings. It is really important that we continue to discuss cancer in the chamber, given that it affects so many of our families and friends and so many of the people whom we represent. As has been discussed, one

person in two will now develop cancer in their lifetime.

Debates such as this give us an opportunity to highlight the great work that is being done in research and treatment. As the motion states,

“over the last 40 years survival rates have doubled, with half of people in Scotland now surviving cancer”.

However, such debates also allow us to highlight that those efforts are sometimes hampered by workforce challenges. Miles Briggs and Stewart Stevenson touched on the importance of early detection, but there is currently a 10 per cent vacancy rate in diagnostic consultants, which means that services are struggling to meet a level of demand that will only increase as our population ages.

It makes sense that the earlier cancer is diagnosed, the better, but our overstretched services will not be able to diagnose it early if they are subject to increased pressure with no corresponding increase in the workforce. It is essential that we properly resource and staff our cancer services, and Cancer Research UK is calling on the Scottish Government to urgently create a workforce plan to meet current and future need.

We must continue to use these debates to draw attention to rarer cancers. I met the British Dental Association this week, and I note that Scotland has one of the highest incidences in Europe of oral cancer, and rates are rising. There is low awareness of oral cancer, and of pancreatic and hepatocellular cancers. Like others here today, I spoke recently in a debate about pancreatic cancer awareness. That was a great opportunity to draw attention to that particular type of cancer, which has the lowest survival rate, given that its symptoms are vague and not commonly known.

As members know, in previous world cancer day debates, I have highlighted the benefits of physical activity. I want to reiterate that point. Being regularly active can, for example, reduce the level of inflammation in the bowel, helping to prevent bowel cancer, and reduce oestrogen levels, lowering the risk of breast cancer. A 2016 study showed that leisure-time physical activity was also linked to reduced risks of liver cancer, stomach cancer, kidney cancer, myeloid leukaemia, myeloma, and cancers of the head and neck, rectum and bladder. I wholly appreciate that we will never succeed in preventing all cases of cancer, but we must emphasise the importance of physical activity in prevention.

Physical activity and exercise can also lower the risk of being overweight and obese—the second biggest preventable cause of cancer in the UK after smoking, as Stewart Stevenson mentioned. However, as the motion states, deprivation is a

major determinant of who develops cancer and who does not. Deprivation also has a significant impact on surviving cancer: the risk of developing lung cancer is higher, and the probability of surviving lung cancer is lower, among people living in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. Historically, engagement with screening services has been low in deprived areas and Cancer Research UK has stated that bold, innovative efforts are needed to improve the early diagnosis of cancer. We must do everything that we can to optimise cancer screening. Clearly, addressing health inequalities must be at the centre of efforts to improve cancer outcomes. It is our duty to reach every person who is at risk.

We know that access to good-quality green space and sports facilities is not equitable. We can talk until we are blue in the face about physical activity helping to prevent cancer, but if there is nowhere nearby for people to play football or to jump on their bikes—if there is even nowhere nearby to go for a long walk that is not along a congested, polluted road—opportunities to be active are limited. We must remove the barriers to people making choices that will improve their health and lower their risk of developing cancer.

I appreciate that I have gone over time, so I will conclude my remarks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You just went a smidgen over.

13:22

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Monica Lennon for securing this important debate on recognising world cancer day. Today, our thoughts go out to the individuals and families who are affected by this dreadful disease. In the debate, we will also raise awareness of cancer, emphasise paths towards prevention and highlight recent research. The entire world unites to save millions of preventable deaths each year by educating individuals to take action against the disease early on.

For many of us, cancer is not an unfamiliar disease. Unfortunately, almost every one of us knows someone who has been deeply affected by it. In fact, Cancer Research UK reports that one in two people in Scotland will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.

Although cancer is a common threat, actions to combat it seem to be uncommon in our society. Despite current communication strategies highlighting the importance of early detection, people do not seem to have a clear understanding of the purpose of screening. Research that was conducted in 2018 concluded that awareness of the preventability of cancer through screenings was low across all demographic groups in the UK.

Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting the incredible staff from Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust. The trust reports that one in four Scottish women do not get a regular smear test. Although 75 per cent of cervical cancers are prevented by cervical screenings, over a quarter of young women are too embarrassed or ashamed to attend smear tests and over two thirds do not think that the tests will reduce their risk of cervical cancer.

That concerning level of stigma, anxiety and misunderstanding of smear tests steers women away from getting an important test that could ultimately save their lives. It is not a test for cancer; rather, it is a test that can prevent cancer. There are overwhelming statistics to prove that early detection can lead to prevention. We are lucky to have organisations such as Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust that are particularly focused on improving women's understanding of smear results while addressing fears about cancer.

Promoting early detection has proven to be successful in combating some cancers. Over the years, Scotland has seen overwhelmingly positive survival rates for bowel cancer due to increased screenings and tests. According to the Scottish Public Health Observatory, it is the third most commonly diagnosed cancer among men and women. In June 2007, national health service boards initiated the Scottish bowel screening programme, which invites individuals aged 50 to 74 to participate in the screening test for cancer every two years. The test aims to catch cancer at an early stage and identify pre-cancerous growths. Ten years later, the programme reduced barriers to early diagnosis by simplifying the collection process with the aim of increasing participation, and so effectively increasing survival rates to 60 per cent for both sexes. That notable survival rate comes as a result of Government intervention to encourage people to seek out precautionary action.

Although we have made great improvements in bowel cancer detection and treatment, more action will be necessary if we are to improve the early diagnosis of cancer. In particular, new approaches are needed to improve steps to combat lung cancer, which happens to be Scotland's biggest single cause of death. The survival rates for lung cancer are strikingly low: only 9.5 per cent of people who are diagnosed with lung cancer will survive. Unfortunately, Cancer Research UK has not seen much improvement in survival rates over the past 40 years.

Smoking is a major cause of lung cancer. Action on Smoking and Health states that

"current smokers are 15 times more likely to die from lung cancer than life-long non-smokers".

As well as being the single greatest cause of cancer, smoking is also the single most avoidable risk factor for it. Scotland has made tremendous progress in tobacco control, by setting out a range of measures to shift attitudes towards smoking. It has introduced legislation on making public places smoke free and continues to make investments in tobacco control activity that have included more than £15 million a year on smoking cessation services and measures to stop young people smoking.

Since the implementation of those programmes, the proportion of Scotland's population who are smokers has dropped to 18 per cent. Through the 2034 tobacco-free initiative, we hope to see that number fall below 5 per cent. Today, on world cancer day, I urge members to help their loved ones to quit smoking or, if they themselves are smokers, to make the decision to quit for good.

In my constituency—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, I am sorry—you must conclude there. I am being quite hard on members, because the Parliament resumes at 2 o'clock and we do not have a lot of time.

13:26

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I thank Monica Lennon for securing this important debate, in which we have made it clear that tackling cancer remains an absolute priority that is at the forefront of all our minds. It makes me immensely proud to join other members in wearing a unity band, which shows the solidarity and unified approach that best represent how we should tackle the disease.

I take this opportunity to commend the fantastic work of all our national health service staff who help in the fight, and also the valuable work of many cancer charities that support people with cancer in Scotland.

If I might take this opportunity to move off script for a second, I will thank the staff at Aberdeen royal infirmary. My dad, who was suffering from stomach cancer, recently had fantastic treatment there from Mr Shayanthan Nanthakumaran—who, fortunately, was very happy to be called Shay. That is a difficult form of cancer to treat, but I am absolutely delighted to say that my father got out of hospital at Christmas time, having had the all-clear. He is now doing really well and no longer needs care support. I say a huge thank you to Shay and all the staff at the infirmary for the support that they gave my dad at what was a difficult time.

In mentioning Aberdeen, I should also thank Lewis Macdonald for his comments on the

Aberdeen and north centre for haematology, oncology and radiotherapy. I hear his request to ensure that when the business case for it comes before ministers, approval for it should be given timeously, as it should be.

It is important that we recognise that some 40 per cent of cancers are preventable, so we should continue to take brave and often world-leading public health actions to tackle them. Scotland has proudly led the way through initiatives such as the ban on smoking in public places and minimum unit pricing on alcohol. In a similarly brave approach, we are working on a bill to reduce the promotion of foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt.

We all know the ramifications of smoking. It is the single most significant threat to public health in Scotland, which is why we have a national target—a UK first—for all health boards to achieve quits in smoking populations from the most deprived communities, in which smoking rates are highest.

Monica Lennon mentioned wealth inequalities. Scotland is the only part of the UK that sets targets based on its least well-off communities. Through the collective efforts that have been made across the country, we have already reduced smoking rates by 7 per cent since 2013, and in 2018 the smoking rate went down to just 19 per cent. Alison Johnstone made the very good point that other factors particularly affect people in our most deprived communities. We need to ensure that we focus our attention on those, in addition to smoking.

Screening is also a key weapon in our armoury and we work hard to maximise the opportunities around it. David Torrance talked about cervical cancer: in recent years, thanks to the roll-out of the HPV vaccine, we have seen a huge reduction in the amount of cervical pre-cancers. Emma Harper talked about the self-testing pilot and I am very pleased that Scotland will roll that pilot out across the country later in the year. I hope that that important initiative will help to remove some of the barriers to that potentially life-saving testing. Similarly, thanks to a new UK-leading bowel screening test, which Mr Stevenson talked about, we detect more bowel cancers than ever before.

It is one thing to talk about those exciting developments, but another to ensure that they are available to people who need them. Thirty-four different projects have been funded by the Government in order to tackle screening inequality and to ensure that everyone has equitable access to those potentially life-saving interventions.

Stewart Stevenson also talked about early detection. We know that the earlier a cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat and even cure.

That is why we launched our £41 million detect cancer early programme.

I am mindful of the time, but I will make this important point: 25.5 per cent of people in Scotland were diagnosed at stage one in 2017 and 2018, which is an increase of 9.4 per cent from the baseline years of 2010 and 2011. That means that 743 more people are diagnosed at the earliest stage and 1,026 more people are diagnosed at stages one and two combined, compared with the baseline numbers. More people are being seen and more people see their family and friends survive a cancer diagnosis than ever before.

Lung cancer, as Monica Lennon said, is one of the most difficult cancers to treat. Compared with the baseline, we are seeing a 46 per cent increase in the number of stage one lung cancer diagnoses, which equates to 75 more people being diagnosed at stage one each year. That is very important.

The new, overarching detect cancer early social marketing campaign, survivors, is live. The campaign has been developed in close consultation with the Scottish cancer coalition and aims to reduce fears around cancer and to empower people to take early action, be that visiting their GP practice or attending screening when invited.

Miles Briggs mentioned innovative approaches to treatment. Scotland leads the way in radiotherapy and is the only UK nation to implement a rolling refresh programme that ensures that all five of our cancer centres regularly use the most up-to-date linear accelerators. As a result, all our centres deliver cutting-edge modern radiotherapy.

Alison Johnstone rightly talked about the workforce. In the midst of all the Brexit uncertainty, our health workforce continues to deliver, with care and commitment, for Scotland's patients. NHS Scotland's staffing figures are at record high levels, having grown over the past seven consecutive years. I have a whole lot of stats here about how we are making a difference with regards to recruitment in areas such as radiology in particular, but I will skip on.

With regards to world cancer day, a prime example of the theme of unity is our £18 million partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support, which is the first of its kind in the UK and will ensure that every cancer patient in Scotland has access to a key support worker, who can provide emotional, financial and practical support.

A lot of work has been done and we have to continue those efforts. The cabinet secretary will shortly announce an update on our cancer strategy that will set out a range of new actions to help to drive that continued improvement, and I

can assure Clare Adamson that action around less survivable cancers will be key to that update. I hope that colleagues across the chamber will welcome and support those new actions when they are taken.

I thank colleagues across the chamber for coming together and I thank Cancer Research UK, Marie Curie and other charities, as well as all of our fantastic NHS staff, who work tirelessly to look after us when we most need it.

13:34

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on evidence of excellence and equity in Scottish education. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I welcome this opportunity to set out the evidence of excellence and equity in Scottish education. Education is the highest priority of this Government simply because it can help Scotland's children and young people to reach their full potential. That goal is governed by the twin aims of equity and excellence. Equity is about closing the attainment gap so that all our young people can achieve to their maximum potential, and excellence is about raising the standard across our education system.

I have always made it clear that we need to work together to ensure the best outcomes for our young people. That was the approach that was taken when creating, developing and implementing the curriculum for excellence—a change that all parties here supported and that has attracted international endorsement. The Government has taken a range of actions, in partnership with our education system, to ensure that we deliver practical action to achieve excellence and equity.

We have expanded teacher numbers to a 10-year high and increased the focus on enhancing learning and teaching, strengthening leadership, reducing workload and promoting teacher empowerment. We have issued curricular guidance that reinforces the critical importance of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing at the heart of curriculum for excellence. Through pupil equity funding, we have empowered schools with the resources and flexibility that they need to close the attainment gap and meet the distinctive needs of pupils and, through the Scottish attainment challenge, we have increased the capacity of the local authorities and schools that face the greatest challenges. We have strengthened the capacity to support improvement in our education system by creating regional improvement collaboratives and expanding the work of Education Scotland.

I am wholly committed to building on those measures to ensure that we focus our efforts on improving the achievements of our children and young people. In considering the performance of our education system, it is vital that we draw on the broadest range of information to inform that

judgment. It was for that reason that the Government consulted on a framework that would assess the progress made in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. We did not opt for one piece of information to judge that progress, but drew together a range of indicators. I will highlight some specific data and facts that demonstrate that approach.

First, the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels, published in December, show that reading, writing, listening and talking are improving across almost every level. The same is true for numeracy—there is improvement against almost every measure. On the attainment gap, the figures show that among the most disadvantaged pupils, attainment rose at all stages in numeracy, and for literacy it rose at primaries 1, 4 and 7.

Looking specifically at the 11 key measures to assess progress in closing the attainment gap, which were first published in 2017, we have seen improvement in two thirds of the measures for which we have comparable data. When we set our approach to measuring the poverty-related attainment gap, we also published some deliberately challenging stretch aims. Those are unapologetically ambitious and designed to guide progress in closing the attainment gap. They provide a clear and consistent reference point by which Scotland can navigate over the long term.

That long-term approach is reflected in the advice of the international council of education advisers. It has made it clear that Scotland is heading in the right direction. More than that, it has made it clear that achieving excellence and equity is a long-term task and has told us that steady, incremental gains are necessary in order to deliver sustainable improvements towards closing the gap. That is exactly what we are doing. Finally, we agree with the council's assessment that we now need a period of consolidation and stability to ensure that improvements have time to become embedded.

The performance of the education system can be seen in the academic results that it generates and, of equal importance, in the number and breadth of vocational qualifications that are achieved by our young people. Statistics show that achievement at national level 5 is up. In 2006-07, the percentage of school leavers getting a level 5 qualification, such as nationals, or better was 71.1 per cent; in 2017-18, it was 85.9 per cent.

Although direct comparisons cannot always be made with previous years, because of changes in how qualifications are recorded, we can say, in looking at the past few years, where direct comparisons can be made, that there has been an increase of almost 9 percentage points from 77.1 per cent in 2009-10.

Performance at level 6—highers—has also improved. When the Government took office, significantly less than half of pupils left school with a higher or equivalent, or better. Now almost two thirds—62.2 per cent—of pupils achieve at least that level. Again, direct comparison cannot always be made, but where it can, we find that the proportion of pupils who got a higher or better went up from 50.4 per cent in 2009-10 to 62.2 per cent in 2017-18. The attainment gap is closing here, too. For those who achieve higher level awards or better, the gap between the most and the least well-off has fallen by almost a fifth since 2009-10.

Building on those positive achievements, we can see that the percentage of school leavers who progress to higher education has steadily improved from 36.2 per cent in 2009-10 to 41.1 per cent in 2017-18. The percentage of school leavers who go on to a positive destination has steadily increased and, in 2017-18, it was at 94.4 per cent.

We also see strong performance across a broad range of pathways and awards. The achievement of vocational qualifications at level 5 and above has increased from 7.3 per cent in 2013-14 to 14.8 per cent in 2017-18. The achievement of vocational qualifications at level 6 and above has increased from 1 per cent in 2013-14 to 3.8 per cent in 2017-18, and more than 64,000 skills-based qualifications were achieved in 2019, which is more than a third more than the number that were attained in 2014. [*Interruption.*]

Taken together, the evidence is clear: improvement is being made in Scotland's schools. However, I make it clear to Parliament that I highlight those figures not to claim that everything is wonderful in education and nothing needs to change—that is not my message. My message is that we have made a series of reforms to education that are designed to improve performance and which international experts tell us are correct. Those reforms are designed to achieve long-term, sustained improvement in education, and the evidence tells us that they are starting to work. We will continue to focus on and invest in those areas in which improvements are needed.

I turn to the issue that Jackson Carlaw raised at First Minister's question time last week, which prompted this statement. In highlighting higher pass rates by subject, Mr Carlaw painted a picture of unremitting negativity, but when we look at the big subjects—those that are taken by the most pupils—we can see that pass rates have increased in the majority of the top 10 since 2015. The pass rates in maths, chemistry, modern studies, physics, biology and geography, which are major subjects, are all up. It is not the case

that some subjects matter more than others, but it is entirely right that we should look at the whole picture and acknowledge the successes.

We should also acknowledge that there is volatility in pass rates. Last year, there was an increase in the pass rate at national 5 and a fall in the pass rate at higher. We cannot expect there to be a continual increase in pass rates. As Parliament knows and would expect, we always examine any issues as part of our review of performance in the education system. As I said in the chamber on 15 January, I will publish analysis of the 2019 exam diet in due course.

As a result of curriculum for excellence, young people have more choices and options than they have ever had. We should not judge some subjects—some “traditional” subjects, as they are described by some—as being more valuable than others. Scotland's curriculum places learners at the heart of education, and we want each young person to choose the right blend of courses, achievements and awards to give them the best possible chance of success in life and work.

We can say with confidence that our education system is delivering. A record proportion of young people from all backgrounds are achieving positive destinations; more young people from disadvantaged communities are going to university; and an expansion of choices has led to there being more options than ever before for young people to meet their aspirations.

However, it is essential that we are always open to considering how further improvement might be delivered. Alongside regular monitoring, a full review of the curriculum, which was voted for by Parliament, will seek to identify any areas for potential development to ensure that the curriculum as a whole effectively strengthens the education of Scottish young people. The review will look into the intentions of the policy, analyse the extent to which it has been realised in schools across Scotland and provide recommendations on ways forward.

I have invited all parties to provide their input to the remit of the review, and I will consult local authorities and others in education before I finalise that agreement.

Further improvements can always be made, and we will strive to make them, but the evidence is clear that children and young people in Scotland are achieving strongly through the different educational pathways that they can choose. We have embarked on a reform of Scottish education that is working, is closing the attainment gap and raising standards, and is sustainable for the long term. Now is the time to stay the course, and to have trust in the evidence, in our teachers, our schools and our young people. If we do that, we

can help to create a bright future for all our young people.

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

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Presiding Officer, I apologise to you and the cabinet secretary for the earlier noises off while the cabinet secretary was delivering his statement.

I thank the cabinet secretary for prior sight of his statement and for the letter that he issued to the Education and Skills Committee yesterday, in which he set out the Scottish Government's initial response to the Conservative Party debate on 15 January, following the Opposition parties' call for a review of the broad general education as well as the senior phase. My response to that letter will be with the cabinet secretary this afternoon.

In the meantime, I will ask the cabinet secretary three things about his statement. What timescale does he envisage for the publication of the analysis of the 2019 exam diet, given that that information must surely already exist? What action will he take to measure the effectiveness of the pupil equity funding, which is obviously critical to raising attainment?

The cabinet secretary knows only too well that a wide range of education experts are concerned that curriculum for excellence has lacked a baseline measure from which it would have been possible to more accurately assess progress in literacy and numeracy over the implementation period and that there is on-going concern about whether we have the best data set for Scottish education. What is the cabinet secretary's response to that?

John Swinney: I look forward to receiving Liz Smith's input to the remit for the review. I hope that she understands that, if we are to do this properly, it must have adequate time. The timescale that I set out to the Education and Skills Committee and to Opposition party spokespeople is the timescale that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in our dialogue, has indicated is necessary to undertake such a review.

I will publish our analysis of the 2019 exam diet in due course. We have seen the publication of the subject analysis by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Individual subject reports have been published and are available publicly. The report that summarises the analysis of the diet will be published as soon as it is available.

On the effectiveness of PEF, I decided not to take an approach that would burden the education system with an almost transaction-by-transaction

analysis and audit of the utilisation of PEF funds. I said that I would trust the education profession—which we should do—to make the right judgments about how the resources of £120 million should be used, school by school, to close the attainment gap. We would see, in the data set that we put together after wide consultation on the framework to monitor the progress that is being made, how PEF is a contributory factor to that.

It was a matter of judgment, but I thought that it would intensify bureaucracy in our schools if I asked them to perform an audit of every way in which they spent their money. We will see the fruits of that in the closure of the attainment gap and the data that we have put forward.

Opinions are divided on the data set around curriculum for excellence. My view is the one that I formed during the aftermath of the decline in performance in the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. That is a survey, and when it indicates a decline in performance, it does not tell us where that decline is presenting itself around the country. We can get a generic picture, but we cannot identify where the issues are in the education system.

What we have put in place, through the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels, is a much broader data set that measures the performance of young people according to the judgments of teachers at primary 1, P4, P7 and S3. It enables us to look at a much bigger data set, to see where the challenges and the issues are. I can now look at data school by school and see that there are issues to be addressed in certain schools or local authorities, which information the SSLN did not give us and could never have given us.

I appreciate that there are divided opinions, but I assure Liz Smith that I am intensely interested in the data and the performance, as I want to make sure that where it matters, where we need to apply intervention and support, we have the data to enable us to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind the cabinet secretary that he is answering questions, not giving speeches.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of his statement, although it did not really contain anything new. The carefully selected and well-rehearsed set of numbers that he presents are designed not to elucidate what is happening in our schools but to obfuscate it. The basic facts are straightforward. Higher pass rates are down every year for the past four years: that is a trend, not volatility. The attainment gap in literacy and numeracy has barely moved: it increases through the school years and there is no prospect whatsoever of the

Government meeting its targets on closing the gap.

As for empowering schools with resources, teacher numbers remain 2,500 fewer than in 2007, and last week's local government benchmarking framework shows that we are spending less per pupil than we were in 2010—£288 less in primary and £129 less in secondary.

If the cabinet secretary cannot see that he has a problem, the public can. The benchmarking framework shows that satisfaction with local schools has plummeted by 10 per cent in the past five years. We trust teachers and schools, but, until the cabinet secretary accepts the evidence—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Come to the question, please.

Iain Gray: Why should we trust him?

John Swinney: Well, there was certainly nothing new in that question, either.

Mr Gray says that the information that I put on the record is not designed to provide elucidation. I think that it is designed to set out the fact that very real progress is being made in Scottish education, and I deeply regret that there is virtually nothing that Mr Gray can possibly find to welcome and support.

We are seeing improvement in performance against all the indicators that I cited—reading, writing, listening and talking—at almost every level. On the attainment gap, the figures show that, among the most disadvantaged pupils, attainment rose at all stages in numeracy, and it rose in literacy at P1, P4 and P7. Why can Mr Gray not welcome that and say that we are in the early stages of making progress? Because it does not fit his narrative, which is to run down Scottish education.

Mr Gray talked about resources: year on year, for the past three years—if my memory serves me right—we have seen an increase in the resource that is being spent on education at a local level.

Iain Gray: It is less than it was 10 years ago.

John Swinney: Mr Gray says that it is less than it was 10 years ago. Is Mr Gray aware of a thing called austerity? His party just fought an election, demanding increases in public expenditure because of the dreadful austerity that has been caused by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The main obstacle to this Parliament having the ability to make decisions on all the financial arrangements that are in front of us is Mr Gray, because he personally blocked it all in the Smith commission.

If Mr Gray is going to come here and moan about Scottish education, I ask him to refer to the facts that I have put on the record and

acknowledge that we have wrestled with an incredibly difficult financial climate that, on another platform, he would condemn as well.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open questions. We are very short of time, but I will try to get through them.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The international council of education advisers has made it clear that Scotland is heading in the right direction but that achieving excellence and equity should be seen as a long-term task. In the light of those comments, and in recognition of the evidence that the poverty-related attainment gap is narrowing, will the Deputy First Minister reaffirm the Scottish Government's commitment to achieving those long-term objectives?

John Swinney: I am very happy to do so. The international council of education advisers has given us very valuable advice about the need for us to make incremental progress to strengthen the performance of Scottish education, and I think that the data tells us that that is happening.

It is early days, but, as I have rehearsed with Parliament before, educational change takes time. Any of us who are familiar with education know that. However, the Government is determined to stay the course. We have taken a number of steps to improve performance. We are beginning to see the fruits of those steps, and we remain open to taking other measures that will demonstrate that we can close the attainment gap and improve the opportunities for young people.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The cabinet secretary is right to say that we need to look at higher pass rates as a whole, but we also need to look at trends within individual subjects. Although a definition of volatility would match subjects such as maths or chemistry, it would not match the likes of higher English, which has seen a consistently declining pass rate. Does the cabinet secretary accept that the forthcoming review should look not just at highers as a whole but at trends within individual subjects and at the articulation between national 4, national 5 and higher? In some subjects, national 4 and national 5 are not adequately preparing young people for the subsequent qualification level.

John Swinney: On the fundamental point that Mr Greer raises about higher English, for example, some of the foundations of that will be in the assumption of capacity and literacy, which will take place over a large number of years. Therefore, we must make sure that young people are able to acquire those skills over a long period in their education.

Mr Greer also raises specific issues about the articulation between individual qualifications. In the

original envisaging of the qualifications, it was never conceived that national 4 would be a progression to national 5. That relationship existed from previous standard grade arrangements but that design approach was never taken. There are issues with articulating from national 4 to national 5, which need to be reflected on. In the senior phase review, I am anxious not to have an extensive debate about qualifications. I am more interested in looking at the way in which curriculum for excellence is delivered in order to support its objectives, and I do not want it to be defined by the approach to qualifications. We are undertaking an assessment more of the curriculum than of the qualifications. I have written to Mr Greer and I will reflect carefully on the contribution that he makes to the review.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for sight of his statement.

We all agree that we want to create a bright future for our young people. The cabinet secretary claims to be reducing teachers' workloads, but an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report last year confirmed that Scotland's teachers work some of the longest hours in the world. Teachers want to do their best, but they spend so much time in front of their class that they do not have time for marking, lesson prep or the personal development that helps them to continue to improve as teachers. If the cabinet secretary is sincere about trusting the teachers' evidence, how will that be shown in the review?

John Swinney: Both of the substantive propositions in Beatrice Wishart's question are correct. One of them is that Scottish teachers' pupil contact hours are among the highest; the other is that there are determined measures to reduce unnecessary workload. I stress the word "unnecessary", because we will never get to a point where teaching is not a demanding career that requires hard work. People come into teaching wanting to do that, but they want to spend their time on developing learning and teaching, not on pursuing unnecessary bureaucracy. I am trying to attack unnecessary bureaucracy, to enable teachers to use their non-contact time to enhance the learning and teaching of young people. As I look around the education system, I see more and more evidence of teachers engaging in that collaborative activity. The Shetland Islands community that Beatrice Wishart represents contributes significantly to the work of the northern alliance, which fosters that collaboration. I intend to ensure that classroom teachers have the opportunity to be part of that exercise. On Tuesday, I will join the northern alliance in Aberdeen for the launch of its learning hub, which is designed to support teachers across the Highlands and Islands.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Equity is every bit as important as excellence. Therefore, can the cabinet secretary give a commitment today that the proposed review will explicitly look at the impact that curriculum design and delivery has had on the range of educational opportunities that are available to all pupils in Scotland, regardless of where they live? Will he ask the OECD to investigate whether, compared to affluent and urban areas, an unfair gap in provision exists in our deprived and rural communities?

John Swinney: Those are all valid issues for the review to look at. Although I will look in detail at the specific points that Oliver Mundell made, they strike me as entirely reasonable. Inventive ways to support the delivery of education in a way that overcomes geography being an obstacle to equity are being developed. One of them is taking place in the south of Scotland with the launch of the south of Scotland learning and skills network, which I will inaugurate in Dumfries during parliamentary recess next week.

On Monday, I took part in a fascinating discussion at the convention of the south of Scotland, at which the chair of Borders College and the principal of Dumfries and Galloway College shared with us their aspirations for the delivery of education through that approach. It will maximise access to education for young people in what I recognise is the very dispersed geography across the south of Scotland, where it is difficult to get young people into education—transport is a big obstacle—but where there is every opportunity for us to use technology and access to the learning estate to broaden access to learning opportunities.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Scottish Qualifications Authority figures show a 12 per cent drop in the number of senior phase pupil entries since 2013, and a decline in the number of pupils who are passing highers, from 77.6 per cent in 2016 to just under 75 per cent in 2019—a comparison that John Swinney was prepared to make for national 5s. At the Education and Skills Committee a couple of weeks ago, Fiona Robertson acknowledged that those figures illustrate a "fall in attainment". Is she correct—yes or no?

John Swinney: There are a number of points in Mr Johnson's question. The chief examiner described the 2019 diet as a

"strong set of results"

Those are the words of the chief examiner, not mine, and I am quite happy to rest on them.

We have to look at volatility in exam performance. We cannot expect exam pass rates to continuously go up. There will be volatility; we

saw, for example, that national 5 was down in 2018 and up in 2019. We have to look at that and learn any lessons that are here. However, fundamentally, the data that I put on record today demonstrates that, over the lifetime of this Government, there has been a very significant improvement in the attainment and performance of young people in Scotland.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): The OECD's 2015 review of Scottish education endorsed curriculum for excellence while urging the Scottish Government to continue to be bold with its reforms to develop a world-leading education system. Does the Deputy First Minister share my view that teachers now need a period of stability in order to focus their attention on the teaching and learning practices in their classes?

John Swinney: I have been anxious to say to the teaching profession that I will do my level best to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, which we are making headway on. I note that we are also making headway on the way in which we are cooperating with the professional associations in taking that forward.

As I rehearsed with Beatrice Wishart, we are also creating opportunities for teachers to be involved in enhancing learning and teaching, which teachers need to concentrate time on. I am keen to make sure that teachers are given clarity of direction, which they have got from me. Excellence and equity will be the drivers of the Government's education policy for the duration of the parliamentary session, which provides stability and certainty for the teaching profession. I hope that we will have time to reflect on the issues that we learn of from the review, which will become apparent in the spring of 2021, having built on the good foundations that we have established.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): On the availability of evidence of excellence and equity, what consideration is the cabinet secretary giving to following the advice of numerous educational experts and introducing a new form of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy, as well as taking Scotland back into international studies such as the trends in international maths and science survey and the progress in international reading literacy study?

John Swinney: I dealt with some of those issues in my answer to Liz Smith, because there is a fundamental disagreement. In almost all questions in education, there is never any unanimity. However, there is—possibly—unanimity on pursuing excellence and equity as our objectives. Some experts say that we should be doing what Alison Harris said; other experts say that we should be doing exactly what I am doing.

As I rehearsed in my answer to Liz Smith, I am keen to have available to our education system data that can show where our system is performing well, and where it is not performing well. If we do not have that data, as was the case with TIMSS, PIRLS and the SSLN, we cannot address underperformance in the education system. We need a combination of the data that I have now commissioned, which has acquired the status of official statistics from the chief statistician, who judges the material to be good and reliable data, and international comparisons that come from the programme for international student assessment, or PISA.

To me, that is a reasonable data set for us to build on, because it allows us to see how we are comparing with other countries—of course, in the latest PISA survey we saw a significant rise in reading performance and our science and mathematics performance was on the OECD average although, obviously, we want to improve on that—and the curriculum for excellence levels data tells us how we are getting on school by school and pupil by pupil, which helps us to support young people where they need our support.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement. I apologise to Gillian Martin, Mary Fee, Rona Mackay and Alasdair Allan for being unable to reach their questions. I ask members to have a think about how long questions and answers are taking.

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Economy

14:30

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is portfolio questions on the rural economy. Members should note that question 4 has been withdrawn and that therefore only questions 6 and 8 are grouped.

Agriculture and Climate Change Strategic Group (Meetings)

1. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when the agriculture and climate change strategic group will next meet. (S5O-04103)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): The group's most recent meeting was on Monday this week, and I attended it for the first half.

Liz Smith: The minister will know that media reports suggest that agriculture in Scotland is responsible for 23.9 per cent of all emissions. Despite that, the NFU Scotland reports that

"The greenhouse gas footprint of beef produced in the UK is 60 per cent LOWER than the average for the rest of the world".

What more can the Scottish Government do to ensure that the Scottish public feel that they are supporting local beef producers and are not contributing to climate change problems?

Mairi Gougeon: That is exactly what we want to do, and what we are doing. I want to give the clear message that the Scottish Government sees farmers not as the problem, but as very much a part of the solution. It has not helped that, in recent times, we have seen downright misrepresentation in various television programmes that have conflated systems around the world with farming systems here, when they are absolutely nothing like them.

There is a lot of work to be done. We need to acknowledge better the good work that farmers are doing, and to consider how we can better advertise that and get the word out about what is happening.

To that end, we are working on various schemes. One is the carbon positive initiative, which I believe was referred to in *The Press and Journal* this week. That work, which is being led by the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society, with financial support from the Scottish Government, aims to gather data on soils, woodland, livestock and renewable energy in order to provide a

complete picture of what farms and crofts are doing to mitigate climate change. Ultimately, that will be a national online programme for the farming industry that will give farmers all the information that they need about their contribution to, and mitigation of, climate change.

The SAOS is also working with the James Hutton Institute and Scottish Forestry to gather data for the sector on carbon sequestration, and with the ANM Group, which is a north-east farming co-operative that is involved in the livestock part of the programme through its farm profit programme.

Using the information from all that work, we need to get the message out, and enable farmers to get the message out, about the positive contribution that they are making.

Good Food Nation Bill

2. **Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when it will publish its good food nation bill. (S5O-04104)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): Work is under way on drafting the bill, and we plan to publish it as part of the legislative programme that is set out in the programme for government for this parliamentary year.

Mary Fee: We know that food bank use has soared in the past decade and that the Government cannot rely on donations and people's good will to feed the poorest people. What does the cabinet secretary envisage the bill will do to tackle food poverty? Will it include a statutory right to food?

Fergus Ewing: Mary Fee raises an important point about the sad consequences of the policies of austerity that have been pursued by the London Government for far too long. It is important to say that the Scottish Government has done a huge amount to ameliorate the poverty that has, sadly, resulted from the period of austerity. For example, in 2018-19 we invested more than £1.4 billion in targeted support for low-income households, including more than £100 million to mitigate the worst impacts of United Kingdom Government welfare cuts, and we have increased our fair food fund to £3.5 million this year, in order to provide continued support.

Our consultation did not recommend inclusion of a right to food, but proposed that Scottish ministers should have regard to international obligations that are wider than just the right to food, when developing statements of policy on food. We look forward to publication of the bill in due course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we keep supplementary questions short please?

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): How is the cabinet secretary supporting local authorities' environmental health departments at a time when numbers of plant-based and vegan food and drink outlets and producers are increasing?

Fergus Ewing: We do a wide range of work with local authorities—for example, we have the food for life programme, through which we work with local authorities, encouraging them to provide fresh and local food and locally procured food. Many local authorities are doing a terrific job. I visited Crown primary school in my constituency, which provides a wide variety of nutritious meals—obviously including fruit and vegetables—to its pupils, and also uses a local butcher that supplies a large number of schools. That is the sort of work that stands Scotland's children in good stead.

Scotch Beef (DNA Traceability)

3. **Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to provide full DNA traceability to the Scotch beef brand. (S5O-04105)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government knowledge transfer and innovation fund recently awarded Quality Meat Scotland almost £100,000 in grant funding for a project looking at Scotch beef protected geographical indication traceability.

Angus MacDonald: It is clear that there would be benefit to our world-class beef industry from a DNA traceability system, which would take the existing quality assurance and brands' integrity measures that are currently in place to a new level.

However, does the cabinet secretary share my concern that following the second reading of the UK Government's Agriculture Bill on Monday 3 February, the Tories have shown their true colours, with the bill being set to grab devolved powers on farming and food production, and with a negotiating approach that would see a trade deal with Donald Trump undermining world-renowned Scottish produce, including our world-class Scotch beef and lamb?

Fergus Ewing: Angus MacDonald has raised a matter that is of concern not only to farmers on this side of the border, but to farmers throughout the United Kingdom. I read of a demonstration that is planned by farmers who are taking their case to Westminster.

The Scottish Government will not support any proposed future UK trade deals that would not

only undermine our high-quality regulatory standards, but would lead to consumers unwittingly purchasing products that are produced to a lower welfare standard. I made that position clear to UK ministers, and Roseanna Cunningham and I will make it clear again at the next interministerial meeting on 17 February.

It really is sad that the UK Government has provided no clarity at all on the topic. I understand that the UK Minister of State for International Trade, Mr Conor Burns, indicated in an exchange with our Minister for Trade, Investment and Innovation, Ivan McKee, that he expects there to be reciprocal trade with the United States in agricultural produce. It also seems to be pretty clear that the President of the United States will be determined to get his agricultural produce into the UK market.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

GrASTech Project

5. **Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to support the GrASTech project, which aims to develop existing livestock farming technology to monitor and reduce methane production. (S5O-04107)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy (Fergus Ewing): GrASTech is a cross-Europe collaborative project to tackle the issue of methane emissions from livestock, which is a topic of significant interest for both the Scottish Government and Scottish agriculture. The Scottish Government currently invests £7.2 million annually in longer-term agricultural and rural research at Scotland's Rural College. That investment underpins the SRUC's success in securing the £250,000 grant provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for GrASTech. Scottish Government officials will work with DEFRA to ensure that the results of the project are used to help inform our future policy in that area.

Peter Chapman: I declare an interest as a partner in a farming business. The GrASTech project aims to develop an accurate way of measuring the methane produced by livestock reared outside on grass. Ninety per cent of Scotland's cattle are outdoors for a significant amount of the year and it is hoped that the project will identify sensible and practical measures that the farming industry can use to continue its already substantial efforts in the fight against climate change. I hope that the project will also produce hard facts and dispel some of the myths that have been circulating regarding the farming sector's effect on the environment.

What measures is the Scottish Government taking to further support farmers in their fight against climate change and what does it intend to do to challenge some of the dishonesty circulating regarding the industry's effect on the environment?

Fergus Ewing: We are doing a number of things there anent. First, I welcome the range of on-going activity, including Quality Meat Scotland's better grazing project, which works with livestock farmers across Scotland. I have mentioned our substantial support for the SRUC. I have had the opportunity to discuss with farmers the work of the monitor farm on improving the quality of grass. I have also seen improved agronomy techniques in minimising the use of fertiliser.

We will soon be bringing forward more details on plans to further encourage sustainable and low-carbon farming. I am very pleased that it is a topic on which members across the chamber share an approach to ensure not only that our farmers are producing some of the highest-quality meat in the world, but that they are doing so in a way that is sustainable and friendly to the planet. I am pleased that that meets with approval from members across the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A short supplementary question, please.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that many farmers and crofters are already shifting to a grass-fed approach for their livestock, as it is more sustainable and efficient. How is the Scottish Government further supporting that activity?

Fergus Ewing: Emma Harper is right to say that our livestock farmers play a key role in protecting our permanent grassland and the historic carbon sinks beneath it. We want all farmers and crofters to make the best use of their grasslands, produce high-quality food, improve sustainability and help to achieve our long-term environmental and climate targets.

There is a lot more that I could say, Presiding Officer, but as you know, I always try to be brief.

Food and Drink Sector (Impact of Proposed Immigration Controls)

6. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the United Kingdom Government's proposed immigration controls could have on Scotland's food and drink sector. (S5O-04108)

The Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development (Ben Macpherson): Current UK immigration policy does not recognise the needs of Scotland's key industries. James

Withers, chief executive officer of Scotland Food & Drink, has stressed that the food and drink sector employs 40,000 European Union nationals, with a further 46,000 roles needing to be filled by 2030.

The UK Government's proposals will restrict labour market access and could leave many of those roles in one of Scotland's critical industries unfilled. Our proposals for a Scottish visa would allow Scottish ministers, accountable to the Scottish Parliament, to develop a tailored policy within the UK immigration system to meet Scotland's distinct needs.

Gordon MacDonald: The minister will be aware that many EU citizens living and working in Scotland are employed in the food and drink sector, including at Burton's Biscuits in my constituency. Does he agree that instead of putting up restrictive barriers to our valued EU citizens staying in Scotland, the UK Government should drop the settled status scheme and introduce a system based on a declaration of proof of status?

Ben Macpherson: The Scottish Government has consistently sought to be constructive and solution focused in respect of the clear deficiencies within the UK Government's approach to the rights of EU citizens. We have long argued that, in place of the EU settlement scheme, the UK should adopt a declaratory system with the option of physical proof for those who desire it. That would avoid the need for people to make applications and would remove the threat of refusal, except in the most extreme circumstances.

As things stand in the current scenario, we are supporting EU citizens around Scotland to stay in Scotland, because that is what we want. We have provided significant resource, including to Citizens Advice Scotland, to support them in that. I am grateful to all those who are helping to support EU citizens to stay in Scotland, and I encourage more employers and MSPs to get behind that effort.

Proposed Scottish Visa (Impact on Rural Economy)

8. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its proposed Scottish visa could impact on the rural economy. (S5O-04110)

The Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development (Ben Macpherson): The current migration system is not working for our rural communities. The Scottish visa and rural migration pilot schemes, in line with the recommendation from the Migration Advisory Committee, could have a significant positive impact on the growth and sustainability of our rural economy. Those measures would allow Scotland

to attract and, crucially, retain people with the skills and attributes that we need for our communities to flourish.

The UK Government should engage positively and work with us to develop the pilots and to trial them in Scotland to encourage people to move to, and stay in, our rural communities.

Keith Brown: Does Ben Macpherson share my concerns about reports from a recruitment agency based in my constituency that specialises in sourcing staff from Europe for the rural hospitality sector, for which there is limited local seasonal labour, that in a recent recruitment drive only three people applied for positions, instead of the usual 40-plus applicants? Does he agree with the United Kingdom Migration Advisory Committee's recommendation that the UK should pilot tailored approaches for rural areas, and will he make a request for Scotland to host such pilots to address labour shortages in sectors such as the rural hospitality industry?

Ben Macpherson: I very much share Keith Brown's concerns. The example that he cites shows that the fact that we have now left the European Union makes us less attractive to migrant workers. We are competing with EU countries that want to attract the same individuals to work in their economies.

As Keith Brown said, and as I mentioned in my previous answer, pilots should be hosted here in Scotland. We have consistently said that to UK ministers and the Home Office since the previous Home Secretary mentioned the pilots on 23 January 2019. We will continue to engage with the UK Government and to press ministers to undertake the pilots, which will be to the benefit of the whole of Scotland.

Environmental Sustainability (Farming)

7. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support environmentally sustainable farming practices. (S5O-04109)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): The support that is provided to farmers, crofters and land managers clearly contributes to environmentally sustainable farming practices. Those receiving funding as direct payments must adhere to agricultural practices that are beneficial to the climate and the environment.

Our agri-environment climate scheme has successfully funded a range of activities that help to maintain and enhance our rich and varied natural environment, with almost 1 million hectares of land under environmental management.

Our new agricultural transformation programme will encompass the now statutory commitments on whole-farm emissions accounting, sustainability, innovation and an agricultural modernisation fund, in line with the climate emergency.

Ruth Maguire: I thank the minister for that very full answer. The minister will be aware that Boris Johnson has made it clear several times that he intends to allow genetically modified crops to be grown in England. What consultation has there been with the Scottish Government on that? Will the minister provide reassurance to concerned citizens about the Scottish Government's position on GM crop cultivation?

Mairi Gougeon: I can simply say that the United Kingdom Government has not consulted the Scottish Government on the matter. However, it is a devolved matter and I can categorically say that our position on GM has not changed. We have brought in domestic legislation that aligns with European Union law and allows us to maintain our opt-out of GM crop cultivation. We urge the UK Government to continue to align with EU standards on GM in the future.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): A new agricultural support system will be key to supporting environmentally sustainable farming and it is important that the transition period is used to prepare for that. When will the Government bring forward details on how the pilot schemes to develop the new system will be funded? Is it still the intention to cap direct payments to fund those pilots?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A short and quick answer from Mairi Gougeon, please.

Mairi Gougeon: I am happy to get back to the member with more detail on that, but a pilot is under way with Scottish Natural Heritage. I will get back to the member with further detail on how we plan to take that forward.

Budget 2020-21

14:50

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by Kate Forbes on the Scottish budget for 2020-21. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement.

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): Today, I present the Scottish budget for 2020-21. This is a budget that offers vision and leadership at a crucial moment for our country. Last week, the United Kingdom formally left the European Union and entered the transition period that is intended to last until December. That was not an outcome of Scotland's choosing, but, until Scotland has the opportunity to choose a different path, we must deliver the best possible outcomes for the people we represent. This budget provides an early opportunity for us to do that. It sets out a bold and ambitious programme, which we believe will have widespread public support and, as a result, should command the support of this chamber.

We will confirm today significant investment in our response to the global climate emergency and in strengthening our economy and improving our public services, because it is a budget that has wellbeing and fairness at its very heart. It is a progressive budget, and it will provide extra help to those who need it most, tackling inequalities and poverty, especially child poverty. Our wellbeing approach to the budget prioritises actions that have the greatest impact in improving lives across Scotland now and creating the conditions that are required to ensure the wellbeing of future generations.

However, it is also a budget that is presented in the context of the UK Government's decision to defer its budget last November. That decision has obliged us to make significant changes to this year's budget process. With support from the Finance and Constitution Committee, we have a bespoke budget process this year. The late UK budget has required the Scottish Government to present tax and spending plans for Scotland without certainty of our fiscal position next year. The timetable that has been agreed with the Finance and Constitution Committee should see the budget bill passed on 5 March—the week before the UK budget, on 11 March. We will have passed into law our spending plans, doing what we can to provide certainty and stability on behalf of the people of Scotland.

However, the financial and economic risk will not end there. The UK budget will still present a significant risk to the Scottish budget. This budget

contains our best-estimate, minimum level of funding that will be available to the Scottish Government in 2020-21. Updated economic forecasts and block grant adjustments will be available only when the UK budget is published. That requires the Scottish Government to use provisional forecasts as the basis for setting budgets, in line with the up-to-date forecasts of devolved tax income and social security expenditure that have been undertaken by the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

We have had to make assumptions about the Barnett consequential that will be added to the Scottish block as a result of the UK budget, and we have had to take decisions about devolved tax policy without knowledge of future UK policy. That position is not of our choosing, and it creates unnecessary challenges for public bodies, businesses and taxpayers right across Scotland.

The current timetable provides for royal assent by 30 March. Delaying the Scottish budget further would have undermined parliamentary scrutiny, increasing the risk that we would run out of time to pass the budget bill. Such an outcome would be in nobody's interest. Today's budget aims to provide as much certainty as possible to taxpayers, to public bodies and, above all, to local authorities, which urgently need to set their budgets for the year ahead.

It is hoped that all members of Parliament will unite behind our tax and spending plans. The Scottish Government is, of course, open to discussion with all parties about how we can best achieve that, but the clock is ticking.

A focus on fairness and our collective wellbeing underpins the measures that we are taking to drive an inclusive economy, tackle poverty and respond to climate change through a just transition. That focus also drives our approach to Scotland's public services. The budget will protect and improve those services, as part of our strong social contract with the people of Scotland.

In total, the budget provides—for the first time ever—funding of more than £15 billion for our health and care services. We are providing the capital for our programme of elective care centres; we are investing more than £9.4 billion in health and social care partnerships; we are investing £117 million in mental health; and we are delivering an increase of nearly 60 per cent in funding to reduce harm from alcohol and drugs, including support for the work of the new drug deaths task force.

We are also providing a real-terms increase in local government revenue support, as part of an overall funding package that delivers our key commitment on early learning and childcare; funds a fair pay deal for our teachers; and invests more

than £120 million in closing the attainment gap, with an additional £62 million provided outwith the settlement through the attainment Scotland fund.

To maintain low levels of reported crime and keep our communities safe, we are providing an additional £37 million for the Scottish Police Authority resource budget. That is well above the real-terms increase that we had promised, and it will ensure that Police Scotland has the money that it requires to maintain officer numbers at the current levels. That is coupled with an extra £6.5 million for community justice interventions, as part of our efforts to reduce reoffending rates. The budget provides capital funding of nearly £70 million for the prison estate, including a replacement for HMP Barlinnie and investment in the female estate.

The budget and the economy are, of course, inextricably linked—and both are being impacted by EU exit. Last week, the Bank of England downgraded its projections for the UK economy. The Scottish Fiscal Commission's forecasts for the Scottish economy, which were published today, again confirm not only that uncertainty about leaving the EU has held back growth over recent years but that EU exit will continue to be bad for our economy, holding back growth in trade and productivity.

Despite those challenging economic conditions, the economy continues to grow. We have a strong labour market with high employment and low unemployment, and with earnings growth that is outperforming previous forecasts. However, we must remember that the economic and fiscal forecasts that underpin the budget assume that a sensible agreement will be reached between the UK and the EU. Should that not be the case, we may be forced to reconsider our spending plans across all portfolios in order to mitigate, as much as we can, the unnecessary harm that will be caused if no agreement is reached.

The economic outlook has informed the progressive approach to tax that is taken in the budget. We already have the most progressive, fair and balanced income tax system in the UK, which raises additional revenue from those who can most afford it and protects public spending. That helps us to make Scotland the kind of country that we want it to be. It funds our public services, supports our economic infrastructure and helps those who are most in need.

In 2017, in the interests of providing certainty, the Scottish Government made a commitment that Scotland's income tax structure was settled for at least the duration of this parliamentary session. Today, we are keeping that promise. There will be no increase this year to any of the rates of income tax. No Scottish income tax payer will pay more

income tax in 2021 on their current income than they do this year.

To cement the progressivity of our tax system, we will increase the basic and intermediate rate thresholds by the level of inflation, to protect our lowest and middle-earning taxpayers. The higher and top rate thresholds will be frozen. That will ensure that 56 per cent of Scottish taxpayers will pay less than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK. Scotland will continue to be the lowest-taxed part of the UK for the majority of income tax payers.

The independent Scottish Fiscal Commission has forecast that our decision to freeze the higher rate threshold will raise an additional £51 million in 2020-21, compared to an assumed inflationary increase. The commission's forecasts show that, in total, Scottish income tax will raise more than £12 billion in 2020-21, partly driven by continued growth in earnings.

On land and buildings transaction tax, we are proposing to introduce a new 2 per cent band for non-residential leases only, which will apply to transactions in which the net present value of rental income over the period of the lease is more than £2 million. The move to a three-band structure will ensure that our tax system continues to be seen as progressive and fair, in keeping with the Scottish approach to taxation. Legislation will be introduced to the Scottish Parliament to enable the change to come into effect from 7 February 2020, but it will not apply if the contract for a transaction was entered into prior to 6 February 2020. There will be no further changes to LBTT, which will provide certainty to taxpayers who purchase land and property.

We will use the resources that are raised through the tax decisions in this budget to support our public services and meet our ambitious targets on child poverty, including through initiatives such as the Scottish child payment. This Government believes that that is the right decision for Scotland.

On the basis of previous commitments in the UK Government's autumn budget 2018, we do not expect income tax divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK to increase in 2020-21. If there is any divergence, it will not be because of decisions that are made here; it will be because the UK Government is yet again cutting taxes for high earners.

I turn to the further spending commitments that are announced in this budget. Last year, the First Minister led the way in acknowledging the climate emergency. Across the world, we are seeing an increasingly unified response to what is a fundamental issue for us all and for future generations. We promised that this would be a budget that steps up the delivery of our ambition to

tackle climate change, and today we are delivering on that promise.

Scotland's transition to net zero emissions is a national endeavour, and changes are needed across the whole of society. We will all share in the opportunities that our commitment to delivering a green new deal and securing a just transition will bring. This budget confirms that the Scottish Government will play its part, guided by the expert advice of the Committee on Climate Change and the climate emergency response group.

I can therefore announce that we are meeting our pledge to increase the proportion of investment that is directed towards low-carbon infrastructure each year, with £1.8 billion of capital investment in specific projects to reduce emissions. That is an increase in low-carbon investment of over £500 million compared with last year. The budget provides additional funding in the key areas of transport, agriculture, heat and energy. Promoting a greater shift to public transport will be key to our success, and we are increasing overall funding for rail and bus services, including concessionary travel, by £286 million to a total of £1.55 billion in 2020-21. Investment in active travel will increase to over £85 million, promoting cycling, walking and more sustainable transport.

The £83 million future transport fund will see us invest in low-carbon and other transformational initiatives, including low-emission and electric buses, bus prioritisation, electric vehicle charging point infrastructure and the switched on towns and cities programme. We are providing £5 million to help with the shift to electric vehicles in the justice sector, and we are increasing to £35 million the low-carbon transport loan fund, supporting those who need to drive to transition to low-emission vehicles.

Emissions from agriculture and other land uses need to reduce as part of our climate plan, but we need to work in partnership with farmers and other land managers to achieve that. We are providing an initial £40 million investment in the agricultural transformation programme to help to develop the tools and techniques that are needed. We are also increasing our investment in forestry from £59 million to over £64 million in 2020-21 as part of our response to the Committee on Climate Change's recommendation that we need to move towards planting 15,000 hectares per year as soon as we can.

We confirm today a new £120 million heat transition deal, which recognises the need to boost the scale and pace of growth in decarbonising our homes and buildings. That will ensure that we seize the huge economic opportunity that renewable heat will present as part of a just transition, delivering thousands of new green jobs.

The heat deal will include a £50 million heat networks early adopter challenge fund for local authorities and a £10 million fund to support hydrogen heat demonstrator projects. The budget also secures an increase to £151 million in capital funding for energy efficiency measures.

Those measures alone represent a substantial plan of action for the year ahead, but we must—and we will—go further. The climate emergency demands immediate action, but it also requires genuine long-term commitment if we are to deliver against our statutory emissions reduction targets. I have three further announcements to make that underline the depth of this Government's longer-term commitment.

First, we will incentivise local authorities to use the assets and levers at their disposal to reduce emissions and boost the economy, by unlocking up to £200 million of revenue-financed investment in projects across Scotland through our green growth accelerator.

Secondly, we commit now that we will ring fence an additional £2 billion of transformational infrastructure investment over the next session of Parliament for measures to support the delivery of the climate change plan. Let nobody doubt that this Government will prioritise multiyear investment in low-carbon measures at the scale that is required to help to tackle the climate emergency. Those measures will build on the recommendations of the infrastructure commission, with further detail to be provided in the infrastructure investment plan later this year.

Thirdly, all the evidence suggests that one of the most effective ways of locking in carbon is to restore our peatland. That offers a clear nature-based solution to the climate crisis. The Committee on Climate Change has shown that every £1 that is spent on peatland restoration brings £4 of social benefit through reduced emissions, improved water quality and flood mitigation.

Not only will we increase investment in peatland restoration to £20 million next year—an increase of £6 million compared with this year—we will go further. Today, this Government commits to investing more than a quarter of a billion pounds in peatland restoration over the next 10 years. That will enable the development of large-scale restoration projects: enhancing biodiversity in some of the most important habitats in Europe, supporting jobs in the rural economy and, based on initial estimates, delivering greenhouse gas emission reductions of up to 0.8 million tonnes a year by 2032.

The move to net zero will have many impacts, including on our economy, as consumption patterns change and ways of doing business

adapt. There will be challenges, but there are also new opportunities. This Government is committed to helping Scotland's economy adjust, at a time when we must also work hard to mitigate the impacts of EU exit, drive productivity and ensure that we are globally competitive.

Infrastructure investment remains key to our success. Overall, today's budget, backed with increased capital borrowing, will boost infrastructure investment by nearly £1 billion in the first year of our national infrastructure mission to increase annual investment between 2019-20 and 2025-26 by one per cent of gross domestic product. That includes further investment in sustainable transport, in digital through the reaching 100 per cent programme, and more than £800 million of investment in affordable housing, as we continue to progress our target of 50,000 affordable homes.

The coming year will also bring important progress in our network of support for Scotland's businesses. We are establishing the Scottish national investment bank, with £220 million of direct investment in 2020-21 by the Scottish Government. South of Scotland enterprise will receive £28 million of funding, to provide targeted support for businesses in that area. Our approach will reach across Scotland, as we provide £201 million funding for city region and growth deals, including provision for new deals in Stirling and Clackmannanshire, Tay cities, Ayrshire and the borderlands.

We are pleased to maintain the most competitive business rates regime in the UK, with the lowest poundage anywhere in the UK, and we will implement a new lower intermediate property rate for properties that have a rateable value of between £51,000 and £95,000.

Taken together, those decisions will halve the number of properties that are liable for the higher property rate, and will ensure that over 95 per cent of properties pay a lower poundage than they would in other parts of the UK.

The budget maintains a generous package of reliefs that will benefit over 150,000 properties, including the small business bonus scheme and business growth accelerator—reliefs that are worth an estimated £744 million in 2020-21.

We are pleased that sense has prevailed and that the Parliament has supported the Scottish Government, the business community and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in approving the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill, which delivers on agreed measures from the Barclay review. The bill supports growth, improves the administration of the system and increases fairness for ratepayers.

This budget delivers a range of other measures that will support growth in our economy. We are providing an additional £16 million of support for the national manufacturing institute Scotland, and we are increasing the trade and investment budget by a quarter.

We are also investing in the fundamentals of our future economy, through increased resources for Skills Development Scotland and real terms increases for our world-class universities and colleges, with total investment of more than £2 billion, helping to ensure that we have the skills and research base that our economy needs.

In total, this budget provides a multibillion pound package of support for the economy, using all the levers at our disposal, just when it needs it most. At a time when the UK Government seems to have cast our economy aside in favour of Brexit, the Scottish Government will work tirelessly to bring certainty and inclusive growth to the economy of Scotland.

We must also build a wellbeing economy—one that values growth but also strives to be inclusive and fair. We know that challenges in our economy often have the greatest impact on those who are already vulnerable. That is why we are announcing a progressive budget that targets support at those on lower incomes and most in need of support. It is also one of the reasons why we fought hard to win greater control over social security. This coming year will be truly transformational, for two reasons.

First, we will see an uplift of nearly £3 billion in the total value of social security expenditure under our control as we administer the attendance allowance, disability living allowance, industrial injuries disablement allowance, personal independence payment and severe disablement allowance for the first time.

Secondly, we will provide £21 million of funding for the game-changing new Scottish child payment of £10 per week, with initial roll-out commencing later this year. It is estimated that at full roll-out in 2022 that will lift 30,000 children out of poverty. When powers rest in Scotland's hands, rather than under Westminster's control, we will use them wisely and decisively to build a fairer, country.

We are also providing wider support to tackle poverty and to help with progress towards the target to halve child poverty by 2030. We will continue to invest from the £50 million tackling child poverty fund and we will increase the Scottish welfare fund by more than 7 per cent to provide more support to people hit by Tory welfare cuts.

Through our public sector pay policy, we will provide a 3 per cent increase in basic pay for people earning up to £80,000, with additional

support for those on lower incomes through an underpin of £750 for those earning £25,000 or less, and we will continue to pay and promote the real living wage.

We will provide additional funding to help the most disadvantaged to access further and higher education, and we will invest £645 million in our radical expansion of early learning and childcare. From August this year, we will provide 1,140 hours of high-quality childcare that will boost the education of children at a crucial time in their development and reduce the financial burden of childcare costs on young families.

In total, based on previous estimates, we expect to spend no less than £1.4 billion in 2020-21 on supporting low-income households, before taking into account the remaining devolution of social security benefits. The impacts of austerity continue to be felt and we face an uncertain future due to Brexit, but rest assured that this Government can be relied upon to act with compassion, investing in the fairer and more equal society that we would all like to see.

In a Parliament of minorities, good governance demands compromise and pragmatism on all sides. This budget speaks to the priorities of the country. I am sure that every party can find a reason to agree with it, but those who wish to find partisan reasons to oppose it should understand the devastating consequences of doing so.

The emergency provisions enshrined in the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000 are wholly inadequate for the Parliament of a modern economy. If no budget is passed, the law mandates that public expenditure should be capped at the level of the previous year. There would be no £1 billion increase to our health and care service, nor the additional £500 million for local authorities, and our police, universities and colleges would all be denied a real-terms increase in their budgets. Worst of all, as a consequence of the further devolution of social security payments nearly £3 billion of vital support would be denied to those people in our society who need it most.

Now is not the time for brinkmanship. At a time when Westminster is far from representing Scotland's interests, it is time for Holyrood to demonstrate clearly and with purpose that we are willing and able to act in the national interest.

In order to achieve that, the Government will be willing to compromise, but we want to be clear on the parameters of that compromise. This is a budget that fully allocates the resources at our disposal and addresses the priorities of the nation. It reflects our ambition for our country and our determination to eliminate child poverty, accelerate the transition to a net zero economy and improve the collective wellbeing of our society

through first-class public services and a social security system that is built with human dignity at its core.

In allocating those resources, we have used every fiscal lever that we have to the fullest extent. Every penny is accounted for, including the £100 million in the reserve, which is held to ensure that we can manage future tax reconciliations and any volatility in social security expenditure. Any party in the chamber that seeks spending increases, or tax cuts, or both, as some parties do, will need to be clear with the Scottish people about not just what it wants but how it will be paid for.

In presenting its budget to the Parliament today, the Scottish Government has made an assessment of the promises that have been made to the people of Scotland by the UK Government. This budget relies on the UK Government fulfilling its commitments. We have had little choice but to take the Tories' promises at face value—after all, their majority at Westminster was won on the back of a promise to end austerity. We have heard those promises before, yet the crippling reality of Tory austerity continues to bite. Just last week, there were widespread reports that all UK Government departments were being ordered to identify savings of 5 per cent. That order was issued by none other than Boris Johnson and Sajid Javid. It seems that old habits die hard for the Tories.

If the UK Government does not live up to its promises, we will have to take the unprecedented step of returning to the chamber with budget revisions that make cuts to the spending plans that I have outlined today. If that happens, the responsibility will lie clearly at the door of the UK Government.

As a Parliament, we face a choice. Time is of the essence, and we must choose soon. We propose a budget that delivers for our public services, invests in the path to net zero emissions, boosts our economy and, through the new child payment, delivers a game changer in the fight against child poverty. This Scottish Government's choice is clear—this budget delivers for the people of Scotland, and I commend it to the chamber. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the budget statement.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the minister for providing advance sight of her statement, and I congratulate her on her delivery of it in circumstances that none of us wanted to see. As an aside, I believe that this is the first time that the Scottish budget has been delivered by a woman and by an England-qualified chartered accountant.

The backdrop to this budget is a substantial increase in the block grant, thanks to extra spending at Westminster. The Scottish Government is benefiting from a Boris bonus that is worth at least £1.1 billion in real terms. What is essential is that that money is not squandered but used to the benefit of the Scottish people. Against the background of that budget increase, there can be no case for additional tax rises or for any further cuts in our vital front-line services.

Our priorities for this budget are for it to provide measures that will help to grow the Scottish economy and support vital public services. When it comes to tax, we have made it very clear that there must be no further divergence between personal taxation in Scotland and that payable elsewhere in the United Kingdom. What the minister announced on tax thresholds will widen the tax differential, and we could not support that.

Thanks to the Fraser of Allander institute, we know that the tax changes that were introduced by the former finance secretary, egged on by the Greens, which made Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, have not raised any additional revenue for the Scottish public services; all that they have done is fill the black hole that has been created by the fact that the Scottish economy is growing more slowly than that of the rest of the UK under the Scottish National Party's stewardship.

We know that, over the past year, the Scottish economy has grown at less than half the UK rate, and I expect that the Scottish Fiscal Commission will tell us today that that trend will continue. No additional taxes would therefore be appropriate, which is why in this budget, we need to see action to support business. The announcement on reducing the large business supplement is welcome, but it does not go far enough for us, or for business, particularly for the large retailers that are suffering at the moment.

We welcome the extra money for health that was made possible only because of additional spending by the UK Government.

When it comes to local government, which has borne the brunt of cuts in previous budgets, we have been clear that that cannot be the case this year. Councils are key to initiatives to tackle climate change, but when their budgets are cut, they cannot progress those. We will therefore scrutinise closely the additional commitments put upon councils to ensure that they are fully funded, with no hidden cuts to the core grant, as in previous years.

I have two specific questions for the finance minister. First, she has told us that every penny at her disposal has been accounted for. Of course, we have heard that exact line from her former

boss, year on year. However, miraculously in the three to four weeks after producing his budget, he would suddenly find a few hundred million pounds extra from down the back of his sofa to lubricate his budget negotiations. Perhaps the finance minister can save us all a bit of time by telling us today exactly how much money is hidden away, in addition to what is in the budget before us. That would make forward budget discussions much easier. We will give the budget serious consideration, and we are prepared to engage seriously with the Scottish Government on whether we can support it.

Finally, will the finance minister accept that all the additional spending that Scotland benefits from is supported by the union dividend, which is now worth almost £2,000 for every man, woman and child in Scotland? We learnt this week that, without it, Scotland would be facing a deficit of over £10 billion, or up to 7.3 per cent of GDP. Will she acknowledge that it is Scotland's place in the United Kingdom, coupled with this year's Boris bonus, that supports this budget and public services in Scotland?

Kate Forbes: Rather than pretending that there is a Boris bonus, the Tories should have started off by apologising for the decade of austerity that they have subjected this country to.

The Tories talk about extra money, but we have not seen a single penny of that. If the UK Government was so confident of investing more in the Scottish Government's budget, why has it introduced so much uncertainty by delaying its budget?

On taxation, Murdo Fraser knows that his position on tax is not sustainable. For the majority of people, this is the lowest taxed part of the UK, but for everybody, it is the fairest. We can invest in our public services because the fundamentals of our economy are strong and we have mitigated the impact of Tory austerity with our tax decisions.

On the first of Murdo Fraser's two questions, I confirm that every penny has been deployed. The uncertainty caused by the UK Government's budget delay means that we are not playing games; this is not the time for brinkmanship. We have deployed every penny through the bill. This is an honest presentation of what the Scottish Government believes the priorities should be for the people of Scotland.

If the union dividend is the austerity that has hit our public services for 10 years, and a Brexit that we did not want that has hit our economy, I am not sure that it is a great selling point for the UK Government.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I welcome Kate Forbes to her role in delivering the

budget statement today, and thank her for a copy of the statement.

Despite the additional powers and financial levers that have come to the Scottish Parliament over the past decade, the SNP Government has failed to maximise their use, leaving our economy, our people and our essential services worse off. It has endeavoured to hide that using smoke and mirrors, and that is the case again today.

The Government tries to avoid scrutiny, but it must come clean with the Scottish people and tell them what choices it is making on their behalf. Scottish Labour wants transformational change. We want investment for the future.

We know that we cannot reverse 13 years of mismanagement in one budget. Acknowledging that, we have asked the Scottish Government to take a step in the right direction and a step towards real change in this year's budget. We asked that it invest in the future by tackling climate change and prioritise getting our young people on to buses.

Scottish Labour delivered free bus travel for older people, which was transformational. We must now do the same for our younger people, the under-25s, and give them a choice that will follow them into adulthood. Doing so will benefit the whole country by encouraging everyone out of their cars and on to public transport.

Scottish Labour is sick of hearing about people being trapped in hospital when they should be at home. It is costing a fortune and holding people hostage. We want to see a step change in local government funding, to allow it to invest in services that people need to help them escape from hospital into the comfort of their own homes.

We want to boost our economy by investing in the education and skills that our country needs—not only for young people, but for everyone—and equipping people for the future of automation and digitalisation. In further and higher education, we used to lead the world: let us aspire to be world leaders again. Let our communities thrive again, let us push for excellence in health and social care services, and let us reverse austerity and change the future.

The budget is a disappointment, and what is worse, it lets down the Scottish people. It is a time for investment. Will the minister please tell me exactly how the Government's spending plans will meet our ambitions to invest in the future for all of Scotland? Will it actually tackle climate change? Will it allow young people freedom and independence to get to work and play? Will it educate our young people and workforce for the challenges ahead? Will it equip our councils to protect our communities? Will it once and for all put an end to delayed discharge?

Kate Forbes: For a party that claims to be about mitigating austerity, it is disappointing that last year, the Labour Party voted against a budget that contained £1.4 billion that was directly linked to mitigating austerity for our most vulnerable, including measures that directly mitigated UK welfare decisions.

In this year's budget, the Labour Party has a choice: will it vote for or against a commitment to deliver the first child payments, which, by 2022, will take 30,000 children out of poverty? That is the choice that Labour faces. I am proud to be presenting this budget today, because it delivers in the national interest. It delivers an additional £1 billion for health, an additional £0.5 billion for local government, and real-terms increases for colleges and universities.

The question for Labour is this: if it has good ideas—and I am willing to listen and to compromise—will it tell us how much they will cost, and if they cost more than the overall allocation that we have, what will it cut in order to deliver on them?

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Kate Forbes has, in a very short timescale, taken on a difficult task in stepping into the breach to lead a budget process, with no finance secretary in the Cabinet. All political parties have a responsibility to be constructive in the process, but Kate Forbes is also going to have to be constructive with us, in trying to build political agreement such as has not been built prior to the introduction of the budget.

There is much talk of the climate emergency in the document, as there was in Kate Forbes's statement to Parliament. The area in which Scotland is clearly failing the climate is transport. Emissions are going up, not down, which is due largely to long-standing Government policies. The transport strategy that was announced yesterday contains little sign of the substantial changes that are needed if we are to make the progress that we need to make.

In the budget, I can find no evidence of a shift away from the damaging traffic-inducing transport projects that the Government has been supporting until now. That shift would free up resources to invest in reversing the decades-long trend towards ever more expensive public transport. The widely supported policy of free bus travel for young people, which the Greens and the Labour Party have been advocating for months, would be a substantial step in that direction.

Given the tight timescales that are involved, can Kate Forbes give a clear assurance that she will look with an open mind at all the options that the Greens and others are putting forward for transformational change, and an assurance that

the budget is not being presented on a “Take it or leave it” basis?

Kate Forbes: I thank Patrick Harvie for that question.

I am happy to confirm to Parliament and to all parties that I am willing to be constructive. I hope that the same goes for them, when it comes to engaging on the budget.

The budget recognises our responsibility to tackle climate change and it delivers on the climate. As of today, the Government will spend 1 per cent of GDP on tackling climate change through capital on infrastructure projects, which Patrick Harvie mentioned. That does not include other measures that we are taking, including significant increases in resource expenditure on peatland and the green growth accelerator. We want the trends to be the proportion of spend on low-carbon infrastructure going up and the proportion of spend on high-carbon infrastructure going down. In today's budget, we have made a step change, but—as always—my door is open and I am happy to listen to all parties.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the minister for advance copy of the statement.

The budget includes measures that we support. However, does the minister not think that there should have been references to all the projects across Scotland that are overspent to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, including the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the sick kids hospital, the ferries and the hospitals in Aberdeen that we have found out about today?

Councils have been given only half of what they need. Does the minister accept that that will hit local services, including in respect of the promises that the Government has made on their behalf?

Forgive me for being sceptical but, when it comes to budget negotiations, ministers always say that they have no spare money, before they reveal secret pots of money. Does the budget allow for any spending on independence?

I agree with the minister on Brexit. We could agree with the minister on the budget, too, if she would clear the pathway in order to make that happen. Is that her objective?

Kate Forbes: I sometimes worry that the Lib Dems are more obsessed with independence than I am. In the past few budgets, the Lib Dems prioritised the union over support for increased spending on mental health, education, infrastructure and all our other commitments. With this budget, the Lib Dems have the choice to get involved, to participate and to be willing to compromise and work with us to deliver the budget.

We have provided a cash increase of almost £0.5 billion to local authorities. The settlement provides for our commitments on early learning and childcare, and on teachers' pay and pensions. In real terms, as well as cash increases, local authorities will see their resource budgets going up. If Willie Rennie believes strongly in a particular area of spend, my door will be open, and I look forward to speaking with him.

The Presiding Officer: A large number of members wish to ask questions. If we keep questions and answers concise, we will get through them all.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the announcement that, for the first time, health and social care partnerships will receive more than £9.4 billion, in spite of the fact that, over the past decade, Scotland's annual budget has fallen in real terms by £1.5 billion. Can the minister expand on how that funding will be distributed?

Kate Forbes: Our budget prioritises investment in front-line services and takes funding for front-line national health service boards to £11.3 billion. That is an additional investment of £454 million—an increase of 4.2 per cent. I hope that all parties will welcome that.

Our budget goes above and beyond the level of funding demand that we recognised in the medium-term financial framework. Through that approach, we will build on our record level of front-line health spending in Scotland, which is £136 per person higher than it is in England. We will deliver a shift in the balance of care towards mental health services and towards primary, social and community care. Next year, we will invest more than £9.4 billion in health and social care partnerships. We will also make available an additional £12.7 million to tackle the harm that is associated with the use of illicit drugs and alcohol.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In her opening statement, the minister said that if any party wants to see spending increases or tax cuts or both, they need to explain how they will be paid for. The answer is simple. We need to grow the economy and reverse the decline of the past 13 years. Yesterday, the SNP confirmed that the Scottish economy had grown by 5 per cent less in the past 13 years than the UK economy. Today, the SFC is forecasting another five years of low growth and low wages in Scotland.

Let us be clear that this is not about Brexit, because the rest of the UK's economy is now growing at more than twice the rate of Scotland's. This is a piecemeal budget, full of window dressing, from a tired Government. When will the minister start listening to us and take real action to restore economic growth to Scotland?

Kate Forbes: Listening to the Tories would require me to do something impossible—to give tax cuts and spending increases. That is, in accounting terms, completely impossible.

On growing our tax take and the economy, it is very clear in the evidence that we have seen—business is very clear about this, as well—that what is harming the economy right now is the uncertainty that is caused by Brexit. The thing that would grow our economy fastest would be our being able to allow people with talent and skills to come into this country for population growth. However, those levers lie with Westminster, which is refusing to allow that.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): First, I congratulate the minister on her excellent delivery of the budget statement. I will not make any criticism; I will simply ask a simple question about a very specific matter.

Will the minister look at the impact of water charges on small businesses and, in particular, will she review the policies and practices of Business Stream, which insists on charging some small businesses for water that they do not use? That is having an adverse impact on quite a number of small businesses the length and breadth of Scotland.

Kate Forbes: I say briefly that I am happy to agree to consider the issue that Alex Neil has asked about. The Government is committed to supporting our small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): We know that, in 2020-21, our councils will have to deliver nearly £500 million-worth of new Scottish Government commitments. Will the minister guarantee that the Scottish Government will fully fund those new commitments in addition to their core budgets, rather than at their expense? Will she also tell us what new money is being allocated to local authorities to address the damaging impact of previous SNP budget cuts, and to address the growing pressures that our communities face?

Kate Forbes: I am delighted to announce today that local government will get—in cash terms—almost half a billion pounds to spend on delivering the services that the people of Scotland need. As I confirmed earlier, the settlement also provides for our commitments on early learning and childcare, and on teachers' pay and pensions.

I have said it before, and I will say it again: over the course of the next few weeks, within the constraints of having only a short time, we have the opportunity to work collaboratively with any party in Parliament. That includes the Labour Party. If it can make clear what its priorities are, and how it will cost and fund them, we will be more than delighted to discuss them.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): As someone who represents a constituency where a just transition away from high-carbon jobs is an acute challenge, but a necessity, I welcome the announcement of the green growth accelerator to support local authorities to invest in measures that will reduce emissions and support new green jobs. Will the minister join me in urging all local authorities—particularly those such as Aberdeenshire Council—to bring forward proposals to ensure that the potential of the green growth accelerator is maximised?

Kate Forbes: I agree with Gillian Martin that local authorities have a critical role to play in responding to the climate emergency. We need them to deploy the key levers—capital budgets or other resources—that they have at their disposal.

Local authorities' ownership of land and assets and their responsibility for local planning and regulatory frameworks are key. As Gillian Martin suggested, the green growth accelerator is designed to support local authorities to use those levers, in concert with other local authorities and public sector partners, to drive the transformative change that we want and need.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome the minister to her position in what will probably be the longest job interview in history.

Despite the biggest cash injection in the history of the NHS, why has the Scottish Government failed to end the underfunding of health boards, including NHS Highland, which is in her area, and failed to reverse cuts to rehabilitation beds?

Kate Forbes: I am glad that Miles Briggs welcomes the record funding for health. I hope that, throughout the year, he continues that theme of welcoming the Government's investment in and prioritisation of the health service.

On the first issue that the member mentioned, I note that the Tories have discussed at length the NRAC—NHS Scotland resource allocation committee—formula and have provided costings in that regard. However, I do not think that those costings are strictly accurate, unless the Tories intend to cut other budgets to deliver those proposals.

On the important issue of rehab beds, when it comes to such complex problems we need complex solutions, and we need new solutions. There is no simple solution. That is why we have increased by nearly 60 per cent the funding for reducing harm from alcohol and drugs. That funding will be focused on supporting reduction in drug deaths to allow our new drug deaths task force to support innovative projects that work and to test new approaches.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome this well-presented budget and the feisty answering of questions so far.

Can the minister confirm that the rail services budget will increase by a thumping 27.3 per cent to more than £1.25 billion and that ferry services will see a 9.5 per cent increase to £255.1 million, which is almost triple the figure when the Government came to office, plus almost £50 million for Ferguson Marine Engineering?

Kate Forbes: I can confirm all of the above. As an MSP who represents a constituency that relies on our ferries, I am particularly delighted with the increase in support for our lifeline ferry services.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The minister talked about the importance of Governments keeping promises. This Government promised to end delayed discharge, but that promise remains unfulfilled. What assessment has been carried out of the minister's spending plans to establish whether they will fully meet the need that exists? When does the Government expect to see an end to delayed discharge?

Kate Forbes: As Monica Lennon will see, there is increased spend throughout the budget and we are ensuring that there is an increase in front-line spend in our health service in particular in order to deal with the challenging issues that she has identified. The budget continues to shift the balance of care. We focus on our twin approaches of increased investment and reform, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport is doing a fantastic job in ensuring that that is happening.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): How much is the Scottish Government providing to support capitalisation of the Scottish national investment bank and how will that boost economic growth in Scotland?

Kate Forbes: In order to continue our progress towards our commitment to provide £2 billion over 10 years to fund the national investment bank, in this year's budget we have direct investment available of £220 million. That is in addition to the existing £150 million building Scotland fund. The bank, which enjoys cross-party support, will help to support and positively impact on Scotland's economy through the provision of mission-based investment and will develop its own pipelines for investment to ensure that we are investing in the Scottish economy not just for next year but for generations to come.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On page 120 of the budget document, the Government states that it will

"maintain at least 116,000 full-time equivalent college places".

However, I cannot see anything about the maintenance of part-time places, which are obviously crucial to the economy. Can the minister give us any detail about what resources will be available for part-time college places?

Kate Forbes: It is a full-time equivalent figure, so in that sense the budget continues to commit to funding college places. I hope that Liz Smith welcomes the commitment in the budget to deliver a real-terms increase for higher and further education.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I think that I am correct in saying that in 2019-20 the maximum by which councils could increase council tax was 4.79 per cent and only 12 councils took it to that level, so the average increase was 3.6 per cent. What are the equivalent percentages for this year?

Kate Forbes: If councils take up the full flexibility to increase their council tax levels by up to 3 per cent in real terms next year, it would generate an additional £135 million to support council services.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): In light of the climate emergency, I welcome some commitments from the Scottish Government, while needing reassurance that it is indeed new money. What methodology did the Scottish Government use to assess the budget, to be sure that it will deliver rapid and transformational change with just transitions for Scotland across all portfolios, given that the results of the just transition commission's review on capital expenditure and emissions are not yet in place?

Kate Forbes: I remember giving evidence to the member's committee on the issue of methodology and ensuring that our budget delivers our aspirations and ambitions on climate change. As she knows, that builds on the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 and this year's programme for government to deliver on the elements that I mentioned in my opening remarks.

We are proud of the significant increase in investment in our climate change aspirations in the budget. In one sense, this is just the start, so although there is significant investment, we look forward to continuing to build on that, not just this year but in the years to come. We see that most clearly when it comes to peatland restoration, where there is a commitment of £20 million this year but a commitment of £250 million over the next period.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Can the minister provide a guarantee that the new budget line for Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow will ensure that jobs will be safeguarded and the economy in my community will be

protected, and that that budget line will be protected when she has discussions with the other parties in the chamber?

Kate Forbes: As Stuart McMillan will see, the 2020-21 Scottish budget includes almost £50 million to fund the delivery of vessels 801 and 802 in line with the revised schedule and the costs presented to Parliament by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work. The Scottish Government is committed to funding the completion of the two ferries that are currently under construction at the yard.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): Last week, the Fraser of Allander institute told the Finance and Constitution Committee that no additional revenues had been raised by the SNP's income tax hikes because of weak growth in the Scottish tax base. What specific policies are contained in the budget to grow the Scottish tax base?

Kate Forbes: Our investment in this year's budget has been significantly helped by our decisions on tax policy. I am delighted that, over the past year, there has been an additional £500 million to invest that would not have been there if the Tories had had their way.

The budget significantly invests in our economy and it protects our reliefs, which the Tories were putting at risk as recently as last week. It ensures that we have the most competitive relief scheme anywhere in the UK, with a lower than inflation rise in the poundage and a lower poundage rate for 95 per cent of businesses in Scotland compared with the rest of the UK. Perhaps most important, the budget also invests significantly in infrastructure, which is a key way to boost the economy.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The report published on 27 January by the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland states that we must have

"a presumption in favour of investment to future proof existing road infrastructure and to make it safer, resilient and more reliable."

Given that, can the minister outline how much the Scottish Government has committed in its budget to improving road infrastructure, especially for roads in the south-west of Scotland?

Kate Forbes: We are committed to delivering transport projects that will help us to create the conditions for an inclusive and net zero emissions economy. The Government is increasing its budget for trunk road and structural repairs to more than £123 million next year and, through the operating companies, will continue to safely maintain and operate the trunk road network.

In the south-west, we will continue to progress the construction of the A77 bypass, with completion expected in summer 2021.

Consideration of further improvements to the A75 and A77 will form part of the strategic transport projects review.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Bus passenger numbers have plummeted by a staggering 108 million journeys under the Scottish National Party. When Labour introduced the free bus pass for older people, it resulted in the biggest increase in bus passenger numbers since devolution. Does the minister accept that the measures in the budget will not begin to reverse the decline in bus usage, but that if free bus travel was extended to young people, we could start to halt the dismantling of our bus network that is currently taking place in every community under the Scottish Government?

Kate Forbes: I am sure that the member welcomes the commitment in the budget to increase overall funding for rail and bus services, including concessionary travel, by £286 million, to a total of £1.15 billion next year.

The member mentioned free bus travel for under-25s. I do not think that that is necessarily a bad idea—I just want the Labour Party to tell me how much that would cost.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The minister has outlined significant additional investment to complete the expansion of early learning and childcare. How much is that expected to save families each year?

Kate Forbes: The Scottish Government will save families up to £4,500 per child per year.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): From her statement, the minister seems unaware that crime has risen for the past two years, and that violent crime has risen for the past four years. The chief constable says that without more cash and officers there will be a crisis in policing and some crimes will not be investigated. The chief constable also says that he cannot afford to lose more officers and that a budget of less than £50 million means that he will have to. With this budget, is the minister saying that the chief constable is wrong and can the chief constable take that as statutory consent from the minister that the SPA can add to the deficit?

Kate Forbes: With this budget, I am saying something quite simple: the overall SPA budget will increase by 3.6 per cent next year, which is an additional £42.2 million. Given that the member takes an active interest in such things, I hope that he will welcome the priority that we have given to the police force by ensuring that the figures in the budget protect our police officers and invest in the estate.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The minister announced an extra £1 billion

in infrastructure investment. Can she set out what is included in that funding and how many jobs in Scotland it will support?

Kate Forbes: It is estimated that the £6.2 billion of investment will support more than 40,000 full-time equivalent jobs in 2020-21. The budget includes funding for an array of infrastructure to support our long-term ambitions for inclusive economic growth, building sustainable places and responding to the climate emergency. It includes more than £200 million of funding for our city region and growth deals, £120 million for the expansion of early learning and childcare places, support for progress on our elective care health centres and funding required to meet our commitment to deliver 50,000 affordable homes.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The minister has spoken several times about a rise in higher education funding. However, the rise is half of what Universities Scotland says that it needs and amounts to less than a tenth of the cuts that it has suffered in recent years. Is the budget not just continuing to sell that critical sector short?

Kate Forbes: I have already confirmed that the budget provides a real-terms increase in funding for higher education and further education. The question for the Labour Party members is whether they will vote against that real-terms increase or not.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sure that fellow members of the Justice Committee—perhaps with the exclusion of Liam Kerr—will welcome the additional £37 million for the police budget. Will the Scottish Government continue to press the UK Treasury to pay back the £125 million in VAT that was paid by Police Scotland to the UK Treasury between 2013 and 2018?

Kate Forbes: We will continue to press the UK Government on those matters. Considering how many spending asks the Tories have, I think that it would be nice if, once in a while, they would direct some spending asks to their own UK Government. That is over £300 million of waste. I appreciate the advice that the minister is getting from the Deputy First Minister.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Despite the minister's warm words about improving transport and infrastructure, the detail in the budget paints a different picture. To answer Emma Harper's question, there is an £85 million drop in funding for motorways and trunk roads, there are flatlined budgets to support councils with cycling and walking programmes, and there are cuts to regional transport partnerships, smart car roll-out and support for bus services. Given that the Green Party has placed a budget demand on the SNP that it backtrack on its existing commitments to

improve Scotland's roads, is today's draft budget a worrying sign that the Scottish Government is capitulating to that ridiculous demand?

Kate Forbes: Interestingly enough, I do not recall additional spending on roads being one of the Tories' asks. I wonder whether that is a new ask to add to their already undercosted list of demands.

On transport, I have already mentioned that we have increased overall spending for rail and bus services, increased investment in active travel and invested in the future transport fund to help support modal shift. There is significant investment in transport in this budget. If Jamie Greene cannot find it in himself to welcome that, there is not much hope for the general spend on transport.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): We know that we need to repeat and extend the success of renewable electricity generation to renewable heat. Will the minister expand on the measures that are outlined in the budget that will deliver on that ambition?

Kate Forbes: Yes. The £120 million heat transition deal that is announced today is an ambitious and broad package of capital investment that will ensure that we make demonstrable progress towards decarbonising our homes and buildings. The deal complements and further strengthens our policy framework for renewable heat.

We will shortly introduce a heat networks bill, which will help to de-risk investment in heat networks and, later this year, we will set out further detail in our heat decarbonisation policy statement on the steps that we will take to reduce emissions from the heating of Scotland's homes and buildings.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Through Kate Forbes's constituency work, she will know the importance of investing in energy efficiency in our homes, which is one of the most transformational tools that we have in tackling the climate emergency and fuel poverty. It is also a prerequisite for the investment on heat that she has just described. The Greens, the climate emergency response group and Citizens Advice Scotland have all called for the budget for that to be doubled, yet there is only a marginal increase for it in this budget. How will the Government meet its own fuel poverty and climate targets with that scale of investment? Is Kate Forbes prepared to bring a spirit of compromise and pragmatism to negotiations on the issue?

Kate Forbes: I confirm to Mark Ruskell that I have a great spirit of compromise, and I am more than happy to talk to him further about those issues. We recognise that, in order to meet our climate change ambitions, we will have to consider

our investment in every area of infrastructure. Although this budget demonstrates a significant increase in the spend on green infrastructure, we are also increasing our spend on energy efficiency.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Addiction and drug deaths are a major blight on the communities that I serve. How will the budget support services for those who are addicted and, ultimately, how will it help them into recovery, including by enhancing the provision of rehabilitation beds and improving the recovery pathway more widely?

Kate Forbes: I confirm that the significant increase in funding to reduce harm from alcohol and drugs that we committed to today will look at different innovative ways and projects to achieve that. Ultimately, we all want a reduction in the number of drug deaths.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): If all councils increase council tax by the maximum amount, will any still have to make spending cuts?

Kate Forbes: We ensure that we work in partnership with local authorities. As I have said repeatedly, we are ensuring that there is a cash increase to local authorities of just short of £500 million. It will be for local authorities, which have complete autonomy over 92 per cent of their budgets, to decide how to spend that.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): The minister has not said anything about cutting waste in the budget. Does she have anything to say about paying an extra £62 million for a botched fixed-price contract for the Aberdeen western peripheral route, wasting more than £200 million on ferries that CalMac does not want and wasting £40 million on an airport that has made losses every year for the past 10 years?

Kate Forbes: Frankly, I find it offensive if the member thinks that investing £200 million in ferries that my constituents and other constituents across the country need is a waste. He might find that his constituents find it questionable that he thinks that spending on the AWPR was also a waste. We will continue to invest in infrastructure and transport projects, as we intend to do through this budget.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): As I am the MSP for the Cowdenbeath constituency, can the minister highlight for me the key benefits of the budget as far as the good people of Fife are concerned?

Kate Forbes: I can confirm to the member that the budget delivers for the people of her constituency, as it does for people across the country. The budget provides certainty for ratepayers, it invests in our economy, it steps up our commitment to tackling climate change and it

tackles the challenges of child poverty. Those are all measures that every person in Scotland will welcome.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): It is not unusual to support elements of the budget without supporting it in its entirety; indeed, SNP groups in local authorities do that all the time. In that vein, therefore, I welcome the fact that page 50 of the budget document shows that the Government has accepted my proposal for a £1 million fund to help mesh-injured women, which will be warmly welcomed. Can the minister bring forward the scheme as quickly as possible to allow women to claim from that fund?

Kate Forbes: I thank Neil Findlay for the spirit in which he made his remarks and asked that question, and I am glad that he welcomes our commitment. I am sure that, in collaboration with the health secretary, we can look at those issues.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Peter Chapman: They would likely complain if I did not declare an interest, Presiding Officer.

The minister made much in her statement of how we all know how important the environment is, but I see that agri-environment scheme payments are down again, for the third year in a row. That is hardly looking after the environment.

Kate Forbes: We recognise that we need to work in partnership with our farmers and land managers to meet our commitments on climate change. That is why I hope that the member welcomes the initial £40 million of investment in the agricultural transformation programme, which will develop pilot schemes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and invest in on-farm renewables and tree planting, among other measures. We are committed to supporting the agriculture industry to make that shift and we want to do it in collaboration with the industry.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I have been reading the carbon assessment of the budget proposals, which has lots of good news. Page 4 of the budget document outlines that spending to mitigate emissions has increased, but is the Government doing anything else in that area? Can she give us further information as to how spending will be targeted specifically at carbon?

Kate Forbes: What is interesting about the budget is not only the high-level figures for our investment in peatland restoration, the heat transition deal, the future transport fund and our priorities but the significant investment in how we work with people to deliver on our commitments on climate change. I have already mentioned the

investment in the agricultural transformation programme, but we are also developing, for example, the £50 million heat networks early adopter challenge fund for local authorities and a £10 million fund to support hydrogen heat demonstrator projects. Not only do we want to be at the forefront when it comes to our climate change commitments, we want to pioneer solutions that the rest of the world can adopt.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): Page 145 of the budget says that the legal aid budget

“funds criminal defence and redress when rights are not being upheld”.

Why has the budget been frozen at £137 million? Why is no additional money being provided for that crucial fund this year?

Kate Forbes: I would be happy to speak to the member more generally after the statement. We remain committed, as is demonstrated by the figures before him, to investing in that important area of our budget.

Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-20740, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill at stage 1.

16:12

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): I thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its scrutiny of the bill and its stage 1 report. I also thank the Local Government and Communities Committee for its valuable contribution to the consideration of the issues that we are about to debate.

Having heard evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, both committees have welcomed the proposals in the bill, although they have rightly sought to explore further some of its aspects. This afternoon’s debate—brief as it will be—affords us a chance to do just that.

With the Scotland Act 2016 having transferred responsibility for Scottish elections to this Parliament, we have an opportunity to make meaningful and appropriate improvements to how we conduct elections.

I will address some of the bill’s key components. On term lengths, we consulted extensively on whether the current four-year terms for Parliament and local government remain the most appropriate approach. We propose moving both to five-year terms, which will allow for greater stability in our electoral cycle. Last year, I wrote to all members, seeking their thoughts. I hope that today’s debate will help us to reach a settled view on the issue.

As a result of clashes with United Kingdom general elections, our previous two Parliaments have been five-year terms. We need to decide what works best in Scotland. Having weighed the options, my preference is for five-year terms, and I welcome the support for that from the two committees.

Changed term lengths is one of several reforms in the bill that will affect the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. As members will be aware, the commission’s remit now includes boundaries for Scottish Parliament elections as well as for local government areas and wards. That change is reflected in a new name: boundaries Scotland. Under the bill, boundaries Scotland will have powers to recommend two and five-member local government wards where that fits local circumstances and communities.

The bill also allows for rolling boundary reviews, which 71 per cent of respondents to our consultation supported. The bill's current deadline for reviews—12 years—reflects a four-year term. In response to the stage 1 report, I have agreed that the local government review deadlines will be increased to 15 years if five-year terms are adopted.

The bill proposes that approval for local government boundary changes will no longer reside with ministers and will now require secondary legislation under the affirmative procedure in Parliament.

The role of Parliament is further expanded through provisions that make the Electoral Commission more directly accountable. The commission will be funded by, and accountable to, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body for the work that it carries out in relation to devolved elections. The commission will also be given powers to create codes of practice covering observers, third parties, candidate expenditure and donation controls. I am pleased that the Electoral Commission welcomes those reforms and the principles behind the bill, and I am grateful to it for its on-going engagement.

The bill recognises the importance of other key stakeholders in Scottish elections, and expanding the Electoral Management Board for Scotland's remit to include Scottish Parliament elections reflects that. Since 2008, the Electoral Management Board has been an invaluable element of elections in Scotland, ensuring that they are delivered to a high standard. It is a vital resource that is regarded with envy by other nations of the UK. The board assists local authorities in co-ordinating elections and referendums, and it promotes best practice through training and information for electoral professionals. That vital work strengthens our system and reinforces voter confidence, so I am pleased that the board will now provide direction for parliamentary elections.

Turning to other provisions, the bill will simplify registration of 14-year-olds. Those approaching legal voting age can already apply to be added to the electoral register as attainers, but the current system is needlessly complex and unclear. Our proposals mean that anyone eligible in Scotland who is aged 14 will be able to register as an attainer. That is a small change, but it will make a big difference to young people's participation, and it has been welcomed by both the SPPA Committee and our colleagues in the Scottish Youth Parliament.

The bill updates existing legislation to enable electronic voting solutions in the future. The initial aim is to use technology to support voters with sight loss to vote independently and in secret.

After engagement with stakeholders, we are undertaking a limited field trial of electronic ballot delivery to assist those with sight loss. Like the committee, I do not think the time is right for internet voting, but it is important to allow Parliament to explore its options once technology is more established. To be clear, any pilots of electronic voting solutions that are proposed by the Scottish ministers will be considered by Parliament.

The bill creates an offence of voting more than once at local government elections, aligning their rules with the rules for Scottish Parliament and UK elections.

The bill also ensures that the Presiding Officer's existing power to postpone Scottish Parliament elections operates if Parliament has already been dissolved. That is important in minimising risk to the public during emergencies or unexpected events, and it addresses a present gap in the powers of the postholder.

I appreciate that the committees have highlighted that there are opportunities for further reforms, and I agree. However, the bill is a significant step forward in many important areas, although, as I said, it is by no means the end of the journey.

There is an important point about proper consultation and care when considering reforms. Like the SPPA Committee, I am sympathetic to members wishing to tackle the alphabetical bias of the list-order effect, but I agree that options must be carefully researched to avoid disadvantaging voters. We must, for example, respect the needs of those with disabilities and the neurodiversity of the electorate. As the committee's report states,

"There is no point simply replacing one set of problems with another".

That echoes my own comments at the committee's evidence session, at which I said:

"we should not change it simply for change's sake".—
[*Official Report, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee*, 5 December 2019; c 20.]

However, that is not a signal for inaction. We need to find a better way forward that does not have obvious drawbacks.

I appreciate that much of the bill's content is highly technical. Boundary changes and powers of the Electoral Commission sound quite dry in isolation. However, we should value rigorous independent oversight of our system, and the bill enhances that. The reform bill brings in changes to support stakeholders and reassure the public, building on strong foundations of partnership working and our proposals to widen the franchise.

I will finish as I started, by thanking the committees for their engagement. I look forward to the debate.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill.

16:20

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): As the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, I am pleased to speak on behalf of the committee in this debate.

As has been mentioned, the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill proposes a number of changes to electoral practice and administration in Scotland. It is a technical bill, but it is an important one because it is vital that any changes to our elections work effectively and enhance the democratic process. The electoral system must be accessible to everyone who has the right to vote.

I am grateful to committee members for working together to produce a unanimous report on the bill. I also acknowledge the experts in the field of running elections who generously gave up their time to inform our scrutiny of the bill.

The bill contains a number of provisions, and I will highlight the main conclusions that the committee reached. We heard different views on the relative merits of four and five-year terms for Scottish Parliament and local government elections. Ultimately, the committee was satisfied that the balance of evidence supports a move to five-year terms for both. That schedule will make clashes between elections less frequent, and there is an argument that a five-year term will allow more time for policy development.

The committee also supported the proposal in the bill to allow two-member and five-member wards for local government elections. We anticipate that that will be particularly useful in more remote and rural areas. We heard some concerns about the impact of two-member wards on the proportionality between votes cast and wards won. The committee believes that two-member wards should be recommended only in exceptional circumstances, such as in remoter rural areas, including islands.

The committee supports the proposal in the bill to make it an offence to vote more than once at Scottish local government elections that are held on the same day. That will bring local government elections into line with UK and Scottish Parliament elections. However, we were not clear about how that provision will be enforced, as there are challenges in cross-referring between electoral registers.

The committee welcomes the Scottish Government's proposed approach to electronic voting. There is a need to proceed with caution in relation to what is relatively untested technology. The proposal to undertake pilots is welcome, as is the focus on smaller-scale improvements to enhance the accessibility of the voting process, particularly for people with disabilities, which has been mentioned. We suggest that the Scottish Government accelerate its engagement with groups that represent disabled people.

A number of other provisions in the bill were welcomed by the committee, including the proposed simplification of the rules to allow anyone aged 14 and over to register as an attainer before they are officially old enough to vote.

The committee took evidence on some topics that are not included in the bill. For example, we heard evidence about the list-order effect, whereby candidates whose names are nearer the top of the ballot paper are more likely to be selected. That is potentially unfair to candidates whose surnames come later in the alphabet. There was no consensus on how the list-order effect should be addressed, but we recommend that the Scottish Government ask the Electoral Commission to take a wider look at different approaches to ballot design.

Another issue that the committee has highlighted is the requirement for candidates' addresses to appear on ballot papers for local government elections.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I note that the consultation included a proposal to remove the current legal requirement for candidates' addresses to appear on ballot papers for local government elections. I have written to the ministers, asking whether they also intend to allow candidates to have their addresses withheld from publication on council websites and noticeboards on council premises, so as to protect applicants who may previously have been abused.

Bill Kidd: I thank the member for raising that subject, which was discussed in committee. A number of people raised concerns with us about security and safety, which have been long-term issues. The committee is pleased that the minister has agreed to address the matter as soon as possible. He is in the chamber, and I am sure that he listened to what Mr Lyle said about the wider aspect.

The committee also noted that there will continue to be scope to reform the electoral system in the future. For example, there is a need to address the important issue of under-registration. The committee was supportive of the idea of reviewing the multimember ward system for local government elections, too.

The Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill proposes a range of changes to electoral law covering Scottish Parliament and local government elections, and those proposals have been broadly welcomed. On that basis, the committee was content to recommend to Parliament that the general principles of the bill be agreed to.

16:25

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): Broadly, we welcome the bill, and we will be supporting it at stage 1. It contains mainly technical, but nonetheless important, changes to aspects of electoral law.

I will confine my remarks to three areas, in each of which there are a number of questions for the minister to reflect on as the bill progresses—namely, parliamentary terms, two-member council wards, and electronic voting and voter participation. My hope is that the minister will want to engage constructively with us, and indeed with members across the chamber, on our concerns about those aspects of the bill as it progresses through the legislative process.

I will talk first about parliamentary terms. This session, the Parliament will sit for a maximum of five years, as was the case in the previous session. That reflects the change of the norm at UK level, from four-year sessions to five-year sessions—a change that moved from convention to law in the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. Speaking personally, I regret that change. I prefer four-year terms to five-year terms, but that ship would appear to have sailed, although—who knows—it may yet sail back.

What is important—here, as in all matters of electoral law—is that the interests of the voter are paramount. I suspect that what the voter wants is clarity. In that sense, it matters less whether terms are four years or five years; it matters more that the issue is clear and beyond unnecessary doubt.

It also matters that this session of Parliament should not set its own limits. The length of this session was set before the 2016 election; the length of the next session should be set now, and not after the 2021 election. There is no controversy on those matters. Therefore, in principle, I support the move made in sections 1 and 2 of the bill to fix the terms at five years for both the Scottish Parliament and local government in Scotland.

However, there is one fly in the ointment—and this is the matter on which I would like the minister to reflect. If the reform in sections 1 and 2 of the bill is happening because of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, what will the Scottish ministers do when, or if, that act is repealed? I suspect that its days are numbered. Most

commentators think that it has not worked—after all, we have had not one but two early general elections since the act came into force. The fixed terms of the UK Parliament do not seem to be particularly fixed, and, of course, the current Conservative Government has a manifesto commitment to repeal the act. How does the minister think that we should reflect that rather fluid picture as we debate and deliberate on section 1 of the bill?

I turn to two-member council wards. As the law stands, all council wards in Scotland have either three or four councillors. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 allows the creation of one or two-member wards in the islands. That makes good sense. However, section 4 of the bill would allow the creation of two, three, four or five-member wards in any council area in Scotland.

As we have heard from its convener and read in its stage 1 report, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee supported that proposal, but it voiced concerns, reflected in the evidence that it received, that the degree of flexibility envisaged in section 4 is not an unalloyed good and that it comes with some potentially negative consequences, which need to be carefully thought about. I urge the minister to take those concerns seriously.

In particular, the worry is this. Two-member wards may be desirable in some sparsely populated areas that have strong community boundaries, but—and it is a big but—proportionality between votes cast and seats won is the explicit objective of the single transferable vote system that we now use in Scotland for local government elections, and two-member wards make the achievement of that proportionality much more difficult than is the case with larger, multimember wards.

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

Adam Tomkins: Let me finish my point and then I will let Mr Findlay in—if I have time, Presiding Officer.

Surely, we do not want the new flexibility, which section 4 of the bill heralds, to undermine that all-important principle of proportionality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is time for interventions.

Neil Findlay: I very much agree with what Adam Tomkins is saying, but the committee took evidence from one academic who argued for very large wards in order to ensure proportionality and choice. What is Mr Tomkins's view on that? I would not like to see wards of eight or 10, or anything like that.

Adam Tomkins: It is a very odd day in the Scottish Parliament, because not only does Mr Findlay agree with me, but I agree with Mr Findlay—on this matter. We must, therefore, both be wrong. I would like the norm to be four or five-member wards, as it is three or four-member wards at the moment; only exceptionally should wards be smaller or larger than that.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee noted what it called its disappointment that the Scottish Government did not commission more research into the matter of the proportionality of two-member wards and recommended that two-member wards should be used only in “very exceptional circumstances”. I agree with that recommendation and ask the minister whether he and his officials will commit to working with me and, indeed, other members who are interested in the matter to craft a stage 2 amendment to the bill that will ensure that overuse of two-member wards is not permitted or allowed to undercut the principle of proportionality on which our local government elections in Scotland are based.

Finally, on electronic voting and voter participation, I am sure that we all want to do what we can to encourage voting. High voter turnouts in elections are better than low voter turnouts, for everyone who believes in the democratic process. That said, however, some of the more frequent suggestions as to how voter turnout may be encouraged need to be treated with caution. Moving from Thursday elections to Friday or weekend elections would have grave implications for a number of religious groups, for example, and should, in my view, be resisted for that reason.

Likewise, moving to electronic voting should be resisted. It may have considerable benefits, not least for those who find access to polling stations a physical challenge, whether that is for reasons of poor sight or other physical disabilities, but other European countries with experience of electronic voting report serious concerns about security. Researchers have found the Swiss system to be flawed, the Estonian system is said to be outdated and open to attack, and in Finland the view has been taken that the security of online voting is not yet advanced enough to ensure either the confidentiality or the integrity of the voting system.

The bill does not enable electronic voting, but in section 6 it enables pilot projects, as the minister explained, which may include some form of electronic voting. The committee describes that

“light-touch approach”

as

“probably the most appropriate approach”

and I cautiously agree. There is a need to proceed with great caution, given the very real concerns about security that have been voiced across Europe. At the same time, consideration must be given to the accessibility of polling stations, as I have already said. Therefore, while cautiously welcoming section 6 of the bill, I ask the minister to specify how he proposes to ensure that any pilots exploring the use of electronic voting in Scotland will make sure that the integrity of our voting system is not compromised by untested technology.

Overall, we are supportive of the bill at stage 1, but we look forward to working with the Government and, indeed, with members from across the chamber on amendments that address the concerns that I have outlined.

16:33

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the committee’s members and convener and the clerks who have been helping us through the bill. We have had some very interesting evidence sessions. It is not the most exciting bill to come before Parliament—it is certainly not the most exciting thing that has happened today, which has been a very lively day in Parliament—but the bill is very important to our democracy. The way in which we organise elections is vital in order to ensure that the widest number of people can participate and that the elections are fair, people have confidence in them and they are seen to be fair.

If we look at how different electoral systems work and how different methods of voting deliver results—or sometimes do not—and all the nuts and bolts of elections, we see that it is an area of huge importance, with significant consequences for our country and our people. When elections go wrong, they can go badly wrong.

To see that, we need only look at the shambles of the Iowa primary or the chaos that the country that is supposed to be the leader of the free world and a beacon of democracy ended up in as a result of the hanging chads in Florida—an aged, creaking system was at the heart of the problem, although there was also a liberal sprinkling of corruption. Closer to home, we had the Scottish local government election shambles in 2007. Such situations can be painful to watch, but we should not just point the finger at others when they get it wrong.

We must keep our democracy match fit, and some of the provisions in the bill seek to do that. The bill also seeks to increase participation in our democracy, which is a key aim. All of us, regardless of our political views, want the

maximum number of people to participate in our democracy.

There were mixed views on term lengths. Mr Tomkins made it clear that his view is different from that of others in his party. People in my party have different views, and I am sure that the same is true of the minister's party. That situation reflects the research that was put before the committee, which showed that there is no firm view on the matter. However, on balance, the Labour Party supports five-year terms.

We also accept that, in some circumstances, two or five-member wards might be required for local government elections to enable local circumstances to be met. All members of the committee were clear that two or five-member wards should be used only in exceptional circumstances and should not be the norm.

As I said earlier, we do not accept the arguments for huge wards that some witnesses put forward. The pitch was made that there would be some sort of arrangement between the eight or 10 or however many members there were and that they would all get on well and would all produce the goods, but if we are honest, we know that it is more likely that they would fight like ferrets in a sack. I do not think that having such big wards simply to produce proportionality would work. We must ensure that local connections, geography and communities are respected and not dispensed with solely on the basis of an arithmetical formula.

Mr Tomkins said that he was aghast that he agreed with me, but I am sure that someone who was once a disciple of a Mr T Sheridan can find space in his heart to have some common linkage with a woolly liberal like me. It was good to hear Mr Tomkins agreeing with me.

The committee had a great deal of debate about, and showed great interest in, the list-order effect, whereby those candidates who are higher up the ballot paper because their name is nearer the start of the alphabet gain an advantage. We all know of people who have gone to great lengths—by changing their name to Andy Aardvark or whatever—to gain such an advantage. I recall the use of the phrase “Alex Salmond for First Minister” being mentioned during the committee's deliberations. Who remembers that? That is an example of the exploitation of the list-order effect. I have to say that the SNP was quite right to do that, because it recognised that it would gain an advantage from it.

The list-order effect disadvantages people—there is an in-built advantage for candidates who are higher up the ballot paper. Therefore, I ask the minister whether he will commit to commissioning proper, decent-quality, in-depth research into how we can address that. I think that full randomisation

must be the answer, but that is only my personal view.

On electronic voting, I am open minded. The committee was very cautious about it, and I am cautious about it, too. The only electronic voting system that I have looked at up close—Mr Tomkins will enjoy this—was the Venezuelan electronic voting system. I was in Venezuela as an election observer—in 2012, I think. It was a hotly disputed election in which there was less than 1 per cent between the candidates. The electoral system that we saw operating there was highly sophisticated—within it, there were 17 audits.

The Jimmy Carter foundation examined that system and said that it was the best voting system in the world, which is very interesting. A full manual recount of the vote was done because the result was so close, and it replicated almost exactly the electronic ballot. There are therefore countries across the world that we might want to learn from that we might not initially think would be the countries that we would want to learn from.

Finally, we should look much more closely at postal ballots for all elections because it is the most successful way of engaging as many people as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mark Ruskell to open for the Green Party. Mr Ruskell, I will be generous with you, also.

16:40

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I join other members in thanking the clerks, all those who gave evidence, and the other members of the committee for their consideration of the bill.

The bill represents a baby step towards democratic reform, so I welcome its general principles. To be honest, however, it is hardly groundbreaking stuff. Even when taken together with the Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Bill, we have miles to go if we are to reinvigorate democracy, improve registration and turnout, and make Holyrood and council chambers truly representative of the people they serve.

Last year, I went with the Presiding Officer to visit the Swedish Parliament, where there was genuine concern that turnout in elections had fallen a few percentage points from the high 90s. We can only dream of those levels of voter participation in elections in Scotland.

We still live in one of the most democratically underrepresented countries in Europe in terms of the levels of government that operate and the numbers of elected representatives who serve. In Sweden, one out of every 145 citizens has stood

for election, whereas in Scotland, it is one in every 2,000. In Sweden, political work is normalised in communities and it really shows in Sweden's political culture. Does the bill address that democratic deficit? I do not think that it does. It takes a small step towards doing so, but does not really address it.

I welcome the five-member council wards as an option for the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland to consider. That would deliver more proportionality, but to represent what the public actually votes for in an election, we would need wards of around six to seven members. In answer to Mr Findlay's point, we took some evidence on that, and there were some more expansive suggestions that we could have city-wide lists or council-wide lists. Even sticking with the system that we have at the moment and expanding it to true proportionality would require six to seven members per ward.

Worryingly—and I share Mr Tomkins's views on this—the option of two-member wards is also on the table in the bill. Beyond the islands, where the flexibility to have one and two-member wards already exists, I can see no circumstances in which two-member wards would be appropriate. The fact that the Government did no work to consider the bill's impact on proportionality is disappointing. I do hope that, 13 years after its introduction, a wider review of the multimember ward system will now take place. It would be good if the minister could reflect on when that could happen. Committee members all had different perceptions of how well the multimember system has worked, so now is a good time to review it.

I felt that the committee disappeared down a few rabbit holes when hearing evidence. One was the list-order effect. I do not deny that it might be real, especially for candidates of the same party whose surnames start with the same letter. It is, however, clear that a wide range of other factors, especially incumbency, are more important, particularly in local government elections.

Another red herring was around registration. The bill makes it illegal to vote more than once and I suspect that most people would think that that was already the law; they might be surprised to learn that it is not. Registration on multiple registers is not a problem. Groups such as students move around, and it is far more important that they are enfranchised to vote wherever they are resident at the time of the election rather than having no vote whatsoever. Underregistration is a much bigger issue that should concern us.

The shift in the length of the parliamentary term from four to five years is to be welcomed. There is no point in trying to second-guess the chaos of Westminster timetabling anymore, and five years allows Parliaments to get more into their stride.

We received very little evidence on electronic voting, to be honest, which I am a bit disappointed about, but I am aware of major concerns from organisations, including the Open Rights Group, about whether e-voting can ever be genuinely secure, anonymous and verifiable. The Government appears to be quite agnostic on electronic voting, but I ask the minister to focus work with disability groups on other methods of increasing participation, including postal voting. I also ask that the Government work with the Open Rights Group and others in fully assessing the implications of any pilot well before they are even considered.

The provisions in the bill to allow attainers of age 14 to be entered onto the electoral register could be a real springboard in helping young people play a full role in democratic life. I urge the Government to help equip our young people with the knowledge that they need about our democracy while they wait for their full rights to vote to come to fruition. It is an unusually exciting provision in a bill that has perhaps been more about tidying up than igniting a renewed democratic vision.

16:45

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I do not know what Neil Findlay is talking about; this is the stuff that Liberal Democrats love to talk about. I was formerly an election agent and I would spend hours and hours discussing the detail of the size of wards and how many members we would have—two, five, six or seven. I could last forever on that kind of stuff. We could spend all our time at conferences talking about it, probably along with Neil Findlay.

Neil Findlay: As Willie Rennie is a Liberal Democrat, that is the least surprising thing that I have ever heard.

Willie Rennie: Neil Findlay and I might have one of those discussions ourselves—I might inflict that on him. Adam Tomkins is objecting to that for some reason.

During the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition of 1999 to 2007, we brought in the proportional representation system for local councils. As Sarah Boyack might remember, there was a debate then as to the size of the wards. In the end, we came up with a compromise. We wanted bigger-sized wards to reflect that in rural areas some of the distances are utterly huge. Up in Caithness, the wards are enormous—they are much bigger than many of our constituencies. There was a debate at that time and we compromised on three and four-member wards. Having two and five-member wards would help to keep communities together in more urban areas, increase the amount of

proportionality in urban areas, but also reflect the real distances that are involved in rural areas and the sheer number of community councils and school parent councils that are in those communities. It is sensible to have two and five-member wards, although I would probably change it further and include bigger-sized wards. We know that on islands, there is potential to go to one-member wards, which I think is equally sensible.

We also support the cautious approach on electronic voting pilots, particularly for people with sight loss. That is a sensible way to proceed. We need to be careful with our democracy. There are measures that some people are proposing that we should not try out, as they may jeopardise the whole electoral system. I would be cautious with electronic voting pilots.

It is sensible to have declarations on internet adverts. We have seen that Facebook has changed in order to give greater transparency; however, for other adverts, there needs to be an ability to find out who its original source is, so that we can track back and hold it to account for anything that is said.

There are provisions relating to the Electoral Commission being accountable to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. Considering the debate that we had quite recently on the independence of the SPCB, we need to be careful regarding that institution. The Electoral Commission reporting to the SPCB means that it is even more important to make sure that the SPCB is considered as an independent body. I agree with all that.

I even agree with Neil Findlay on doing further research on the randomisation of ballots. I recall that when Steven Purcell was the leader of Glasgow City Council, he almost lost his seat because he happened to be a bit further down the ballot paper. I am not sure that the constituents in his ward really intended for that to happen, but it did almost happen. We need to be mindful of that issue and there should be further research on it. There is a bias towards those whose names are at the beginning of the alphabet, and somebody who is near the end of the alphabet, like me, has a great interest in changing that.

However, we do not support the five-year term lengths. For a long time, the norm has been four years. In my view, there is no reason why we should change from four years; that term gives a regular renewal of our democracy and sufficiently long terms in Government but also enough democracy within our system. As we have seen, in our country, politics changes a lot, and the electors should have the right to change their Governments more frequently than every five years. It feels like we have had elections and referendums every five minutes for the past

decade, but I hope that that will not always be the case. A four-year cycle would be sensible. As Adam Tomkins said, we might not continue with the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. We might be back in the same position of having to make sure that we separate election years by another means. We should do what is right for our democracy in Scotland and have four-year terms instead of five-year terms. We want to avoid a repeat of the chaos around 2007. We can do that by making sure that we have a system in this Parliament that accommodates any change at Westminster.

In order that I can make another speech on the subject, I hope that there will be another elections reform bill and that it will be more radical. We could have a reform to the voting system in this Parliament. We could align it with the local government voting system, so that we can avoid confusion by having the single transferable vote across the country. That would allow us to educate people fully on the ballot paper. Even with randomised ballot papers, we would have a connection with the communities as well as greater proportionality and simplicity. I urge the minister to consider that for the next elections bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. Speeches should be of up to five minutes.

16:51

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): As Neil Findlay and other members from across the chamber have said, on the face of it the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill might seem to be dry and technical. However, the changes that are proposed to our election arrangements are sensible and will enhance democracy.

Increasing the term between Scottish parliamentary and local government elections to five years will ensure that there will be no election clashes in the future, so we can avoid the confusion of 2007, when we had two different elections on the same day. Every election should have its own focus and uniqueness: we should provide the best circumstances for voters to concentrate on the specific issues that are raised in that election. The situation in 2007 was detrimental to the message from local government about the work that it had been undertaking, as well as to folk who were trying to get re-elected. It muddied the water.

The provisions to change council ward membership by introducing one-member, two-member and five-member wards to the current system of three-member and four-member wards is a significant adjustment that has, as we have seen, its detractors. We have heard that there are differences of opinions on the matter. However,

the key is to allow for local circumstances and local people to make the decision. Of those who responded to the consultation, 72 per cent agreed that, when deciding ward sizes, local circumstances and geography should be given more weight. That confirms my view that that is the right way to go.

The idea “Vote early, vote often” is not mine, but the principle in the bill of one person having one vote, in respect of local government voters who are registered in two council areas, will be an improvement on the current situation, and was supported by 93 per cent of consultation responders.

The provisions on electronic voting will give us the opportunity to investigate the practicalities of providing better voting access for people who find it hard to participate in the process. For me, that is where it might end, because of the worries about folk hacking into the system. That said, I am pleased that because of other countries’ negative experiences with electronic voting and potential cyberattacks from outwith Scotland, we will require further legislation before a pilot or trial scheme can be implemented.

Registering attainers who are aged 14 and over without the complication of assessing a year-end notional age is a step forward and will make the registration process simpler for everyone. More important is that it will encourage young attainers to register early and to participate in the democratic process, and not just for the here and now. Introducing people early will, in itself, be good for democracy and voting intentions in the long run.

Currently, there is no requirement for candidates in council elections to disclose where financial donations to their campaign have come from. In the name of transparency and fairness, I—like most of the consultation respondents—agree that that should change. The bill makes provision for that.

The candidate list system discriminates against people who have names that begin with a letter that is late in the alphabet. Some of the evidence that we received—in fact, all of it—suggested that the mere fact of one’s name being further down the list is detrimental. I am therefore really pleased that the Government is prepared to look at the matter and, let us hope—I think that we can—sort it out.

All in all, the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill will make sensible adjustments to our electoral process and will, I believe, improve democracy in Scotland. That is what it should be all about.

17:57

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): Because elements of the bill relate to local government, I declare an interest as a councillor in Aberdeen City Council.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has been pleased to scrutinise the bill, and I am grateful to the minister for his response to our recommendations in the stage 1 report.

Broadly, the bill seeks to make changes to electoral law—mostly to reform aspects of practice for local government elections, although it also touches on term lengths for Parliament and makes facilitating arrangements for trials of electronic voting, among other things.

I welcome making permanent the change to five-year terms for Parliament. That will provide certainty and sufficient time for the Government of the day to progress its policy objectives.

I support the move to enable the Local Government Boundary Commission to introduce two-member and five-member wards where appropriate, although I hope that more is done on assessing the effect that that would have on the proportionality of votes that are cast at elections and on wards won.

I am generally supportive of examining whether electronic voting would boost political engagement. However, we should be very careful, because any action that we take should have the validity of election results as its first priority. Nonetheless, I advocate that we work towards electronic counting; it has always struck me as being rather absurd that we sit there counting by hand when we have electronic machines that could do it for us.

I will focus the remainder of my remarks on a few areas in which there appears to be a difference between the approach that is set out in the report and the thinking of the Scottish Government. I note that the Government has supported the majority of the recommendations, and I am glad that ministers will lodge appropriate amendments at stage 2. However, it appears to be the case that there are alternative viewpoints on a couple of issues. They are not areas of huge disagreement—they are simply matters on which further reflection will be required.

One committee recommendation was that further consideration be given to the effect of postal ballots on turnout. However, it appears from the minister’s letter that the Government is hesitant to commit to such work. I hope that the minister will reconsider that, because postal votes are a valuable aspect of our electoral system. If

they would boost engagement, we should reconsider them.

In addition, I am glad that the minister has agreed to consider again increasing the maximum fine for breaching election expenditure rules, which would ensure welcome consistency with the Referendums (Scotland) Act 2020.

One element that was discussed in the committee but is not included in the bill is a review of multimember wards in order to improve electoral practice and administration. The Scottish Government has stated that there is not sufficient time in the current parliamentary session to consider the issue in depth. That is a fair assessment, but given my first-hand experience in the matter, I implore those who are in Parliament after the next election to make the issue a priority, so that Parliament does all that it can to ensure that local government works as efficiently and effectively as possible.

In particular, proportionality should be examined. We know that it improves with higher councillor numbers per ward, but following that through to its natural conclusion could mean wards being replaced with area-wide proportional representation lists, which would not help the public to interact with their representatives. Perhaps a solution can be found that is based on the electoral system for the Scottish Parliament, in order to give ward and authority-wide mandates that more accurately reflect the electorate's views.

The bill includes a couple of things that might require amendment at later stages, but I endorse the conclusion of the stage 1 report that the changes are broadly acceptable. With that in mind, I am happy for the bill to proceed and will vote accordingly on the motion, later today.

17:01

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Like colleagues in the chamber, I think that the bill represents a welcome opportunity to consider how we can improve our electoral process. As the Electoral Reform Society stated in its evidence to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee,

“Meaningful, and more inclusive, participation should absolutely be the cornerstone of electoral reform”.

The society also highlighted that the reforms that are before us are not

“in any way enough to achieve a democracy fit for 21st Century Scotland”

and pressed for us to ensure that any amendments that are made to the electoral system through the bill are reviewed when the outcome of the local governance review comes before Parliament. That is not to speak against the

bill; it is to say that we should view it in a wider context.

The bill makes modest changes, and the Labour Party will support its general principles. We welcome the cap on spending in local government elections and the action on online advertising, which will bring Scotland into line with the rest of the UK on that issue. We also welcome the change to allow those who are aged 14 and over to join the electoral register, which several members have mentioned. That must be backed up with increased work in our schools to ensure that young people are aware of local government and how it interacts with their lives.

When the Parliament was set up, there was a huge effort in that regard, and that has continued. Those of us who have hosted school visits to the Parliament know that there is interaction, that teachers are interested in what we do and that young people are engaged. The challenge is to achieve real engagement in school so that young people want to get active, to vote and potentially to stand as candidates. I hope that the changes will be important and will be followed through with education in order to improve voter turnout among young people. The changes could serve as an example for UK elections.

We have some reservations about the bill. Quite a few members have mentioned electronic voting. We have heard about problems across Europe and in the US and the fact that electronic voting does not increase participation. Electronic voting can be problematic, and it can cause staffing issues in polling stations. As we have heard, in one or two parts of Europe, electronic voting has not worked. For example, after the introduction of electronic voting in Belgium, where voting is compulsory, voting numbers dropped. We need to look at the issue in a bit more depth, and stage 2 could be a good opportunity to do so.

We want to modernise the process of voting, but there is an issue with the integrity of the process, which is paramount. Electronic voting will potentially make the process more streamlined but, if big organisations such as banks and other financial institutions are not safe from cyberattack with all the budgets that they have, we really have to flag up a concern that there could be issues. Neil Findlay's and Mark Ruskell's suggestions about postal ballots are worth looking at in considering how to encourage people to get involved.

Another area that was discussed is the numbers of councillors in council wards and the concern about underrepresentation. It has not been mentioned so far that we are one of the most underrepresented countries in the world. We have only one elected representative for every 4,270 people. On one level, moving to two and five-

member wards gives flexibility, and it has been welcomed by some, but the comments today—

Tom Mason: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: Yes, briefly.

Tom Mason: Is it the case that up to very recently—when we left the European Union—every member of the Scottish community had 19 elected representatives?

Sarah Boyack: We do not have the same level of local representation that there is in the rest of the EU.

Everybody has focused on proportionality, which I totally agree with. Another issue is the capacity of councillors to represent people in what can be incredibly large wards—that is clearly an issue in island and remote and rural communities. There is also the issue of whether we could have more councillors in our communities, rather than just focusing on the number of wards in terms of proportionality. Bringing those two issues together might be another way to look at them. It was interesting to hear reservations from Bill Kidd and colleagues in the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, because they paralleled the reservations that came up in the Local Government and Communities Committee when we looked at the issue.

Finally, I will talk about representation. Alongside the bill, we have talked about encouraging young people to vote. There is a broader issue to do with encouraging everybody to vote. The numbers participating in local government elections are very low in comparison with the numbers participating in either Scottish Parliament or UK elections. There is a need to encourage people to get involved in local elections and local government. When we look at the sizes of wards and the numbers of people standing in wards, we should be thinking about participation and encouraging people to get involved. When we look at the parity of representation between women and men in Scotland, we see that only 30.5 per cent of local government representatives are women. We should be looking to improve that—it is not good enough.

Let us get the details of the bill right and use the opportunity of having the debate on the bill to encourage greater numbers of young people to vote and to think about how we encourage young people and people from underrepresented groups to become candidates and, potentially, elected representatives. The bill is an opportunity. Although it cannot do everything, I ask the minister to think about—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will have to be quick.

Sarah Boyack: I ask the minister to have a look at multimember wards, which have been mentioned by a couple of members, and do a proper review of how they have worked and the range of changes that could be made to increase representation.

17:07

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the stage 1 debate on the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill. As we know, the bill is part of a package of measures that are intended to update our electoral processes, alongside the related but distinct bill, the Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Bill. It is probably fair to say that the latter bill, which deals with issues of franchise and so forth, has perhaps attracted a wee bit more attention than the drier—as they have been described—provisions of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill. However, the reforms that are proposed are nonetheless important.

As we have heard, the bill covers a number of key technical issues that underpin our electoral processes. First, it is proposed in the bill—I understand that the Government's position is still unclear, but the minister can clarify—that we move to a five-year electoral cycle for the Scottish Parliament and local government. That would be moving away from the present statutory position of four years. I have heard what members have said on that, and not everybody is in agreement. I think that it is entirely reasonable to move to five years and that it would help to facilitate longer-term policy planning and, I hope, greater consultation, which is important.

The bill will provide the new boundary commission with the necessary discretion to establish two or five-member local government wards where special local circumstances pertain. I have heard in the debate that that discretion should be exercised carefully to ensure that we do not unduly risk proportionality issues. The view has also been expressed that a two-member ward has resilience risks, for example if one of the two members becomes ill or otherwise incapacitated. In broad-brush terms, the possibility of a two-member ward is important to reflect the diversity of Scotland and underline the important fact that one size does not fit all.

The bill also sets forth a series of proposals that will amend the way in which the Electoral Commission carries out its work. There are provisions that will extend the role of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland to cover Scottish parliamentary elections. There are provisions on rules on election expenses returns and the important issue of donations for local government elections.

There are also provisions that will provide enabling powers to carry out exploratory trials or pilots for electronic voting in local government elections. There is to be a further debate on electronic voting. There are many potential positives but also an awful lot of issues that require to be addressed in detail to provide voters with the assurance that their vote is secure and will be fairly counted. We are not there yet, by any stretch of the imagination, but I welcome exploratory trials to consider improving the accessibility of voting for people with disabilities.

In addition to the work of the lead committee, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, the committee on which I sit, the Local Government and Communities Committee, looked at the bill and held an evidence session with Ronnie Hinds of the Local Government Boundary Commission, as it is currently called, and Jonathon Shafi of the Electoral Reform Society. We had an interesting and wide-ranging discussion with them on matters relating to the bill and on wider issues relating to the subject matter. As far as the bill itself is concerned, I am pleased to note that the minister has responded positively to the recommendation that was made, including by our committee following the evidence from Ronnie Hinds, that we move to 15-year cycles for local government boundary reviews.

We also held an interesting discussion on the important issue of council by-elections. In effect, those take place at present using the alternative vote method, given that there is normally only one vacancy to be filled. That is far from ideal. The Local Government and Communities Committee has suggested that the issue merits further consideration. I note that the minister in his reply to the convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee indicated a willingness to engage in further discussions on possible reforms here. I look forward to those discussions.

Another wider issue that has been referred to this afternoon and on which the Local Government and Communities Committee would welcome further engagement is the system of multimember wards. It has been 15 years or so since the passing of the relevant legislation introducing the system. It may be that we review that system at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Aside from those comments, I am very pleased to support the principles of the bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

17:13

Neil Findlay: At the beginning of the debate, Gil Paterson made an important point about the

desire to see every election have its own focus. That is right. When elections are coupled together, the local government elections—as is always the case with local government—get shoved down the agenda. It should not be like that.

Some issues that were raised in the debate are very interesting. Adam Tomkins was right about voters needing clarity and certainty. That is absolutely the case in any election. Where there is uncertainty, it undermines the whole democratic process. The point about no Parliament setting its own term is equally important—that should never happen.

There is a question about what would happen to the bill—any future bill would have to take this into account—if the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 was repealed. Who knows what the situation would be then? I would be interested to hear the minister's response to that point.

We have heard quite a lot of comment on four and five-year terms, which reflects the differences of opinion between members. Perhaps a four-and-a-half-year term would be the answer. Who knows?

A number of views were expressed on two and five-member wards. I can picture Willie Rennie on “Mastermind”, with ward size as his specialist subject. Indeed, I can see him at the Liberal Democrat conference—him and Alex Cole-Hamilton, up all night with their peppermint teas and in their Lib Dem onesies—discussing the intricacies of ward sizes. Meanwhile, Liam McArthur and Tavish Scott would be holding up the bar. I am not quite sure where Mike Rumbles would be—he would probably be locked outside so that he could not influence anybody.

Richard Lyle was right to raise the issue of candidate addresses. There is a balance to be struck between openness and transparency and personal security. I do not know where the line should fall, but it is a legitimate question.

Richard Lyle: My point was about a candidate that I know of, who was formerly abused by her husband. She was distraught when her new address was published by the council.

Neil Findlay: That is an unintended consequence. We might not think about such things happening, so it was a legitimate point to raise.

Tom Mason raised the point about our being represented by 19 people when we had all the MEPs. My only response to that is that I can never get my head around the fact that, at one point, one of them was David Coburn.

Prior to our starting work on the bill, I did not know that someone could register to vote more than once—every day is a school day on the

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. There are practical issues about how we address that situation and ensure that it is not abused.

Sarah Boyack raised some excellent points about voter education and engagement, which is key. When I was on West Lothian Council, we had an excellent voter education team that did a lot of work out in the community—in shopping centres, schools and so on—to sign people up to vote. However, all those services have gone. That team worked around the electoral cycle, not just at election time. They did that work throughout the year and were skilled at it. In the cuts caused by local government cuts, many such services have been dismantled and we are the poorer for it. Local government should be the building block of our democracy, but it is often undervalued and underrated, and councillors are underpaid.

Graeme Dey said that the Parliament should have its say on electronic voting, which is right, although there are issues around its costs and practicalities. I can picture in my mind another public sector information technology project, which sends a shiver down my back. If we are going to move towards electronic voting, we will need to move with caution, but I am open-minded about it.

The bill is about widening access to voting and democracy. Hopefully, we can develop that as the bill goes through the parliamentary process.

17:18

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I give my regular thanks to our committee clerking team for their support in the preparation of the stage 1 report that we are debating. I also thank the members and clerks of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for their contribution to the process.

The bill that is before us is wide ranging, and our committee has contributed a considerable body of detailed work on each of the topics that are covered. Our convener, Bill Kidd, has already provided an overview of the committee's position and our support for the principles of the bill, so I will address a few of the issues that continue to arise.

On term lengths, it is apparent to me that we have gone too long without answering the questions that have arisen from, initially, the 2011 act and the broader trend towards five-year legislative sessions. The Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies have already broadly accepted that principle. It is rendered slightly problematic by the fact that, as other members have said, we have lived through three general elections at UK level in the past five years. The reality is simply

that, to avoid election clashes, a level of flexibility will be required.

The bill also contains provisions that relate to postponing elections for the Parliament. The committee weighed the benefits of being able to respond to unforeseen consequences against the breadth of the power that is being given to the Presiding Officer. Again, a degree of flexibility is required, but we should be wary of pulling the Presiding Officer into areas of potential controversy, particularly when there could be heightened tensions during an election campaign and when a Presiding Officer might be seeking re-election in their own constituency.

As I am a Highlands and Islands MSP, an issue of more local relevance to me is the provisions around council wards. I come from the islands, where special rules are already in place, and it is clear to me that what the bill proposes has some merit for our remote and rural communities. Local government should reflect local needs rather than there being a one-size-fits-all approach. Deviation should be possible where there are strong and considered arguments in its favour.

When multimember wards were introduced—often spanning several communities—the link between place and representation became weaker. A reformed approach at the community council level could have gone some way towards addressing the issue, but that has not happened. However, the committee concluded that there was a lack of evidence from the Scottish Government on the effect of two-member wards on proportionality.

The committee also considered the provisions that relate to voting in more than one local authority election on the same day. As we set out, it remains difficult to see how such a law would be enforced effectively without changes to registration arrangements. The committee has not taken a position on the way forward in that regard, but it has at least set out its thinking, and the Scottish Government has ruled out a single-register approach.

We have had several discussions in the chamber on the question of electronic voting. For regions such as mine, there are clear benefits but also clear disadvantages to the potential approaches that have been suggested. The Scottish Government has recognised that work in the area is at an early stage, which is welcome, and I would encourage the Government to have a fuller debate in the Parliament before any significant change in policy is set in motion.

I will touch briefly on the powers of the Electoral Commission. The committee has looked at consistency with regard to referendums and the different levels of penalty that are available to the

Electoral Commission when election or referendum laws are breached. The Scottish Government outlined in its response sympathy for the committee's arguments and that it intends to clarify potential ways forward, which is a positive approach.

Another area of consistency between elections and referendums is the Electoral Commission's investigatory powers. It is my view that they should be the same for both of those electoral events. The Scottish Government has, quite reasonably, set out the reservations that apply in those areas. However, if parity of approach is broadly accepted, there is surely scope for raising the issue with the UK Government and exploring matters in a co-operative spirit.

My colleague Adam Tomkins highlighted our support in principle for the bill and the need to provide clarity for voters, particularly around the issue of term lengths. He also raised the issue, as I have, of concerns about the impact on proportionality of the proposal for smaller, two-member wards, which the committee also had concerns about. Tom Mason highlighted concerns about the effect of two-member wards on proportionality and referred to his experiences as a councillor and how the proposed changes might impact on local communities.

There were other positive contributions to the debate from various members. Neil Findlay and Adam Tomkins surprised each other by finding areas of agreement. Willie Rennie surprised no one by highlighting just how excited the Lib Dems can get about this sort of thing. Adam Tomkins also spoke about the security of electronic voting. I still have concerns about the security of that voting process. I had hoped to introduce amendments in that regard to the Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Bill, but I was not able to. I intend to have similar amendments considered for this bill, but I will be happy to work with the minister on those. Sarah Boyack talked about voter education, which is very important, as we must have the resource in place to ensure that voters are aware of their rights, have information about who they are voting for and understand the issue of responsibility.

Alongside the multitude of provisions in the bill, we should also consider the bill's broader importance, as it would alter the rules about how our democracy functions. The bill would set the foundations for a number of relatively significant changes to the functioning of our elections at both Holyrood and local authority levels. As ever, that will place a burden on us to ensure that the structures that we put in place are not only fair and credible but stable and resilient.

17:25

Graeme Dey: This has been a considered and thoughtful debate, which, despite its short nature, has been very useful. It has certainly been a memorable debate for me, not only because of the spectacle of Neil Findlay and Adam Tomkins agreeing on a number of matters but because I concur with them, which is deeply concerning.

Members have highlighted the competing views on a number of topics linked to the bill. I will focus on those aspects, and I apologise to those members whose contributions I do not have time to cover.

I am very happy to engage in the same constructive approach that Adam Tomkins took today. He talked about the five-year term issue and the interaction with UK elections, given the possibility of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 being revoked. There is no easy answer to the question that he posed. I simply take the view that we should proceed by planning for what we know. At the moment, if we were to take a five-year term approach, the likelihood is that we would avoid two clashes over the next 20 years. That would be the same approach that is taken in Wales and Northern Ireland. Instinctively, I think that that is what we should do.

On Adam Tomkins's valid point about two-member wards and his seeking assurance that the use of that provision would be by exception, I absolutely agree with him. I am not sure how an amendment along the lines that he was talking about would be framed, but I am happy to engage with him on that. However, I make it absolutely clear that that approach would be used only in exceptional circumstances and, of course, any proposal would come back to the Parliament for ratification under the affirmative procedure.

A number of members rightly highlighted some of the concerns to do with e-voting. I reassure them that we are at an early stage, and I entirely recognise the concerns that were expressed, particularly about the integrity of the process. Again, we would consider pilot projects, all of which would be subject to scrutiny by the Parliament before they were taken forward. I hope that that provides reassurance to colleagues.

Neil Findlay's speech was very constructive. I absolutely recognise the issue around the list-order effect and how some participants in elections are disadvantaged. I am happy to acknowledge the need for further research, and I am willing to undertake to explore the issue further with the Electoral Commission, because the issue is not going away and we really need to find a way forward. However, in doing so, we must not simply find ourselves in another situation in which someone is disadvantaged in some way.

Willie Rennie, like Neil Findlay, explored the issue of full randomisation. I get that argument, but I want to highlight some of the downsides to that, without in any way dismissing it as an option. There would be issues for people with certain disabilities who seek to memorise the ballot paper before they go to vote. Members need to bear in mind that a number of individuals going to vote depend on having an enlarged ballot paper in the polling station, and we could not provide that option if the process was fully randomised. This may seem a bit spurious, but there is also the matter of dealing with households that have multiple ballot papers posted to them, because the ballot papers would be completely different.

As I said, I make those points not to dismiss in any way the idea of randomisation; I do so to highlight that very few alternatives are 100 per cent straightforward.

Mark Ruskell and Sarah Boyack mentioned encouraging young people's full participation in the process. I agree. Obviously, political literacy is embedded in curriculum for excellence, but I offer a bit of reassurance on the matter. Over the past few months, two high schools in my Angus South constituency have either reintroduced or introduced modern studies into the curriculum. In fact, one school is expanding that into secondary 2 in order to get young people engaged in that subject. I think that the direction of travel is already positive, but it is an important topic.

Mark Ruskell, Tom Mason and others mentioned the need to review the whole local government electoral system. As I said at committee, I have sympathy with that view. It has been quite a number of years since that system was introduced, and I think that it might be time to look at it. However, given the parliamentary timetable, I think that we will be into the next session of Parliament before that is possible.

A number of members suggested postal ballots as a way forward. I recognise again that perhaps there would be benefits in trying pilots, but I have reservations about postal ballots, which I explained at committee. I say again that, as we move forward to stage 2, I am happy to talk to members about how we might address the points that they have made.

Richard Lyle sought clarity on the order that I intend to bring forward in a matter of months to address the publication of local authority candidates' addresses. I assure him that that will cover the publicly displayed list of nominated candidates. I commend his work on the issue, because it is something that has mattered to a number of people, particularly in the circumstances that he noted.

Although the bill addresses many facets of electoral law, the central theme is that of putting the interests of the voter first. I am pleased that it has attracted wide-ranging support from stakeholders and members in the chamber today. I hope that members will join me in supporting the principles of the bill. Once again, I commit to working constructively with colleagues to make the bill even better.

Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill: Financial Resolution

17:31

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of motion S5M-20364, on a financial resolution for the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Kate Forbes*]

Decision Time

17:31

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that motion S5M-20740, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-20364, in the name of the cabinet secretary, on a financial resolution for the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

Meeting closed at 17:32.

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