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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 21 April 2022

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is general question time. I would appreciate short and succinct questions, and answers to match, in order to get in as many members as possible.

Women's Access to Clinics and Hospitals

1. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Police Scotland to discuss safe access for all women to clinics and hospitals. (S6O-00982)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government convened in December 2021 a working group with members from COSLA, Police Scotland, and councils and health boards that are affected by vigils and protests that take place outside abortion clinics. The group is specifically focused on seeking solutions to ensure that women can access abortion services safely and without fear of harassment. The working group last met this morning: it was our third meeting. The agenda and minutes of previous meetings can be found on the Scottish Government's website.

Katy Clark: Last week, at the end of 40 days of continuous demonstrations, there were 100 anti-abortion protesters outside the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's maternity unit. Does the minister accept that women and the workforce are being harassed and that urgent action is needed to bring that type of behaviour to an end? Does she accept that we need to know that action is being taken urgently and that steps will be taken to ensure that such protests cannot continue? Will the Scottish Government have the courage to introduce Scotland-wide legislation to create buffer zones?

Maree Todd: I put it on the record that I was very dismayed to hear about the protests at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital last weekend. There is absolutely no place in our society for harassment, abuse or intimidation of women and girls who are accessing healthcare services. The Scottish Government is committed to women being able to access timely abortion without facing judgment. Both our programme for government and our "Women's Health Plan: A plan for 2021-2024" include undertakings in that regard, which I

hope indicates the level of importance that we give the issue.

I am working closely, collaboratively and constructively with Gillian Mackay, who intends to introduce a member's bill on the issue. I met her in February and she was at this morning's meeting of the working group to meet all its members and to share her consultation. We all agreed to work constructively with her on the issue.

Home Heating Support Fund

2. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the roll-out of the home heating support fund. (S6O-00983)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): The home heating support fund is delivered on our behalf by Advice Direct Scotland. It reopened at the end of last year with funding that was provided from our fuel insecurity fund. Since then, it has been successfully helping households that are at risk of severely rationing their energy use or of self-disconnecting entirely. Although figures are still being collated, the provisional figures show that more than 7,300 applications for support had been received by 11 April.

The fund will continue to offer households support through the current financial year, thanks to the additional £10 million funding that we recently announced for the fuel insecurity fund.

Evelyn Tweed: As the Tories waste precious energy running to the defence of their law-breaking Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, people across Scotland are focused on how to make ends meet, feed their children and keep their homes warm. Does the minister agree that, instead of navel gazing, the Tories must engage with reality and encourage the chancellor to cut VAT on energy bills as a way of helping people with the cost of living crisis?

Patrick Harvie: I very strongly agree that action must be taken and that a short-term cut to VAT on energy fuels, among a range of other measures, would be one way of providing short-term relief for households that are faced with the huge increase—resulting from the price cap that has just come into effect—which we expect will get worse later this year.

We first suggested such a cut in VAT back in January. My colleagues, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy and the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, both reiterated the request when they wrote to their United Kingdom Government counterparts last month. We have proposed a range of other actions to address the cost of living crisis, some of

which sit with the UK Government and some of which, as discussed, we have already implemented in Scotland through our devolved powers.

For some time, we have been pressing for an end to VAT on energy-saving measures, which would increase uptake of those products. It is good that the UK Government has finally recognised the merits of that policy. We also continue to urge it to commit to rebalancing the policy cost element of energy bills in order to reduce the premium that is paid by households that rely on electric heating, and to unlock deployment of low and zero-emissions heating.

Finally, I say that it is astonishing that the UK Government has published an energy security strategy that says absolutely nothing about energy efficiency. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government continues to make the matter a long-term high priority.

National Health Service (Rural Areas)

3. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what help it will provide to tackle any national health service backlogs in rural areas. (S6O-00984)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The on-going impact of addressing the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that many health services have been suspended or reduced in scope and scale. That has affected almost all aspects of planned care; as a result, many people are waiting longer for the care that they need. I hope that Finlay Carson and the Parliament are assured that addressing that backlog, while continuing to meet on-going urgent health and care demands, is a top priority.

We published the “NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026” in August 2021. It sets out our plans to address the backlogs in care throughout the current parliamentary session. In Dumfries and Galloway specifically, we are working closely with the health board on its local recovery plan, which recognises the specific challenges that the board faces. They include recruitment to a number of key roles to support increased capacity, use of the independent sector where appropriate, and funding to open short-stay and ward beds in order to accommodate additional activity.

Finlay Carson: Earlier this month, the Scottish Government announced that it had purchased a private care hospital—Carrick Glen hospital in Ayr, which specialises in orthopaedics. Given the important role that is played by cottage hospitals at Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbright and Newton Stewart, which provided vital health services to nearly 600 patients before the pandemic, will

financial assistance be made available either to retain or replace those crucial local facilities in order to reduce the growing backlog in delayed discharge and to move palliative care patients closer to home?

Humza Yousaf: Mr Carson has raised an important point. It is for our local health boards to make decisions and assessments about the premises and acute sites that they have in their regions. If the local health board comes to the Government with a plan for how purchase of those premises might help it to reduce the backlog, of course the Government will look at it.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Recruitment of new staff to the health service will play a crucial role in supporting the recovery of our NHS. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on progress since the launch of the recruitment drive in October, and can he outline how measures in the “National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care in Scotland” will promote the growth of Scotland’s remote and rural workforce in the long term?

Humza Yousaf: I am delighted that we were able to announce this week that we have recruited more than 1,000 healthcare support staff in a mixture of acute sites and community sites. They are in urban areas and in remote and island communities, which is very positive. We have recruited almost 200 overseas-registered nurses, and more than 200 more will come on stream over the weeks and months ahead. The overseas recruitment is ethical international recruitment, which is incredibly important.

We are absolutely committed to developing a sustainable healthcare workforce, and we have committed to developing a remote and rural workforce strategy. As Stephanie Callaghan is no doubt aware, we are creating a national centre for remote and rural health and social care, which is due to be operational by spring next year. That centre will support recruitment, retention, ideal practice, evaluation, training, education and research.

Department for Work and Pensions (Meetings)

4. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the Department for Work and Pensions, and what was discussed. (S6O-00985)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Ministers and officials are in regular contact with the Department for Work and Pensions. Joint ministerial working group meetings are held twice a year. The most recent meeting took place in November last year, when the adult

disability payment, child disability payment and the Scottish child payment were discussed.

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government holds regular bilateral meetings with Chloe Smith—the UK Government Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work—on priorities for delivery of devolved social security, the most recent of which took place last month. There is also a well-established programme of meetings at official level on delivery of devolved welfare benefits.

Collette Stevenson: As the cabinet secretary knows, the Tories' cost of living crisis is causing real hardship, and their lack of action is staggering. Does she agree that the UK Tory Government must review and increase its local housing allowance to help people with spiralling costs; raise all social security payments by at least 6 per cent, to protect people from poverty; and implement fair and fast compensation, as requested by Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI—to ensure that women who were born in the 1950s are not further penalised?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government has fully supported the work of the WASPI campaign and has consistently called on the UK Government to take responsibility for the hardship that is being caused to thousands of women who are negatively impacted.

Local housing allowance rates were last set on 31 March 2020 and have not been elevated since. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 1 January this year, urging her to take steps to restore rates to a level that will prevent many people in Scotland from having to make the difficult choice between paying the rent and feeding their families, and heating their homes. In contrast, we acted urgently, in spite of our limited powers, by further increasing, from 3.1 per cent to 6 per cent, several devolved social security benefits and forms of assistance.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland (Lab)): The DWP's nationwide closures include its office in Aberdeen, which leaves more than 60 workers at risk of redundancy. I previously raised the prospect of those highly skilled workers being redeployed to Social Security Scotland to assist with roll-out of new devolved benefits. At the time, the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise indicated that the Scottish Government could explore that option, but no clear commitment was given. I ask the cabinet secretary for a firm commitment. Will the Scottish Government work with the Public and Commercial Services Union and the DWP to explore redeployment of those workers to Social Security Scotland?

Shona Robison: Mercedes Villalba is probably aware that a number of DWP staff have

successfully moved across to Social Security Scotland in recruitments since it has been up and running. However, I am happy to take forward the suggestion that she has made. I will look at what was said previously and write to her with more detail.

Benefit Cap

5. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to proceed with its commitment to mitigate any impact of the United Kingdom Government benefit cap as much as possible within the scope of its devolved powers. (S6O-00986)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): We know that households that are impacted by the benefit cap lose almost £2,500 per year. Mitigation of the cap will help the families who are hardest hit by the UK Government's cuts to keep their homes. We will invest up to £10 million in 2022-23 to mitigate the benefit cap as far as we can within our powers. We are working with local authorities to identify existing good practice in benefit cap mitigation and to agree how best to support those who are affected by that damaging policy. That additional funding will be rolled out as early as possible this year.

Marie McNair: The cabinet secretary will remember that the first conversation that I had with her as a newly elected MSP was about mitigating the benefit cap and I am delighted that we are doing that. It is beyond belief that the Westminster Government is implementing a policy that denies families with children basic levels of subsistence and continues to make things even worse with its two-child policy and its abhorrent rape clause. Will the cabinet secretary join me in condemning that approach and agree that it would have no part in an independent Scotland, which would have dignity, fairness and respect at the heart of its approach to social security policy?

Shona Robison: I whole-heartedly agree with Marie McNair on that point. I also recognise her long-standing support of the move to mitigate the benefit cap. Indeed, she raised it in the early days after she was elected.

We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to urgently review the various failings of the universal credit system, such as the two-child limit and the rape clause, which is abhorrent and would have no place in an independent Scotland's social security system. In contrast, we are committing more than £3.9 billion for benefits expenditure in 2022-23, providing support to more than 1 million people. That is more than £360 million above the level of funding to be received from the UK Government through the block grant adjustment, which shows the investment that we

are making in the people of Scotland in this important area.

Cladding (Replacement)

6. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is progressing with the replacement of unsafe cladding on tall buildings. (S6O-00987)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): We will introduce legislation tomorrow to ban the highest-risk cladding and combustible materials in residential and other high-risk buildings above 11m. That will apply from 1 June 2022. All unsafe cladding that is being replaced through our assessment and remediation programme will need to meet that standard.

Our programme of single building assessments, which is free for home owners, is currently under way in 25 buildings. It will determine what, if anything, needs to be done to ensure that those buildings are safe. We expect some of the assessments, which are detailed and very complex, to be completed in the coming weeks.

Alexander Stewart: In January, the United Kingdom Government pressurised housing developers to commit to removing dangerous cladding from buildings. Three months later, we have seen no such moves from the Scottish Government. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that developers remove flammable cladding from buildings as a matter of urgency?

Shona Robison: I am glad that Alexander Stewart has asked me that question. I say to him first that, unfortunately, the building safety pledge and building safety fund are for England only. Despite assurances that we would work closely together to tackle building safety issues, the devolved Administrations have yet to have a seat at the table. We have raised deep concerns with the Welsh Government about that.

The change from a fund to pledge letters means that less in consequential is available for the devolved nations to tackle their own cladding issues. We remain open to all solutions, and we are currently working with several developers to try to action remediation and to get it done on a voluntary basis, but it is deeply unhelpful that the UK Government has excluded Wales and Scotland from the developers fund. We are urgently seeking a meeting with Michael Gove to request that the pledge letters cover Wales and Scotland. It is deeply disappointing that, to date, we have not managed to get that meeting arranged.

Perhaps my colleagues on my left in the chamber who are heckling from a sedentary

position could refocus their attention on requesting Michael Gove to meet with Wales and Scotland, because at the heart of this is the very important issue of unsafe cladding on buildings. Surely that is something that transcends party politics. If they can be of assistance, that would be most helpful.

Fuel Costs (Support for Agriculture and Fishing)

7. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the agricultural and fishing industries with rising fuel costs. (S6O-00988)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): It is clear to all of us that Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the justified western sanctions in response are having impacts, not the least of which are the hugely challenging increases in energy bills, which affect households and everyone in the food industry, from farmers and processors to the fishing industry. I am acutely aware of the impact that that has across the food supply chain and of the particular issues that it causes for our fishing industries, which are facing financial hardship as a result. The continued lack of engagement from the United Kingdom Government will lead again to consternation for Scottish businesses that are dealing with an already unsettled international environment.

On 17 March, I announced that we have convened a food security and supply task force, jointly with industry, to monitor, identify and respond to those issues, as well as to recommend actions that can be taken by business and by the Scottish and UK Governments to mitigate some of those challenges. Further to that, on 4 April I wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice, requesting an urgent four-nation summit on the impact of fuel prices. Yesterday, he finally agreed to that request during a meeting. We will now work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that that happens at pace.

Liam McArthur: Although we are all feeling the pinch at the pumps, the exceptional rise in input costs is forcing boats in Orkney to either tie up or leave the industry entirely. The combination of feed, fuel and fertiliser costs threatens the very viability of many farms. Given the importance of food security, which the cabinet secretary has recognised, when would she expect the working group to come forward with recommendations? Will she give a commitment to implement those recommendations with absolute urgency?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes. The task force was set up as a short-life task force to do exactly that—to look at the short, medium and longer-term actions. We had our third meeting yesterday and we will be

having what is expected to be our last meeting shortly. We will produce a paper with a report with recommendations from that, which, of course, the Scottish Government will consider carefully.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. Before we move to First Minister's question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Hon Jonathan O'Dea MP, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Parliament of New South Wales. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Charges for Drivers (Edinburgh and Glasgow)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I begin by wishing Her Majesty the Queen a very happy 96th birthday. On behalf of the whole chamber and people across Scotland, we send our best wishes to the monarch, who has been a constant in our country for many decades. Through good times and difficult periods, while the country has been at war and during peace time, she has been a global figure and our remarkable head of state. I know that everyone in the chamber will join us in wishing Her Majesty a very happy birthday.

Does the First Minister support plans for drivers who live outside Edinburgh and Glasgow to be charged extra to get into Scotland's two largest cities?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I, too, take the opportunity to wish Her Majesty a very happy 96th birthday. Her service has been, and continues to be, an inspiration to many, not just in Scotland and the United Kingdom but across the world. I know that all of us, in sending her our very best wishes today, will also wish her many happy returns.

It is right that we support people who require to use our roads and that we do that in a range of ways—for example, by ensuring good maintenance of our roads and pressing for action on the part of the UK Government to cut the cost of motoring, particularly just now when people are suffering due to the cost of living crisis. However, we also all have a big responsibility to ensure that we make the transition to net zero, which means decarbonising our transport system. Therefore, local authorities will consult on a range of issues. It is important that those responsibilities are kept in our minds, but also that the views of the wider public are taken fully into account.

Douglas Ross: So, the First Minister wants to support people who use our roads, and her answer is this: tax them more. The Scottish National Party Government brought in the workplace parking tax and the SNP group in the City of Edinburgh Council has charged ahead with plans to introduce it—plans that would hit anyone who needs their car to get into work in the city. Now, in its manifesto for the local election, the SNP has included proposals to charge vehicles just to come into the capital. That is a commuter tax on people all over the country who travel to work in Edinburgh, come to do business, visit family and friends or use vital services. Scottish

Conservatives are completely opposed to that proposal, so why is the SNP intent on making driving in our cities unaffordable?

The First Minister: I think, perhaps on many issues, Douglas Ross needs to decide what his position actually is and avoid rendering himself ridiculous by having contradictory and inconsistent positions.

Talking of manifestos, let me first quote the Tory local government manifesto from 2017, which says this:

“We need to empower councils and give them a renewed sense of meaning and purpose”.

[*Interruption.*]—I can hear Douglas Ross say, “That is not up to date enough”, so let me cite the Conservative manifesto from the Scottish Parliament election just this time last year. Again, I am quoting. It said:

“Councils should lead post-COVID reviews of changed travel patterns in their area and be encouraged to create more low traffic neighbourhoods”.

[*Interruption.*]—So, on the one hand, Douglas Ross wants to empower local councils, but then he stands up and says that I should rule out the local councils having the ability to decide on things that could help us with that transition to net zero, while, of course, supporting travel patterns across the country. Not for the first time, Presiding Officer, and I suspect not for the last time, Douglas Ross’s position is completely inconsistent and bordering on being ridiculous.

Douglas Ross: “Bordering on being ridiculous” is the dismal answer. The two things that are bordering on being ridiculous are the fact that SNP back benchers think that that was a good answer, and the complete deflection from the SNP proposals. There was nothing from the leader of the SNP—the First Minister—about the specific question that I asked. Her pre-prepared answers about what I might or might not have said do not really sit well—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues—[*Interruption.*] Colleagues—thank you.

Douglas Ross: Her pre-prepared answers on what I might or might not have come to the chamber to say—[*Interruption.*]

I do not know what it is difficult for the SNP to understand. The First Minister—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Ross. Can we please hear Mr Ross? Thank you.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister is trying to predict what I will say at First Minister’s question time and has a script ready that has nothing to do with the issue that we are raising, which is about the SNP raising the cost of driving cars in cities,

which people rely on to get to work, to visit friends and family, and to use vital services.

In response to the news of that commuter tax, this morning, the Federation of Small Businesses urged councils to avoid additional cost for business. It made it clear that a commuter tax would hit tradespeople coming from the Lothians, the Borders, Fife and further afield.

It is not just those areas that would be hit with extra charges from SNP councillors. Anyone who is working in Glasgow also faces the prospect of extra charges for driving into their city. Glasgow City Council’s SNP leader Susan Aitken has suggested capping traffic on the M8, and she is considering introducing road tolls. A previous SNP Government scrapped those charges. Will the First Minister give the categorical answer that she will not bring them back in again?

The First Minister: Douglas Ross might want to reflect on the fact that members in the chamber were not laughing with him a few moments ago.

I was quoting from Conservative manifestos that put the finger on the really important issue here. Everybody across the country and everybody in the chamber knows that all of us—not only in Scotland but across the world—will face some really difficult, tough and challenging decisions in the years to come about how we heat our homes and how we travel around the country, so that we can meet our climate change obligations and make the transition to net zero, but also have a transport system that still supports our economy and the travelling public.

It is easy for the Scottish Conservatives to reduce those challenging decisions in the simplistic way that they have, but the rest of us know that those decisions have to be faced. This is about empowering local councils to consult on the decisions, consider the options and arrive at decisions. That is what we are doing and what the Conservatives used to, but clearly now do not, support.

As a Government, we continue to support the transport system across the country. Since this Government took office, we have invested in excess of £9.5 billion in managing, maintaining and improving Scotland’s trunk roads and our motorway network. We are also investing more than £500 million for bus priority measures to support people getting out of car use. We will continue to take the tough decisions, to consult the public, to come to sensible decisions and back those decisions with investments. That is serious government as opposed to ridiculous opposition.

Douglas Ross: There have been three questions so far to the First Minister, but zero answers. The last one was very straightforward: will the First Minister rule out re-introduction of

road tolls in Scotland? She was silent—she did not even attempt to answer the question.

Across the chamber, all parties agree on the need to do more to meet our climate change targets—*[Interruption.]*

SNP members laugh about that, but in many industries, and across rural areas especially, people still need their cars. Right now, there could not be a worse time for a further hike in the cost of driving. We are in the middle of a cost of living crisis and petrol prices are rising globally, yet Nicola Sturgeon wants to tax people off the road by hammering anyone who owns a car. The people who will be hit the hardest are not the wealthiest people, but ordinary working people who need their cars and who are already struggling with the cost of living.

If the First Minister carries on down that road, Nicola Sturgeon and her SNP councillors will force Scotland's economy into the slow lane. The commuter tax should be abandoned, toll charges should be ruled out and her workplace parking tax should be ditched. Will the First Minister drop that triple whammy of anti-driver taxes?

The First Minister: I do not support road tolls, but I do support local councils being empowered to consider the tough issues that they face, to consult the public and to take sensible decisions—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, First Minister.

We will hear the First Minister. Thank you.

The First Minister: I will say two more things. Yes, people continue to need their cars, in particular in rural and remote parts of our country, which is why this Government has invested so heavily in maintaining and improving our trunk road and motorway network. We have delivered improvements right across the country to meet the needs of all the population—they include the Queensferry crossing, the Aberdeen western peripheral route and the M8, M73 and M74 motorway improvements—and we will continue to do so.

I will make one final point, which I know Douglas Ross will not want to face up to. What is hammering people—including motorists—across the country right now is the Tory-created cost of living crisis, which an out-of-touch Prime Minister and an out-of-touch Chancellor of the Exchequer have refused to do enough about. Perhaps we should focus on the immediate problems that are being faced by people and the solutions that need to come from Douglas Ross's colleagues at Westminster.

Scottish Government Spending

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I join others in wishing Her Majesty the Queen a very happy 96th birthday and in this, her platinum jubilee year, I thank her again for her service.

Before Easter, I highlighted the £2 million that the Government wasted on a turnaround manager at Ferguson Marine, who left the yard in a worse state than he found it. The First Minister supported paying him more than £3,000 a day while Scots faced a cost of living crisis. However, that is not the only waste of public money that the First Minister has supported. Can she tell members in the chamber how much money her Government has wasted since 2007 because of delays, loan write-offs or avoidable spending?

The First Minister: I do not have that figure to hand, but I am happy to look at that. I suspect that I would not agree entirely with the way that Anas Sarwar is characterising it, but I am more than happy to look at the detail of his question and write to him with the information in due course.

Anas Sarwar: The answer is over £3 billion. That is the cost of Scottish National Party failure—the loss of public money due to SNP incompetence.

The list is endless: £152 million on a failed ferry contract at Ferguson's; £146 million on fixing the Government's mistakes at the Edinburgh sick kids hospital and the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Glasgow; £40 million—and rising—on the malicious prosecution of Rangers; almost £200 million on failed industrial interventions and loan write-offs; nearly £1 billion for agency workers in the health service because Nicola Sturgeon cut training places when she was Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing; and more than £1 billion on delayed discharge because of her failure to fix the social care crisis.

The total is £3 billion—that is the equivalent of a £1,200 bill for every household in Scotland. Every penny of that wasted money could have been more cash for the national health service, more cash for our schools or more cash to tackle the cost of living crisis. Rather than helping people with the cost of living crisis, why is this Government instead making them pay for the cost of SNP failure?

The First Minister: I said that I suspected that Anas Sarwar's characterisation would be an utter mischaracterisation—it turns out that I was absolutely right on that.

Before I come on to the detail, some of which is ridiculous—I did not think that the Opposition would be exceeded in being ridiculous in their questioning today—

Anas Sarwar: Which one is wrong?

The First Minister: I will come on to that in a second.

What Anas Sarwar failed to mention is that this Government has had 15 years of unqualified accounts. That is the reality in terms of our stewardship of the public finances—*[Interruption.]*

Obviously some members do not understand that point, but it is rather important.

I come on to the detail. I will take two of the examples that Anas Sarwar talked about. One was prosecution. Prosecution decisions are, of course, a matter for the independent Crown Office. Is Anas Sarwar seriously saying that I, as First Minister, or any minister of this Government, should have interfered in the independent prosecution decisions of the Crown Office? Perhaps he should clarify that.

The second example that I will use is one where he is downright wrong, and that is the £146 million of additional costs in relation to hospitals. I have looked at that figure closely because I have heard Labour use it before, and the majority of it relates to planned costs that were in no way new, unexpected or avoidable. For example, £80 million of it related to preparatory works that were separate to the main contract but were budgeted costs that were included in the business case. Another £33 million related to the annual service payment, which is also part of the original business case.

There is therefore a lot of nonsense in the question that Anas Sarwar has just asked. Perhaps he should reflect on that.

Anas Sarwar: I asked about wasted money, but that was a waste of an answer from the First Minister right there.

For the first time ever in Scottish history, £40 million was spent on a malicious prosecution. Perhaps the Government should reflect on that. The bill for Edinburgh sick kids hospital, which failed to open—perhaps the Government should reflect on that. The failures at Glasgow's Queen Elizabeth hospital—perhaps the Government should reflect on those.

Right around the country, we are seeing the cost of SNP failure. At the same time, energy bills are up, petrol prices are up, and the weekly shop is more expensive than ever. Right now in Scotland, mums are skipping meals so that they can feed their kids. People are knocking back items at food banks because they cannot afford to cook them. In the face of the biggest drop in living standards since the second world war, both our Governments are not doing enough. Instead of wasting billions of pounds in paying for SNP failures, we should be supporting families through the cost of living crisis.

The £111 million loan write-offs could have been used to top up the Scottish welfare fund. The £152 million that was misspent on mismanaging Ferguson's could have been used to halve rail fares for three months, not three weeks, and to cap bus fares. The £1 billion spent on delayed discharges could have been used to give our care workers the pay rise that they deserve.

While families are being forced to account for every single penny of their spending, why does the First Minister think that it is acceptable for them to pay the £3.2 billion-and-rising cost of SNP failure?

The First Minister: There are some really serious issues in there and I hope that, if not during this meeting then after it, Anas Sarwar will clarify at least two of his points. First, there is a serious constitutional question. He has twice referred to the Rangers prosecution and the cost of settling that. If he thinks that that is something that I could have influenced, is he saying that ministers should have been involved in or should have influenced independent prosecution decisions, or intervened in any way in that case? If he is going to suggest, as he has, that that money was wasted by the SNP, he really must answer that fundamental question. Does he think that I should have interfered in the prosecution decisions of the Crown Office?

The second point goes back to the £146 million in relation to hospitals. Is Anas Sarwar saying that £80 million should not have been spent on essential preparation work? That is the logical conclusion of what he is saying.

The spin and soundbites might sound good when Anas Sarwar is rehearsing these questions, but he should pay a bit more attention to the detail.

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, if I may interrupt. A lot of contributions are being made in the background at the moment. I would be grateful if they ceased and we could hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The important part of the question is about the cost of living crisis. Anas Sarwar referred to rising petrol costs and energy costs. I remind Anas Sarwar that powers over energy and the cost of petrol are still reserved to Westminster. If he wants to change that, he should argue for those powers to come here.

On the wider cost of living, we have increased the benefits for which this Government is responsible. We have doubled the child payment. If we are to be able to do more, Anas Sarwar needs to support us in calling for greater welfare powers to come to the Parliament.

Cost of Living (Free Childcare)

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): As the cost of living soars and thousands of families across the country are already feeling the crush of grossly inflated energy bills, can the First Minister give an update on the number of families that are benefiting from free childcare? How much money is it saving them at such a critical time?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): More than 111,000 children were accessing funded early learning and childcare in January of this year, and the families of 87 per cent of those children have taken up the full entitlement. Families who take up the full entitlement can save up to £4,900 each year for each child. Ours is the most generous early learning and childcare offer anywhere in the United Kingdom, and it will, of course, also deliver better social and educational outcomes for Scotland's children.

Long Covid

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): It is estimated that 132,000 people in Scotland are suffering from long Covid, 59,000 of whom have experienced symptoms for more than a year. We face a ticking time bomb, and yet the Scottish National Party Government is merely sticking its head in the sand, having dropped the proposed debate on long Covid from this afternoon's schedule, thereby preventing the Parliament from having an opportunity to discuss the issue. When will we have specialist long Covid clinics in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are currently implementing the commitments in the long Covid approach paper, which is all about improving care and support for people in Scotland with long Covid. Long Covid clinics are one model that health boards can consider, but we have always recognised—rightly, I believe—that no single approach will fit all areas and circumstances, so health boards must look at a range of approaches.

As far as the issue of a debate on long Covid is concerned, we have made it clear and given a commitment that we will have such a debate in the next few weeks. At that time, we will provide a full update on progress. The intention is that we will provide Parliament with a detailed update on the outcome of the planning process that is currently being undertaken with national health service boards to determine the first allocations of the long Covid support fund, which is what MSPs have called for.

Abortion Services

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The anti-abortion lobby now sees Scotland as an easy

target, with campaigners following the Texas playbook. Last September, I raised concerns with the First Minister and highlighted the urgent need for protest-free buffer zones at abortion services. Does she regret the fact that swift action has not been taken in that respect? Can she also tell us when telemedicine for early abortion will be made permanent, as Scotland now trails behind England and Wales on that important healthcare matter?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): On behalf of the Scottish Government, but also as First Minister and personally, I say that we are committed to ensuring that all women are able to access timely abortions without judgment. I condemn in the strongest possible terms any attempts to intimidate women as they choose to access abortion services. Of course, people have a right to protest against abortion, but they should do so outside Parliament, where the laws are made, and not outside a hospital where women are undergoing abortions, in the course of which they often experience extreme distress.

The buffer zones working group has been meeting, and it is looking at ways of preventing any patients from feeling harassed or intimidated when they access healthcare. There are complex legal issues involved here—there is no way of avoiding saying that. We must make sure that the approach that we choose is consistent with the law. I know that the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport is committed to seeing whether that work can be accelerated—I think that she might have said as much to Parliament earlier today. We will keep Parliament updated on that work.

I say again to those who take a different view on abortion from the one that I and many people in this chamber take: by all means protest—you have a democratic right to do that—but come and protest at Parliament. Do not intimidate women who seek access to abortion at hospitals.

Bank Branch Closures

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The proposed closure of 19 Bank of Scotland branches will mark the loss of the last bank in town in Dunblane and many other communities. As a result, vulnerable people in Dunblane who do not have access to digital banking would need to make a 12-mile round trip to the nearest branch. Does the First Minister agree that the proposed move is clearly out of step with our ambition to build 20-minute neighbourhoods, regenerate our high streets and connect communities to lifeline services?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I share those concerns and those sentiments. We all understand that the way in which people access banking services has changed—in some respects,

quite fundamentally—and that banks must respond to that and make sure that the services that they provide are reflective of that.

However, the physical presence of banks and other facilities can be very important in sustaining access and the life of local communities, so it is really important that banks try to find the right balance. I personally and the Government generally have communicated those views to the banking sector and will continue to do so.

Flood Prevention Schemes (Airth)

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Communities such as Airth, in Falkirk district, are being left behind by the Scottish National Party Government's cuts in funding for flood prevention. We need only ask the people of Airth. They are caught up in a game of piggy in the middle between the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Falkirk Council, which are engaged in the worst kind of buck passing. How can people in villages such as Airth have confidence that Nicola Sturgeon will deliver flood prevention schemes, given her woeful track record of cuts to local schemes?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We have provided significant and sustained funding for local flood prevention schemes. Decisions on individual schemes and the ranking of schemes are matters for local authorities. I am happy to come back to the member with any more detail that I am able to provide about the Airth scheme, but it is right that local authorities consult SEPA and local communities in taking forward those schemes and that the Scottish Government continues to provide funding, where appropriate.

Homelessness (Glasgow)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The Homeless Project Scotland in Glasgow has today said that it is seeing high numbers of families attending its soup kitchen. This morning, Shelter told the Social Justice and Social Security Committee that the equivalent of a whole classroom full of children will be homeless by the end of today and every day. What more will the Government do to support the project in Glasgow, including helping it find a building in which it can bring people together, instead of having to do that outside? Moreover, what will the Government do to pick up the pace of building new homes in Glasgow?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am happy to engage with the Homeless Project to see whether there is more that we, as a Government, can do to help it find a building. The work that it does is extremely important. We all wish that it was not necessary, but I pay tribute to the project for its work.

Over and above that, the Scottish Government will continue to do all that it can to help people with the cost of living, which is heaping misery upon people who, in many cases, were already living in poverty. I have already referred to the increase in benefits, the doubling of the Scottish child payment and support for the welfare fund. All those policies will continue. Glasgow City Council, working with its partners, has a very good record in delivering affordable housing. We will see what happens in a couple of weeks, but I know that the current administration has plans to build on that progress.

It is incumbent on all of us with any influence and power to do everything that we can to help people suffering the cost of living crisis. However, for us to be able to do as much as we would want to would necessitate more power over those crucial issues lying in the hands of this Parliament and not in the hands of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak at Westminster.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): On behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I echo the good wishes that have been expressed to Her Majesty the Queen on the occasion of her 96th birthday.

To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-00987)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: In January, the Scottish Government announced that it had sold the lion's share of Scotland's sea bed for £700 million. Huge wind farms will be built on it. What ministers did not tell Parliament that day was that the Scottish Government and the Crown Estate Scotland had explicitly stopped companies paying a vast amount more. There was a cap of £100,000 per square kilometre on bids despite the fact that, in England and Wales, where there was no cap, a similar sale achieved four times that amount in initial deposits alone.

We know that wind farm jobs are going overseas—it happened again last week in Moray. The First Minister cannot tell Parliament that this is about employment. Scotland's sea bed can be sold only once, and the sale price matters because the cash flows straight into the Scottish Government's budget for schools and hospitals.

The Scottish Government has sold those national assets on the cheap and has thrown away a fortune. When the auction south of the border netted four times as much, why was the First Minister still determined to limit how much companies in Scotland should pay?

The First Minister: First, the process used by the Crown Estate in making those decisions was fully transparent—rightly and properly so. Secondly, we must be careful in making comparisons between the Scottish auction round and similar rounds elsewhere. There are differences in the complexity of the projects in Scotland, which is partly to do with the depth of the water that the projects are taking place in.

Although Alex Cole-Hamilton's points about the £700 million are correct, that is not the only income from those projects. There will be annual rental costs as well, and, if we do this correctly—which we are determined to do—there will be a very significant economic benefit.

I remind members of the vast potential of this. We went into the auction round with a planning assumption of 10GW of offshore wind power and we have come out of it with potentially 25GW of offshore wind power. It is a massive opportunity for Scotland that all of us should be extremely positive about.

Channel 4 (Impact of Privatisation)

4. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assurances the Scottish Government has had from the United Kingdom Government that the reported privatisation of Channel 4 will not negatively impact the development of the creative sector across Scotland and the growth of new Scottish talent. (S6F-01005)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government strongly opposes the privatisation of Channel 4. In its present form, Channel 4 makes a significant contribution to the creative sector in Scotland. It has invested over £200 million in Scotland-based productions since 2007 and, of course, it opened a creative hub in Glasgow in 2019. Since the UK Government's announcement of its privatisation plans on Twitter, no further information has been forthcoming from the UK Government. As soon as it provides clarity, we will seek assurances about how it will ensure that there is no negative impact on the creative sector in Scotland.

Jenni Minto: Does the First Minister share my concern that Channel 4 is currently under threat from a Tory Government that appears to be doing all that it can to undermine the principles of public service broadcasting for its own narrow political interest?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. I think that that is absolutely what is happening. The proposals represent cultural vandalism, but they also represent an attempt by the UK Government to undermine public service broadcasting. I cannot see any reason whatsoever why Channel 4 should

be privatised—especially at the very time when it has shown resilience in weathering the pandemic and has strengthened its content spend and investment in Scotland. The current model is a good and successful one that upholds the principles of public service broadcasting. We should all get behind that and seek to see off these misguided Conservative proposals.

Attainment Gap (Libraries)

5. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether she can provide an update on the Scottish Government's strategy to include libraries in the policy to address the attainment gap. (S6F-00989)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Libraries deliver a range of benefits. They provide vital access to learning materials and resources, helping to improve literacy and tackle the attainment gap.

Although local libraries are the responsibility of local government, the Scottish Government is committed to supporting libraries directly. As part of our programme for government, we launched a £1.25 million public library Covid relief fund to support 30 projects across Scotland to remain open and tackle the attainment gap. That is over and above the money invested since 2017 through the school library improvement fund and the continued annual public library improvement fund, which supports new projects in libraries. As part of the £1 billion Scottish attainment challenge, the framework for recovery and accelerating progress encourages collaboration across local authority services, including education and local libraries.

Liz Smith: The First Minister set great store by the national strategy for school libraries, which was launched in 2018. However, the Scottish Library and Information Council and the Scottish Parliament information centre have told me that the advisory group met on four occasions in 2018 but there are no records of any recent meetings and no updates on progress made—particularly regarding how effectively the school library fund is being spent. I am also told that a large number of primary schools remain without a library or—just as important—without a librarian.

The strategy was supposed to be a key component in schools addressing the attainment gap, but we know that the curriculum for excellence achievement levels in primary 1 to primary 7 literacy declined between 2018 and 2021. Why has there been no formal parliamentary update on the strategy, and why are primary school literacy levels going backwards, not forwards?

The First Minister: We are seeing improvements in attainment in Scotland's schools,

although all of us understand the impact of Covid over the past couple of years. That has made it all the more important that we focus on initiatives to improve attainment.

I will write to Liz Smith, or I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to do so, with more details on the work around school libraries. However, in my first answer, I talked about the investment that we are making through the school library improvement fund. That demonstrates the Government's commitment to supporting libraries in schools and local community libraries as well.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is absolutely right to highlight the importance of libraries in closing the huge attainment gap that we have in Scotland. What does the First Minister have to say to the young people of Kirkton in Dundee—an area of deep deprivation in which the level of attainment is among the lowest in Scotland—whose attainment funding the Scottish National Party Government is cutting by 79 per cent while the SNP-led council is closing the library?

The First Minister: The decisions that we have taken on attainment funding are in recognition of the fact that there is deprivation in all parts of the country. Those changes to the allocation of the attainment fund were fully supported by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, including the member's colleagues on it.

As I said in my earlier answers, we support school libraries through the school library improvement fund, and we will continue to do so.

Private Rental Costs

6. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to bring down the cost to tenants of private rent in the coming year. (S6F-01011)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are all aware of the significant pressures that are faced by private renters, which is why our commitment to introducing rent controls is so important. Of course, that means doing detailed work to ensure that we implement an effective system of rent controls that is right for Scotland, is robust against challenge and will stand the test of time. Our housing bill will begin that process and will strengthen existing rights by ensuring that anyone who believes that their rent increase is unfair can apply for adjudication without fear of their rent being put up.

We are also providing immediate financial support for people who might be struggling. That includes doubling the Scottish child payment from the start of this month, as I have already

referenced, and investing up to £86 million this year in discretionary housing payments.

Mercedes Villalba: Although the Scottish Government's commitment to introducing rent controls is welcome, rents are rising right now, so tenants cannot afford to wait for three or more years for action. Rightly, the First Minister has called for more action from the United Kingdom Government to help to tackle the cost of living crisis, but this Parliament has powers to address one of the biggest pressures that is faced by people in Scotland right now: rising rent costs. Already, some councils have taken the positive step of introducing rent freezes for social tenants. Will the First Minister commit today to exploring the implementation of an emergency rent freeze to support all renters in Scotland?

The First Minister: As a matter of good faith, I will undertake to explore any suggestion that is made in the chamber. We all want to do everything that we can to help. The member will understand that to legislate, particularly on a complex matter such as this, takes time. That was recognised by her colleague Mark Griffin in the debate before Christmas, when he said

"We certainly do not expect legislation to come into force in year 2 of this parliamentary session, but we would look for details of the framework for the rules".—[*Official Report*, 21 December 2021; c 45.]

We will continue to look at how we can, if possible, accelerate progress on the bill, but in the meantime take further action. We have already strengthened tenants' rights in recent years, and it is not the case that we are not providing help in the meantime. We have the £10 million tenant grant fund, which is focused on helping private and social tenants who are struggling financially; we are providing £86 million in housing support this year; and we provided £39 million of additional funding to avoid evictions as a result of the pandemic. We will continue to make support available but we will also continue to look closely at any suggestions for further action that might be made.

The Presiding Officer: We return to general and constituency supplementary questions.

Asylum Seekers

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am proud of the record of Glasgow, and of Glasgow Kelvin in particular, of supporting asylum seekers. What is the First Minister's reaction to the sending of asylum seekers who arrive in the United Kingdom to a detention facility in Rwanda for processing?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): That decision is utterly abhorrent—morally and ethically. It is a total abdication of the UK's moral

and international responsibilities to asylum seekers and refugees, and will make it more challenging and prolonged for people to seek safety from war and persecution. In that decision, the UK Government is ignoring the welfare of extremely vulnerable people.

For all those reasons, that policy has, rightly, been condemned by many. Given that we have heard Theresa May—who as Home Secretary sent “go home” vans around Glasgow—describe that policy in the House of Commons as morally, ethically and practically wrong, all of us have to realise how far the UK Government is going from any moral course on this issue.

A75

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): A recent review by Sir Peter Hendy for the United Kingdom Government found that the A75 is the road most in need of an upgrade anywhere in the country. Will the First Minister admit that the failure to upgrade that dangerous road—often referred to as “the goat track”—represents a broken promise by the Scottish National Party to the people of the south-west of Scotland and the haulage and ferry companies that depend on the route to move goods to and from Northern Ireland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No, I do not accept that. The second strategic transport projects review recommends, of course, that safety, resilience and reliability improvements are made on the A75 corridor to support access to Stranraer and to the port at Cairnryan. We will continue to take decisions that support that access, which all of us accept and agree is extremely important.

ScotRail Ticket Prices

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): Given the rising cost of living, does the First Minister welcome the announcement yesterday that the newly publicly owned ScotRail will be slashing off-peak ticket prices in half for the month of May?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I absolutely welcome the half-price fare offer that the newly publicly owned ScotRail announced yesterday. It was postponed due to omicron, but people are now able to book discounted tickets between 9 and 15 May for outward travel between 9 and 31 May, with return travel to be completed by 30 June. The ScotRail “kid for a quid” discount will be able to be used in conjunction with the offer, which means that up to four children can travel for £1 return each, with each adult.

We want people to return to travelling by rail, but we know that we need to make it affordable for it

to be a truly attractive alternative to using the car. Public ownership of ScotRail means delivering a service that listens and responds to passenger needs. We will continue to develop further initiatives that make rail a better choice, as we work towards our ambitious net zero target.

South Lanarkshire College (Governance)

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The Auditor General said today:

“Independent audit was unable to conclude that governance at South Lanarkshire College”

In East Kilbride

“was satisfactory over the last year.”

There have been serious issues at the college. Whistleblowers have made a number of allegations, with reported claims of fraud, theft and general malfeasance. The principal, Aileen McKechnie, ordered an audit report that the college is refusing to publish. She and the interim clerk to the board were then suspended; I suspect that she was ruffling feathers.

The college has now published an action plan that says that procedures should be changed in areas such as procurement, preventing bribery and carrying out supplier due diligence. A light needs to be shone on what has been happening at the college. Will the First Minister order an investigation and commit to making its findings public?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have some sympathy with the sentiments of that question. I know that significant issues have been raised. Colleges, of course, are self-governing institutions, but the Scottish Funding Council has an important role and, if the Scottish Funding Council considers it appropriate for there to be further inquiry or investigation, of course it is able to carry that out.

I am happy to consider whether there is any further action or procedure that the Scottish Government can initiate and I will come back to the member in writing if I conclude that that is the case.

Parole Licence Conditions (Breaches)

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The Parole Board has issued warning letters to 25 life-sentence prisoners who have been accused of breaching their licence conditions. Does the First Minister seriously think that murderers and rapists will care about a warning letter, or will she back our plans to recall lifers who breach parole and block their future early release?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is right that we have a robust system of parole. If, on any

occasion, it is concluded that that system needs reform, that should happen. As we have covered in exchanges in this Parliament before, it is right that people who commit heinous crimes are properly punished, not only for the sake of punishment but to keep the public safe. We have a justice system that supports rehabilitation as well, because that is in the wider public interest. We will continue to ensure that the parole system is fit for purpose.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time.

Ferry Services (Public Ownership)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask members of the public who are leaving the gallery to do so quickly and quietly, please. Thank you.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02902, in the name of Katy Clark, on keeping CalMac public, and publicly owned ferry services. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the view that lifeline ferry services should be in the public sector; is alarmed by the Scottish Government's reported contract with Ernst & Young to review governance of Scotland's public ferry contracts, including Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services (CHFS); understands that the current operator, CalMac Ferries, the entire fleet and the majority of harbours on the CHFS network are publicly owned, employing 1,600 people; considers that unbundling of CHFS routes would mean privatisation; is concerned at reports that the Scottish Government has reneged on the commitment it gave the RMT in 2017 to build the case for permanent in-house operation of the CHFS contract; agrees with the reported view of the RMT that the CHFS network lacks resilience and capacity due to vessel procurement failures and not due to the public ownership model; understands that the contract with the public sector operator, CalMac Ferries, ends in October 2024; further understands that CalMac staff have helped carry over 47 million passengers and 12 million cars in the last decade and that the Road Equivalent Tariff fares subsidy drove a 20% increase in passengers, pre-COVID-19 pandemic, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to categorically rule out extending private ferry operations or privatisation of any routes in the CHFS contract and to commit to keeping CalMac Ferries public and expanding ferry capacity and resilience in the public sector.

12:46

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am grateful to the members who signed the motion to enable the debate to take place in the chamber today; to islanders, including members of the Arran Ferry Action Group; and to the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, with which I have worked on this issue.

The contract with public sector operator CalMac comes to an end in October 2024, and Parliament needs to debate what will happen at the end of the contract. Ferry services are currently in crisis. Yesterday, for example, all 10 ferry services on the Ardrrossan-Brodick route were cancelled due to the withdrawal of the MV Caledonian Isles from service, which is causing havoc to islanders and, indeed, to the economy.

CalMac operates a fleet of 33 vessels across a network of 49 routes. Most industry experts agree

that the average life expectancy of a ferry is about 25 years, but half of the working state-owned ferries are older than that. For example, the Caledonian Isles is 29 years old.

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd owns and procures vessels, and ports are owned by a mix of trusts, private companies and public bodies, under a model that is the result of an obsession with privatisation over many decades. Some will try to blame the problems with the ferry service on public ownership but, in reality, the problems are a result of a failure to invest in new fleet for many years, the fragmentation of the service, a series of poor appointments of key decision makers, appalling management and political failures.

The motion argues that our ferries should remain in the public sector, and polling has repeatedly shown that Scots overwhelmingly support that model of ownership.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Is the member saying that she does not want any change to the current failed structure?

Katy Clark: I am not saying that at all. If the member listens to the rest of my contribution, that will become self-evident.

In 2017, the Scottish Government's procurement policy review stated that it was the Scottish Government's intention to

"build a case for making a direct award to an in-house operator for the Clyde and Hebrides services".

Last year, I asked the previous transport minister to confirm that that was still the Scottish Government's policy, but he failed to give that undertaking. I hope that the current transport minister will confirm today that she is committed to a public sector model.

Despite the Scottish Government's commitment in 2017, it commissioned the private accounting firm Ernst & Young to review the structure. It has paid the firm more than half a million pounds of taxpayers' money since 2015. Documents that were leaked to the media from the project Neptune review revealed that ministers explicitly asked Ernst & Young to consider the unbundling of routes and privatisation as an option. Despite journalists having written articles quoting sections of the report weeks ago, the report has still not been published. Can the minister confirm today that it will be published?

We need a long-term plan for a publicly owned ferry service, and we need to learn from the mistakes of the past by having a structure that involves communities—particularly island communities—and the workforce in decision making.

We also need to address the problems that have been caused by the fragmentation of the structure. For example, vessels 801 and 802, which were debated yesterday, would not have been commissioned if the Scottish Government had been required to involve the Arran community in decision making and had listened to the representations that were made at that time. The delay of more than four years to the regeneration of Ardrossan harbour would not have happened if the harbour had still been in public ownership, rather than in the ownership of Peel Ports.

There is a widespread view that we need standardisation of the fleet, with smaller vessels. That will cut maintenance costs and ensure that ferries can operate across routes. Can the minister confirm that the Scottish Government is actively looking at that?

Today's debate follows on from yesterday's debate on the procurement of vessels 801 and 802, which are being built at Ferguson Marine. They are projected to cost £240 million. They are two and a half times over budget, they are four years late, and they have been described as "a catastrophic failure" by a Scottish Parliament inquiry. Audit Scotland's report said that ministers chose not to restart the process after CMAL expressed concerns. The First Minister raced to Port Glasgow to launch the 801 all the way back in 2016. The Scottish Government continues to hold responsibility for a catalogue of bad decisions, poor appointments and eye-watering sums being wasted on executives. No minister—and definitely not the First Minister—has been willing to take responsibility.

We need the Scottish Government to come forward with a plan for a ferry service that will deliver for islanders and support the community. We know that the current structure is not working and that change is required, but we will get the best service only if we involve islanders and the workforce in a publicly owned service. I ask the minister to respond in detail to the points that I have made and to the other points that will be made in the debate. I look forward to hearing members' speeches. I hope that the Government will commit to developing a publicly owned model with a structure that will deliver for communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stuart McMillan, who joins us remotely.

12:54

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate Katy Clark on securing this members' business debate. I remind the Parliament at the outset that my wife works part time for CalMac. I have always felt that it is important to acknowledge that when I take part in

debates about CalMac, even though I am not obligated to do so. I would certainly have thought that Katy Clark would have considered it appropriate to do likewise, bearing in mind her links to the TSSA trade union, which has members who work at CalMac. It is all well and good to challenge the Tories on their transparency or lack of it, but the Labour Party must do likewise.

It is sad to say that this is really a non-debate. I would be the first in line to challenge my Government if I believed for one minute that CalMac was to be sold off or that the network was to be broken up. If either were to happen, that would have a negative impact on Gourock, in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency. Gourock is the home and headquarters of CalMac, which is a hugely important local employer in my constituency. I would not want to see any adverse effects in my constituency. If CalMac were to be broken up or privatised, as has been purported by Katy Clark, that would present serious economic challenges in my constituency—challenges that we have faced since the early 1980s due to failed United Kingdom Government policies. Neither will happen and, although it is always important for parliamentarians to raise legitimate issues, scaremongering and causing alarm to CalMac staff and the local community is nothing short of shameful.

At First Minister's question time on 3 February, the First Minister stated:

"I will be very clear in that commitment: we have no plans whatsoever to privatise public service ferries and, contrary to concerns that have been expressed in recent press reports, we have no plans whatsoever to split up the CalMac Ferries network. Those ferry services are delivered through public contracts".

She went on:

"However, to come back to the thrust of the question, I did not seem to rule out privatisation—I ruled it out. I will say it again: we have no plans whatsoever for that—we will not privatise our public service ferries and, equally, we have no plans to split up the CalMac network. That is the Scottish Government's position, and we will continue to invest in our ferry network to give people on our islands the service that they have every right to expect."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2022; c 23-24.]

During the ferries debate yesterday, Graham Simpson's comments towards the end of his contribution were enlightening. He seemed to suggest that the network should be opened up to allow other companies to bid for routes. On the one hand, I can see why that might appear to be beneficial. However, breaking up the network would surely lead to the HQ being either shut or reduced in scale. Either way, that would lead to jobs in my constituency being lost and futures being wrecked. If that is what the Scottish Tories are offering my constituents, I sincerely hope that

the population in my constituency give a clear message to the Tories in May.

Ultimately, ferries will be a political issue, irrespective of the Government of the day in Scotland. That is quite right. However, Labour scaremongering about the future of the network and the Conservatives appearing to advocate dismantling the network highlight that neither Labour nor the Tories are fit to govern any time soon.

CalMac needs to continue its improvement programme, and I warmly welcome that. Years of lack of investment and drive in the business have led to the business needing a major internal overhaul to make it fit for the present day. Ultimately, CalMac has a brand recognition that is second to none, but it needs new ferries to help it to turn into the business that we all want it to be.

Finally, I want to make members in the chamber aware that I have invited members of the CMAL team to come to the Parliament, which they will be doing in a few weeks' time. I invite everyone to talk to them and ask them questions. Members will have questions, and CMAL will provide answers to colleagues from across the chamber.

Katy Clark: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I appreciate that Stuart McMillan would not have been able to take an intervention as he made his contribution remotely, but he criticised me directly for failing to declare an interest. I would like to take your guidance on how to correct that and put that on the record. I do not believe that I was required to declare an interest. However, at the beginning of my speech, I said very clearly that I have worked on these issues with the RMT and TSSA trade unions and with islanders, including members of the Arran Ferry Action Group.

I am not sure whether that is a point of order, Presiding Officer, but I am grateful for the chamber's time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank the member for her contribution, but I do not believe that that is a point of order. There are mechanisms to correct the record. The Presiding Officer is not responsible for members' substantive comments when they make their contributions. I am sure that the member is well aware of the rules on the declaration of interests and of when those rules are engaged and are not engaged. I trust that that is helpful.

12:59

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Katy Clark on bringing the debate to the chamber.

I spoke in yesterday's ferries debate on a number of overlapping issues: procurement,

transparency and sustainability. One key ask was that the withheld project Neptune report be released. That is vital to ensure that communities served by the Clyde and Hebridean routes are not left in the dark but are partners in deciding the service's future.

There can be little doubt of the importance of our ferry connections—the lifeline routes that serve to connect often remote places across our country. They support not only travel but bringing food to shops and produce to market, the delivery of essential public services and much more. I have long called for a proper, fully considered strategy for the future sustainability of Scotland's ferry networks. Never has the absence of one been more keenly felt than now.

Thinking strategically, we must balance quality, sustainability, fairness to the taxpayer, working conditions and, perhaps most important, the views of the communities themselves. Solutions should not be imposed. Communities will not, and should not, accept a loss of local influence.

On Monday night, I travelled down from Orkney on a NorthLink ferry. The northern isles contract has a quite different history from the Clyde and Hebridean network. Although it covers long distances, it is less extensive and does not include interisland transport.

Interisland ferries are one aspect of the publicly owned network that is not mentioned in the motion. They remain the responsibility of local councils in Orkney and Shetland and retain a financial disadvantage, being only partly funded by grants from central Government. The Scottish Government has long held out the prospect of local control being exchanged for fair funding. That would be a terrible deal for islanders, because one size certainly does not fit all.

Back in 2018, the RMT was aggressively pursuing a nationalise NorthLink campaign that sought to apply the position on CalMac to the northern isles service. That ran contrary to the views not only of the local councils but of elected representatives, local stakeholders and local people. There was—and I believe there still is—a wide body of support for tendering.

I simply will not accept that privately operated ferry networks are a bad thing. The motion calls on the Government

“to categorically rule out extending private ferry operations”.

Does that mean that a private operator who wishes to expand and provide a new service should be prevented from doing so? That would be putting political ideology ahead of the needs of island communities.

We can see small, independent operators working well and delivering good services for

communities across Scotland. Pentland Ferries, for example, is a family-run business that provides a valued and unsubsidised link between Orkney and Caithness. Unlike CalMac, it has managed to procure not one but two new ferries at reasonable costs. The MV Alfred, which I sailed on only a few weeks ago, was built on time and on budget and has already won an award for its environmental standards.

That is not to say, of course, that the current tendering model is the right one either. As Audit Scotland reported, the two companies tendering for the Clyde and Hebridean contract submitted more than 800 queries during the process. Significant weaknesses and confusion were identified. Arguably, short contract periods fail to give operators a chance to make significant change.

All those elements are significant points for discussion. However, that discussion needs to be held beyond the politics of the chamber. It needs to respect the communities involved and treat those of us who use our ferries regularly—those who rely on our ferry network—as the key stakeholders that we are. The people in our island and remote communities must have the greatest say, not the ministers and mandarins of the Scottish Government, who have become too used to dictating from afar with increasingly disastrous consequences.

Katy Clark: Will Jamie Halcro Johnston give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has concluded his speech.

13:03

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Scotland's islands need lifeline ferry services. The key word is “lifeline”. As well as meaning a rope thrown into the water to save someone from drowning, “lifeline” is defined as something that someone depends on to lead their life in a satisfactory way. That includes not only food, fuel, building materials and medical provision, but the economic benefits of being able to travel to and from work or in search of work. It also means the wellbeing that is promoted by being able to easily meet friends and family, especially in times of celebration or when people come together for comfort in times of grief.

For islanders, “lifeline” mostly means ferries. My inbox is constantly brimming over with emails about ferries. If we get any two islanders from anywhere in Scotland together, their conversation will inevitably turn to ferries. For us islanders, ferries shape our lives.

I live on an island where the ferries not only connect people but directly connect a multimillion-pound industry—whisky—to the world market. I can see that shipping whisky to the mainland might be viewed as an attractive investment for an ambitious company and its shareholders. I am sure that, in its hands, the Islay ferry could be very profitable, especially if we add the benefits of the island's farming, seafood and tourism industries.

The Scottish National Party is a party for all of Scotland, however, and I do not believe that we should deprive island communities of lifeline services simply because they do not make the Chancellor of the Exchequer's eyes light up.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Is the member suggesting that, if CalMac was at full capacity and the vital trade that her constituents rely on could not get on and off the island, and if another operator came along and offered that service, she would say no to it?

Jenni Minto: I am not suggesting that; I am merely pointing out the importance of lifeline services to islands.

There are 23 inhabited islands in my constituency and also peninsulas that have important ferry links. Portavadie to Tarbert, for example, is a key link for school children, businesses and tourists. I want people whose homes are in the remote or island areas of Argyll and Bute to be able to live their lives without being judged as a profit or loss. My constituents are people, not a balance sheet. If an island or peninsula community is struggling, cutting back on its unprofitable ferry services can only hasten that area's decline.

Next week, I will visit the island of Jura—an island off an island, where the service is provided by Argyll and Bute Council. Jura's population is growing, the school is at bursting point and new businesses are being set up but they are worried that an unreliable transport network could impede their growth. In an economy that is increasingly driven by renewable energy and with the ability to work from home, a decent and reliable ferry service may allow such areas to turn their fortunes around and reverse decline. Communities should be listened to when structures and ferries are being reviewed.

It is not just people who live on islands or peninsulas who rely on lifeline services. The definition of a rope being thrown into the water does not exactly apply to our railways, but the definition of something that we depend on to lead our life in a satisfactory way does define Scotland's rail services for hundreds of thousands of Scots who rely on them for work, family obligations and leisure.

Katy Clark: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is bringing her remarks to a close.

Jenni Minto: I think I am in my last 30 seconds.

This month, the Scottish Government took our train services back under public control after years of disastrous privatisation. Let us not inflict Mrs Thatcher's train-crash privatisation policy on islanders. Let us keep the island public's ferry services where they belong—in public ownership.

13:08

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I begin by reminding members of my entry in the register of members' interests and by thanking Katy Clark, whose distinguished record on raising these issues is second to none.

We are often accused by Government ministers of applying the benefit of hindsight, but, as far back as 2010, the late Bob Crow, referring to the CalMac fleet, had the foresight to warn:

"many of these ships are thirty years old and the Fleet needs renewing ... there will be a lead time of around ten years before new ships come into service."

It is a pity that his warning was not heeded. He also called for

"a unified service which is publicly owned and publicly accountable".

He is greatly missed.

We note the First Minister's undertaking to the Parliament to stop short of unbundling Clyde and Hebrides ferry services, but it is a matter of record that Transport Scotland and CalMac are currently carrying out what they call a "market assessment" of each route. What about a social assessment, an equality assessment or a community assessment? After all, people do not live in markets; they live in communities.

Let me set out the reasons why I think that the public ownership of CalMac is critical. First, the ferry links are, for the most part, monopoly services. They are natural monopolies and they should not be run as private monopolies. Secondly, they are lifeline services, so they must be run in the public interest for the public good, not according to the fiduciary duties of private capital to beneficial shareholders. Thirdly, this is one public service that works most efficiently when organised on a larger scale. This is not just the largest ferry operator in Scotland; it is the largest ferry operator in the whole of the UK, and such a concentration of power must remain in public, not private, hands.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Richard Leonard: I will not. To the Tories, I say that the real choice is not between monopoly and competition. That is a fiction.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: *rose*—

Richard Leonard: The real choice is between monopoly capitalism and socialised public ownership—that is the choice.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Richard Leonard: As a democratic socialist, I do not believe just in ownership of our ferry services by the state; I believe in democratic, socialised public ownership of our ferry services, which is why we demand change.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Leonard—could you resume your seat for a second? It is up to each individual member to decide, and it appears to me that the member is not taking interventions. Therefore, there is no point in standing about, Mr Halcro Johnston. The member has, I think, indicated that he is not taking an intervention. Mr Leonard, please resume.

Richard Leonard: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

We demand change. We demand participatory democracy whereby islanders, passengers and seafarers—the workers and their trade unions—really share power and are not merely consultees, because what these ferry services provide is not only an economic lifeline but a social service, and one that, in my view, not only should be obtainable by payment but should be available as of right.

We need a developmental state where Government intervention is not simply defensive but is positive, radical and visionary. That means the implementation of a regional policy to iron out the social, environmental and economic imbalances within Scotland, to which ferries are an essential part of the solution. That means a planned economy—not economic planning that is piecemeal or expedient, but planning that is comprehensive and strategic, so that the programme of replacement CalMac vessels is back on time, is based on local labour and is properly planned and invested in.

My message to the Government is this: rule out privatisation, expand ferry capacity, deal with the backlog of fleet investment, invest in the workforce, put passengers before profit and let us truly secure at last a people's CalMac.

13:12

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Katy Clark for bringing the debate to the chamber.

We can all agree that ferry services provide an essential lifeline to island and remote rural communities and their economies. We have heard from members who live on those islands, and I am aware how important the services are to the communities that they serve and what they mean to the economy and general wellbeing of such communities. We also have to acknowledge that technical issues have caused much frustration to islanders, not just in the past few weeks but in the past few months. It is also, as a balance, worth acknowledging that more than £2 billion has been spent on service contracts, new vessels and infrastructure since 2007, and that in the current five-year period a further £580 million has been committed.

The Scottish Government commitment to publish the islands connectivity plan by the end of 2022 is welcome. As we know, that will replace the current ferries plan. It will look at aviation, ferries and fixed links, and it will invest in more sustainable ferries. The islands connectivity plan will also be taken forward through the national transport strategy and the strategic transport projects review, which will enable us to consider other potentially viable options for connecting the islands.

Engagement and consultation on the islands connectivity plan, which, as I said, will replace the ferries plan by the end of 2022, will enable substantial public and community input. That is key as we move towards options in 2024. The island communities must be part of any solution.

Project Neptune's remit is to review the legal structures and governance arrangements that exist between Transport Scotland, CMAL and CalMac, and to look at whether those “remain fit for purpose” to deliver an “effective, efficient, and economic” ferry service. That project has just started and it will deliver a final report later in the year.

The Scottish Government is also developing a revised ferries stakeholder engagement strategy and, again, there will be community input into that.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I will if I have time.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Does the member think the current ferries network is fit for purpose, and, after 15 years, does he think that the current Scottish Government has any responsibility for the state that the Scottish ferry network is in?

Paul McLennan: Of course the Scottish Government has an input in the matter. I previously mentioned the £2 billion and £580 million investments to which the Government has

committed, and we are talking about how we will take them forward.

I come back to the ferry stakeholder engagement strategy, which will set out an approach to engagement on three matters—operational issues, which have been mentioned, strategy and policy.

The infrastructure investment plan for Scotland from 2021 to 2026 will produce and maintain a long-term plan for new ferries and development at ports to improve resilience, reliability, capacity and accessibility, and to reduce emissions, to meet the needs of island communities, including in relation to freight fares, which are an important part of the islands connectivity plan.

I move on to public ownership. Transport Scotland has said that

“Scottish ministers have already ruled out privatisation and have no plans to split up the CalMac Ferries network. The independent review of governance arrangements for Scottish Government lifeline ferry services will present a framework consisting of a range of options to the overarching objective of effective, efficient, and economic delivery of lifeline ferry services, to enhance passenger experience and support local island economies ... We will then engage with all key stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and best value arrangement to deliver our key lifeline ferry services.”

The First Minister has insisted that

“there are no plans to privatise lifeline ferry services to Scotland’s island communities”

and made a commitment to keep ferry services in public ownership. She said:

“ensuring ferry services are delivered through public contracts gave them ‘control over service levels, timetables and fares’ on the routes operated by CalMac on the Clyde and Hebrides routes”

and:

“Let me say it again. We have no plans whatsoever, we will not privatise our public service ferries and equally we have no plans to split up the CalMac network. That is the position of the Scottish Government.”

It could not be any clearer.

13:16

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Katy Clark on bringing the motion to Parliament. However, her speech left me completely baffled by what she was attempting to say. When I intervened and asked her what she would change in the current system, she promised to tell us later in her speech, but she did not. Had I been able to intervene on Richard Leonard, I would have asked him exactly the same question, but I did not get to do so.

I think that Katy Clark is trying to intervene from a sedentary position—if I am right, I will give way.

Katy Clark: I took an intervention from the member, so I am very grateful to his returning the favour.

To be absolutely clear, I am arguing against the fragmentation of the current structure. I am arguing that the ferries, CalMac, CMAL and the ports should be in public ownership, which would then enable better decision making. In my speech, I used some examples of the poor decision making that occurred as a result of the failure to have a model of that nature and to involve islanders and the workforce in that decision making.

Graham Simpson: It sounds like Katy Clark wants business as usual on the ferries, apart from the ports, which, it would appear, she wants to nationalise. Scottish Labour needs to put a cost on that if that is what it is suggesting.

Katy Clark’s motion says that

“lifeline ferry services should be in the public sector”.

Conservative members support lifeline ferry services but we do not come to that point with the ideology with which Labour approaches it. We want ferry services that work for the islanders, who are the most important people in relation to this issue.

Katy Clark was not a member at the time, so she might not be aware that the former Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee conducted an exhaustive inquiry into ferries, the Ferguson debacle and how to run ferry services.

One of the committee’s recommendations was that the Government should commission a review into how to procure and run ferry services, which led to the Government’s appointment of Ernst & Young to carry out the project Neptune review. The Government cannot be criticised for having done that after a cross-party committee of the Parliament asked it to.

It is entirely right that we explore options for a system that is clearly failing. The problem is that although Ernst & Young has completed its review and produced the project Neptune report, that report has simply been sitting with Transport Scotland. The minister has the report, but despite promising to issue it to Parliament, she has not yet done so, so we simply do not know what it recommends.

However, it is right to look at the governance and at questions such as whether we should unbundle the west coast services. That does not have to mean privatisation. The whole thing could still be run and paid for—subsidised—by the Government; it might just introduce other operators. For example, there is Western Ferries, which runs a very good service already, or Pentland Ferries—it probably would not be

interested because of where it is based, but other operators like it could come in.

To be frank, if Labour listened to people such as those on the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee, it would know that that is exactly what they are calling for. At the end of the day, we need to put islanders first, and we need to be open to new ideas and get rid of the dogma in which Labour is bogged down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Katy Clark to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Katy Clark]

Motion agreed to.

13:21

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I, too, congratulate Katy Clark on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to my predecessor as Green MSP for the Highlands and Islands, John Finnie, for his attempts to see the NorthLink ferry service to Orkney and Shetland nationalised. Ferries should be run in the interests of islanders, not in the interests of Serco's global shareholders.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am from Orkney, and I use that service all the time, as I highlighted in my speech. I am yet to meet any more than a handful of people who want a nationalised northern isles contract. How many people has the member spoken to? Does she agree with me that people in the northern isles just want reliable ferries, and not an Orkney and Shetland version of CalMac?

Ariane Burgess: I thank the member for his intervention—I will continue my speech and unfold my argument. We are looking for a joined-up, reliable approach.

Scottish Greens believe that public ownership of Scotland's ferries is critical to reversing depopulation, supporting community regeneration and delivering a fairer and greener transport mix for our islands. The next 10 years are vital for the future of our planet, and public ownership enables an approach to procurement that centres on environmental impact and community wellbeing instead of shareholder profit.

I have been contacted by an island constituent who, as a result of ferry cancellations, had to fly to the mainland to assist her elderly parent with hospital visits. Other constituents have been

unable to get things such as animal feed or, more importantly, to attend funerals.

In the draft STPR2, we have committed to moving towards reliable zero-carbon ferries so that constituents like those whom I have mentioned are not forced to fly or to flit. We must work to ensure that there are always islanders on the boards and staff teams of CalMac and CMAL. With a public ownership model, we can achieve that.

I will work with my colleagues in Government to ensure that lifeline ferries are viable and reliable, and that they are publicly funded where essential connectivity cannot be met by the market. [Interruption.] I am sorry—I will not take an intervention, as I need to get on.

If ferry operators enjoyed the certainty of much longer contracts, they could seek investment on the back of future ticket sales to procure vessels without the need for substantial public investment. That would also allow operators to develop a strategic, cost-effective, long-term plan to upgrade and decarbonise the fleet. Perhaps that could be considered as part of the Bute house agreement commitment, in the "Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party Shared Policy Programme", to

"assess the model of"

ferry services delivery

"to ensure ... our approach delivers good outcomes for communities, value for money, accountability and transparency."

We also want to see interisland ferries categorised as publicly owned Scottish national infrastructure, in line with requests from local authorities. Such council owned and operated ferries must be sufficiently funded to allow island councils to operate them effectively.

The Scottish Green Party believes that we should extend the policy of free bus travel for under-22s to ferries, bringing parity between islands and the mainland in Scotland's public transport offer.

A lack of interconnectedness between rail and ferry routes renders islands inaccessible for many travellers who wheel and potentially unsafe for lone travellers. The train to Thurso is frequently late, which makes connecting with the ferry to Stromness from Scrabster challenging and can leave people unexpectedly stranded.

A more joined-up approach between ScotRail, the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership, NorthLink Ferries and Pentland Ferries could resolve such issues. The fact that ScotRail is now also in public ownership—thanks to the Scottish Government and the Greens—paves the way for new, exciting ways of collaborating and working towards a more fully integrated public transport

network. The Scottish Green Party believes that islands should not be an afterthought but should be at the forefront of Scotland's journey towards net zero.

The public ownership of ferry services, especially when supported by publicly operated rail and bus networks, has the potential to reverse rural depopulation trends, revitalise communities and make islands more accessible for those who walk, wheel and cycle.

13:26

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): it is baffling to me that we are debating this motion. As others have noted, Katy Clark asked the First Minister directly to commit to keeping ferry services in public ownership only two months ago. As is clear in the quote that Paul McLennan read out earlier, the First Minister provided that assurance in no uncertain terms. I do not understand why I am looking at a motion that suggests otherwise. It is shameless—and frankly, reckless—that, after receiving the First Minister's personal, unambiguous commitment that ferries are not being privatised, the member decided to bring a motion for debate that references calls on the Scottish Government to categorically rule out privatisation. The Government has already ruled out privatisation.

Sitting here listening to Richard Leonard talk as if privatisation has not been ruled out and there is no such thing as a PSO has been a waste of time. It is no surprise that he would not take an intervention on that point.

There are plenty of issues worth debating in relation to ferries and other transport services in Scotland. Personally, due to a health condition that has, so far, prevented me from driving, I rely solely on public transport and the goodwill of pals with cars. That is not easy in the Highlands and Islands. The Minister of Transport—and anyone else who will listen—hears from me and my office regularly on matters of trains, ferries, buses, bikes and more.

I care deeply about improving our ferry services. I am a regular user of CalMac and NorthLink services. I am very familiar with CalMac-and-cheese dinners and being rudely woken up when docking in Kirkwall en route to Aberdeen. I care about our ferry service and I will engage in debates about procurement, timetabling and privatisation, but this debate is a waste of time and a failed opportunity to talk about something that actually matters.

Katy Clark: The motion is very clear that the CalMac contract comes to an end in 2024. I have been raising the issue over the past year and asking what model of contract we will move to. It is

clear that the current model does not work for the reasons that I outlined in my speech and that others will no doubt cover. Does the member not think that we should be debating that? Surely, we should.

Emma Roddick: As I said earlier, there are discussions to be had and it is confusing to me that Katy Clark's motion says that it is a matter for alarm that there will be public consultation on the future governance of ferry contracts and on project Neptune. Her party constantly claims that ferry contracts in Scotland are not up to scratch and her leader has been heavily critical of ferry contracts, so Labour should welcome the opportunity to debate the finer points and involve constituents in conversations. Submitting a motion outlining the dangers of a privatisation that is not happening is as legitimate as submitting a motion expressing concern about the potential loss of tourism caused by Nessie coming out as a republican.

Pressing over and over for a commitment that has already been given—clearly, unambiguously and repeatedly—by the First Minister is not one of those many worthy issues that we could be discussing today. The motion is purely political and deliberately misleading. The Labour Party should be ashamed that it has wasted a parliamentary debate slot on making a point that serves only to provoke anxiety for ferry users and ferry workers who have nothing to be concerned about because privatisation is not on the table.

13:30

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I do not know how to follow a speech that says that talking about ferries in the Scottish Parliament is a waste of time. My goodness, that really sums up the state of the debate about Scottish ferries.

The *Official Report* shows us that in 2007 members made fewer than 100 contributions in the chamber that included the word "ferry". This year to date, and we are only in April, there have been more than double that number of contributions. Does that not say something about the state of Scotland's ferries? Not a day goes by when the media is not filled with stories of the utter fiasco that people in our island communities face. Today, the Arran ferry is again out of action because of engine problems.

Again and again islanders are scunnered, and they are scunnered of listening to contributions that say we are wasting our time by criticising the Government on the issue. It is absolutely right that we criticise the Government on it, because each and every one of us has the responsibility to stand up for island communities and tell the Government that the current scenario and status quo is simply not working, which is why I thank Katy Clark for

bringing another debate on the subject to the chamber. We have brought many debates on the issue to the chamber—I brought one when I was shadow transport minister—and every time we are told that we are politicising the issue.

However, here is where I find fault with Labour's proposal. It is a slightly odd debate, because Scottish Labour is attacking the Conservatives for proposing the privatisation of everything that moves, but that is simply not true, and I want to make that clear. A statement was made in the chamber yesterday that we want to privatise CMAL. You can check that in the *Official Report*. It is simply not true and I put that on the record.

This is an important point and it is a shame that we are not acknowledging it: there are private operators out there doing good work, including Pentland Ferries, NorthLink Ferries and Western Ferries, which services the Gourock to Dunoon route. Some of them are in receipt of public subsidy and some are not, and good on the ones that are not. If they are able to run an effective service that operates between mainland and islands or mainland and mainland, good on them.

I say to Richard Leonard that that is what matters to islanders. It is all very well grandstanding on the soapbox about the ideology of public versus private, but what islanders really want is a service that runs. They could not give two hoots about who owns it or what the ownership structures are. They do not have such a service at the moment and that is what they are asking us to debate.

The other points that I want to make are about the contract, which is the substance of the motion, which I find interesting. I agree with a lot of the motion, such as the concept of permanent in-house operation of the contract that Labour wants to see, which is fine, but the problem is that the contract is flawed, Ms Clark, and everybody knows it. We have ferries that do not operate in the ports that they are designed for, ports that do not fit the ferries that run, ferries that are not interoperable between ports and routes, and we have onerous contracts that only CalMac could bid for anyway, to be honest, and we knew that from the last contract. I am all for tenders because it keeps people on their toes and brings out the best in the operator. CalMac won the last tender, and rightly so, but the contract is onerous. The people of Arran do not want a cruise liner with beds, bunks and bars; they want a ferry that runs on time. I do not care who operates or owns it.

Katy Clark: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding shortly.

Jamie Greene: I do not have time. The other problem that I have is the idea of ruling out any form of private ferry operator. I ask Scottish Labour, who will meet the capacity? Who on earth will get the whisky off of the islands? Who on earth will get the grain and cattle? If someone could come along and do night-time routes, freight routes, winter routes and cover all the pinch points in the current services, I say bring it on. The ideological position of ruling operators out simply because of politics is narrow minded. If we listen to islanders, that is not what they want—everybody knows that—and that should be lying at the heart of this debate. What do islanders want and are we doing enough to meet those requirements? Let us park the politics for once in this debate and actually deliver ferries for our islands now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Paul Sweeney will be the last speaker before I ask the minister to respond to the debate.

13:34

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and I thank my colleague Katy Clark for lodging the motion. However, I have been disappointed by the paucity of analysis, particularly from members on the Government benches, of what is a critical issue for Scotland's general prosperity and wellbeing.

CalMac has essentially been in some form of public ownership since 1948, when the railway companies were nationalised. It took its current corporate form in 1990. There has long been a settled recognition that ferry services are a lifeline for Scotland's island communities and that the best way to future proof and operate them is to ensure that they are publicly controlled and not subject to market forces. However, to meet the requirements of a European Union guideline on state aid to maritime transport, Caledonian MacBrayne was split into two separate companies in 2006. Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd—CMAL—retained ownership of CalMac vessels and infrastructure, including harbours, while CalMac Ferries Ltd submitted tenders every so often to be the ferry operator. The fundamental bone of contention is that it is clear that that neoliberal experiment in corporate Chinese walls has utterly failed, just as it failed with regard to rail franchising. That failure is most spectacularly evident when we look at the procurement of vessels 801 and 802, which represents a tragedy for Scotland's industrial base and ends any possibility of that model being seen as a success.

For far too long, vital lifeline services in Scotland have declined under this form of quasi-privatisation and absurd market simulation. Look at ScotRail under Abellio: services cut, prices

rising and a constant battle of attrition between unions and management, as well as buck-passing among Network Rail, privatised rolling stock operating companies and train operating companies. The same failed model plays out in relation to the ferry system and it needs to end.

Look at bus services in Glasgow: routes and services cut due to a lack of profitability, drivers demoralised and leaving in droves due to poor pay and conditions and, ultimately, a dramatically reduced service for commuters. It is a common story of failure.

We cannot let Scotland's ferry services continue on the same path and that is why they must remain in public control, fundamentally, and be fully reintegrated under one team—one owner of assets, one operator and, indeed, arguably, one shipbuilder. The expiry of the ferry contract structure in October 2024 gives us an opportunity to make that happen and today we seek an assurance from the Government that it will happen.

We need a conversation about why it is beneficial for the ferry service to be publicly owned—I think that there is general agreement across the chamber on that matter. Public ownership would provide a solid, stable foundation for management that improves standards, increases investment and harnesses the power of the state to provide for Scotland's economy and common prosperity. If we use that model, we must reinforce it with a national shipbuilding strategy that focuses on the workforce, on a stable pipeline of work and on developing Scotland's shipbuilding assets. As I have said before—Katy Clark also mentioned this earlier—there are 33 vessels in the CalMac fleet, each of them with a 25-year lifespan on average. That is a drum beat of one vessel every nine months for our Scottish shipbuilding industry. Why are we not ensuring that Scottish yards have that guaranteed permanent shipbuilding programme that would secure jobs and give shipyards the confidence to invest in the process, which would create a virtuous cycle, rather than drip feeding a free market feast-and-famine order cycle of the sort that has plagued Scotland's industrial base for so long?

We need to change that landscape and have an assured long-term shipbuilding strategy. Babcock has just delivered a world-class new shipbuilding facility in Rosyth because it has an assured naval programme. We should be doing the same thing on the commercial side. Inchgreen dry dock is an example of an asset that should be in public hands but is instead being hoarded by its owners, Peel Ports, for no reason other than to give its Cammel Laird shipyard on the Mersey a competitive advantage. CalMac vessels are sailing south to

Merseyside for refits while Clyde dry docks from Govan to Greenock lie derelict.

Ambition is what is needed from this Government for Scotland's ferry services, not quasi-privatisation and weird market simulations that have not worked and have introduced chaos.

Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves what the purpose of our ferries is. They are not a commercial business; they are there to provide a fundamental public service. It is not good enough for the Government to attempt to wash its hands of the fundamental structural problem that it has created and left the taxpayer liable for. Scotland's island communities, seafarers and shipbuilders deserve much better.

13:39

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I start by thanking Katy Clark for securing time for this really important debate on the future of Scotland's ferries and every member who has contributed to this afternoon's debate, which I have found to be largely helpful and pretty informative.

We are all here because we share the desire for a more reliable and affordable service that meets the needs of our island and remote communities. As I think that Jamie Halcro Johnston pointed out, this discussion needs to go beyond the politics of the chamber. Indeed, that has been a fairly common theme in members' speeches this afternoon.

The motion alludes to the fact that CalMac has carried

“over 47 million passengers and 12 million cars in the last decade”

alone, which is to be lauded. However, as we have also heard, CalMac is facing many challenges in its ability to deliver an efficient service. In saying that, I will respond to some of the points that have been raised in the debate.

Katy Clark opened by talking about a publicly owned ferry company—I think that she referred to a twin structure—that works for and listens to communities. That issue has been highlighted to me in my three months in office, and it is something that I have made a commitment to look at. Indeed, I have started conversations with officials on how we might be able to do that, say, through the board structure, which is a suggestion that was also highlighted to me by Alasdair Allan in the debate that we had just recently.

Katy Clark: I am grateful to the minister for seeming to be sympathetic to the idea of islanders on boards, but is she sympathetic to the idea of workplace and trade union representatives on boards, too?

Jenny Gilruth: Broadly, yes. I would like to come back to the member in more detail on that, as I do not want to make up policy on the hoof in a members' business debate, but I think that it is important that we have boards that are representative and which listen to our trade unions as well as our island communities.

Ms Clark also mentioned standardising vessels in order to cut costs. One of the issues that we face is our relatively old port infrastructure, which raises challenges when it comes to standardising all vessels in any future procurement. However, I am happy to take the issue up directly with CMAL.

The member also asked for a plan. As Mr McLennan has pointed out, the islands connectivity plan will be published later this year. I ask all members, if they can, to contribute to its formation, because communities must be listened to. I think that the plan represents a way forward and an opportunity to do things better and differently and, ultimately, to improve the services that islanders are currently receiving.

Jamie Greene: This is my second session as a member in this Parliament. In my first session, I sat on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, so I know that we asked the Government for a ferries action plan six years ago. We said back then that 12 vessels were needed. Again, that was six years ago—they could have been delivered by now. The question is: where is the plan, and where are the vessels?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that Mr Greene's characterisation of what has been delivered is fair or accurate. For example, we have recently seen the procurement of the two Islay vessels, so it is inaccurate to say that no vessels have been delivered in that time period. I say to him, though, that the islands plan offers a way forward, and I ask that all members, including Mr Greene, take part and collaborate in that process, because it is essential that we get this right.

Mr Halcro Johnston and a few other members highlighted issues with regard to project Neptune. I work closely with Mr Simpson as the Conservative transport representative, and I have been very up front with him about wanting to publish the report. However, we are not yet at that stage. Of course, we are now in purdah, and the cabinet secretary has advised that, as a result, we are not able to do that at this moment in time. I am more than happy to publish the report after the local government elections.

The other thing that we must take cognisance of, though, is the need to engage trade unions and staff in the process and to speak to island communities rather than rush the publication of a document that could ultimately have impacts on them and the future viability of the service.

Graham Simpson: It seems that we are making some progress on publishing the project Neptune report, but can the minister put a date on that? Will it be in May?

Jenny Gilruth: I apologise, but I cannot give Mr Simpson a date today. However, I will speak to officials about doing it as quickly as possible. I recognise the need for transparency on this, and, indeed, we have previously discussed that matter.

As members have pointed out and as the First Minister made clear in answer to a question from Ms Clark, this Government has no plans to privatise or unbundle. To date, that has ensured control over service levels, timetables, fares and contracts, but I am acutely aware of the need to deliver a service for our island communities that works, and I am not clear that that is what is currently being delivered.

Over the recess, I had the privilege of visiting the Western Isles to meet communities in Barra, Uist and Harris and the Western Isles Council, and I had the opportunity to listen to their views and hear about some of the challenges they are facing. It was made very clear to me in those conversations that, for these communities, ferries are a lifeline, and their operations continue to affect day-to-day life. I have apologised to those communities, both in person during the recess and here in the chamber, and I do so unreservedly again today.

I am absolutely clear that communities are not getting the service that they need and deserve. Although the recent period of disruption has been particularly acute because of weather and Covid—indeed, in January and February alone, 92.75 per cent of all cancellations were due to either weather or Covid-19—it is clear that, as some members have pointed out, the ageing fleet and some of the infrastructure are having an impact, too.

There is also a challenge to CalMac in relation to communication with islanders. That was a fairly common theme in my meetings with islanders during the recess. Timely communication with island communities is essential to allaying fears and anxieties about service cancellations.

Katy Clark: It may be that the minister is coming on to this point, but is she going to address the issue of ownership of ports? She will be aware, for example, that in Ardrossan, the ownership of the land and the harbour rights by Peel Ports has caused massive problems, with more than four years of delay. Is she also sympathetic to looking at how we bring ports back into public ownership, because that will make decision making easier in the public sector?

Jenny Gilruth: I am sympathetic to that. The member will know that Ardrossan is not in public ownership—I think as a direct result of UK

Government privatisation back in the early 1990s. If Ardrossan was in public ownership now, we would have been able to move more quickly on the improvements that are required there. I am sympathetic to that point and I would be happy to meet Ms Clark to discuss that in more detail and to provide her with some reassurance that that is something that we are amenable to.

Ms Minto made the point that ferries connect not only people but the multimillion-pound whisky industry in her constituency. I recognise that, for her, having 23 islands in her constituency—the most that any MSP in the chamber has in their constituency, I think—that will not be without challenge. The wider issue that she alludes to of population growth and decline is very important and I can give her an assurance by saying that I have held initial meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands to discuss that in more detail to ensure that our officials are working together on how we can better support that work.

Richard Leonard mentioned market assessment. I will just clarify that that is a requirement for any public provision, but it is also combined with a community needs assessment. He asked about that community assessment and the point about language is important. I agree that they should be in public ownership and run for the public good, as he alludes to. He also asked about participatory democracy. Again, I am not against that. If he had listened to the debate that we had at the end of last term, he would have known that I gave an undertaking to Alasdair Allan to look at how we get greater representation for islanders on island boards, for example.

Paul McLennan pointed to the importance of the islands connectivity plan, which I think I previously mentioned. Mr Simpson spoke about ferry services that work for islanders; we all want that to happen. Ariane Burgess mentioned some of the issues around the under-22s scheme. Beatrice Wishart and a number of others have raised that point with me and it is something that we are considering as a result of the fair fares review, which will look at the modal challenges across the public transport network and how we can better connect the train network to our ferry network, for example, to give some resolution to some of the issues that she discussed.

Jamie Greene mentioned some of the issues in Arran. I will touch on that very briefly, Presiding Officer. Officials met the Arran ferry committee this morning and I will meet it tomorrow morning. I give an undertaking that I am prioritising this as a matter of absolute urgency. I know that the boat itself is in Troon at the moment for repair and it is being looked at today. I expect an update on the timescales tomorrow.

I am conscious of the time, so I will move to my concluding remarks. I think that I have touched on most members' points, but we have had very wide-ranging contributions from members, so if any member feels that there are any issues that I have not addressed in these remarks, I would be more than happy to write to them directly on that.

From my perspective as transport minister, there are things that we need to improve and the next round of CHFS3 gives us an opportunity to do that. We have heard contributions from different members today on how we can best do that and I give an undertaking to all members that I am keen to work with every political party in the Parliament to ensure that we deliver a service that best meets the needs of our island communities.

13:48

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this afternoon is education and skills. As ever, if a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function during the relevant question. I make the usual plea for brevity in questions and answers, so that we can get through as many as possible.

Question 1, from Alex Rowley, has been withdrawn.

Universities and Colleges (Industrial Action)

2. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what communication it has had with Scottish universities and the University and College Union Scotland about the four fights and Universities Superannuation Scheme pensions disputes, in light of the recent reballoting for industrial action by staff. (S6O-00975)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I have regularly met university leaders and trade unions, including UCU Scotland, to discuss the on-going disputes on pay, working conditions and pensions.

Although our universities are autonomous bodies and, as such, have responsibility for making their own decisions on pay, working conditions and pensions, I will continue to urge both sides to continue to engage in constructive and meaningful dialogue in order to resolve the dispute, and the underlying issues, without the need for further industrial action.

Maggie Chapman: The minister will be aware of the deep dissatisfaction among staff and students in higher education. In addition to the UCU reballoting, the University of Dundee's Unison workers are out on strike, as we speak.

Does the minister agree that university principals need to account for the almost £80 million of Scottish public money that they are planning to use to meet a deficit in the USS, even though the USS has stated that the deficit no longer exists because it was a result of Covid? Could Scottish ministers offer to work with Scottish principals to make the case that a revaluation of

the scheme and a reduction in the £80 million spending is necessary?

Jamie Hepburn: Maggie Chapman mentioned the situation at the University of Dundee, so I also make it clear that I have engaged with the university and unions to discuss the issue.

In respect of the wider issues around the USS, we should remind ourselves that it is not a Scotland-specific scheme; it applies UK-wide. It is also not a Government-funded pension scheme, so it does not fall within the devolved responsibilities of Scottish ministers. I would, therefore, not be able to determine whether there should be a revaluation. However, as I said earlier, I will continue to engage with university leaders and unions to discuss the matter and will press them to resolve the issues without the need for further recourse to industrial dispute.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

A survey of university staff by the UCU highlighted that up to two thirds are seriously thinking about leaving the sector during the next five years. Their pay has fallen by 25 per cent in real terms during the past decade, and changes to USS pensions are set to leave staff up to £240,000 worse off. The minister must recognise the harm that is being done to university staff by year-on-year real-terms pay cuts and cuts to pensions. Can the minister share with us what action the Scottish Government is taking to encourage university principals to address staff concerns seriously?

Jamie Hepburn: As I have said a number of times today, this is a matter on which I continue to engage in dialogue with unions and university management. I actively discuss issues with them; the subject that Ms Villalba has asked about will be one of them.

However, when push comes to shove, I cannot resolve the dispute. It is for university management and unions to come together to discuss the issues. I urge them to do so along the lines of the fair work framework under which we operate, by ensuring that there is proper and meaningful dialogue and that workers' voices are listened to. Ultimately, I hope that they can resolve the matter together.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The minister speaks the language of dialogue and discourse, but does he not recognise that 13 years of flat cash and no increase in the unit of resource that goes to universities is leading to the challenges and creating the conflict between management and workers and the tough decisions that have to be made? If the matter is going to be

resolved, the Government will have to make sure that it resources higher education properly.

Jamie Hepburn: We are resourcing higher education properly. This year, we will again provide more than £1 billion of public expenditure to our universities to support their continued financial sustainability. I would have thought that that would be recognised as a fairly substantial investment. In recognition of some of the challenges that have been experienced over the pandemic period, we have invested more than £190 million in direct additional funding to support universities through the difficult circumstances.

We are stepping up to the mark and investing in higher education, and we will continue to do so.

Education (Support for Young People at Risk of Exclusion)

3. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to help young people at risk from exclusion from mainstream education. (S6O-00976)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Our publication "Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2: A Positive Approach to Preventing and Managing School Exclusions" provides national guidance on school exclusion. It makes it clear that exclusion from school should be "the last resort" and should be used in the context of prevention, early intervention and support for positive relationships, learning and behaviour; that it should be

"a proportionate response where there is no appropriate alternative";

and that it must be

"for as short a period as possible with the aim of improving outcomes for the child or young person."

The guidance also sets out schools' and education authorities' responsibilities in line with their power to make decisions to exclude.

Miles Briggs: Such situations are often complicated and complex, so we need to make sure that appropriate support is in place for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Scottish Conservatives support the establishment of family hubs that bring together health, education and social care services. Would the cabinet secretary agree to a pilot project in Scotland to establish how that model could be developed and rolled out across the country?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There is a substantial amount of policy on education and health services working together to help some of the most vulnerable people in society. One example of that is the whole family wellbeing fund, which is being funded for the current financial year and the rest of the parliamentary session, as we

seek to establish full support for all families for a range of issues, not just those surrounding exclusion.

In the spirit in which Miles Briggs asked his question, I would be happy to hear more about the suggestion. I have mentioned some of the plans that we already have in place, but I am always more than happy to hear about another party's alternatives, should he wish to provide me with further details.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Sadly, the percentage of excluded pupils with additional support needs is increasing, while the percentage of children in schools who are identified as having such needs is rising astronomically. Given that we have 600 fewer specialist teachers with ASN qualifications than we did in 2012, what is the Scottish Government doing not only to encourage more people to come into the profession and more teachers to stay in the profession but, specifically, to attract teachers who want to specialise in ASN, which will keep such children in mainstream education?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: All teachers provide teaching and support to pupils with additional support needs. I am sure that Martin Whitfield will be well aware of the Bute house agreement that we have with the Scottish Greens, in which we have agreed to work together to ensure that we work with the profession to ensure that more teachers are available to support pupils who have additional support needs, and that their career progression can be supported.

I would be happy for Martin Whitfield to provide positive reinforcement of our policies with the Scottish Greens, and to hear more suggestions about how we can improve in this respect.

Refugees from Ukraine (Home Fee Status)

4. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what plans it has to offer home fee status to Ukrainian refugees in Scotland, or those displaced following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (S6O-00977)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): On Thursday 14 April, I announced that displaced Ukrainian nationals settling in Scotland who have submitted an application to the homes for Ukraine scheme, the Ukraine family scheme or the Ukraine extension scheme will be eligible for home fee status and living cost support from the 2022-23 academic year.

Carol Mochan: I thank the minister for that news, which is most welcome. Will that provision include the considerable number of other nationals

who have been displaced by the conflict in Ukraine?

Jamie Hepburn: It will cover all the nationals whom I mentioned. I must concede that I do not quite follow the precise nature of the question. The nationals to whom the member referred are encompassed within the provision that I outlined in my initial answer. If there is a specific cohort that she would like to write to me about, I would be happy to respond to her in writing.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What support is the Scottish Government providing to international students studying in Scotland who find themselves in financial hardship?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That question is not directly related to the conflict in Ukraine.

Jamie Hepburn: The question is directly related to the conflict in Ukraine, in that, on 14 April, we announced a newly created £1 million international students emergency fund, which will support Ukrainian nationals who are already studying here, and other international students who face financial hardship as a result of significant changes in their circumstances. Eligible students will be able to apply for immediate financial assistance through their college or university.

Review of Foundation Apprenticeship Provision

5. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to the findings of the HM inspectors of education review of foundation apprenticeship provision. (S6O-00978)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): Since their launch in 2016, more than 11,000 pupils have taken up the opportunity of foundation apprenticeships.

Given the significant increase in foundation apprenticeships, and to ensure the continued best outcomes for young people, the Scottish Government commissioned in 2020 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education to undertake a review of the delivery of FA programmes. We acknowledge the review's findings and will use them as the basis for driving improvement. We have also established a stakeholder group to support that engagement and will set out further steps following that process.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am on record as being an enthusiast for foundation apprenticeships, but the HMIE review must give us all cause for concern. The review noted real weaknesses in the ability to access foundation apprenticeships across Scotland's schools and in the promotion of apprenticeships to young

learners and noted confusion among schools and providers about how the frameworks operate. It also acknowledged that

"In many schools, withdrawal rates are very high, ranging between 50% and 100% of young people leaving their programme early."

I recognise the issues caused by the pandemic, but the minister must acknowledge that serious alarm bells are being rung about the policy and that many of those alarms predate Covid. Foundation apprenticeships have the potential to make a real difference. What will the minister do to ensure that those opportunities are not squandered due to a lack of support from Government?

Jamie Hepburn: On that last point, there is no lack of Government support for foundation apprenticeships. I again make the point that more than 11,000 young people have now undertaken them. There were 346 young people who started foundation apprenticeships in cohort 1; by cohort 5, we had 4,240, as a result of Scottish Government support.

Let me be clear: I recognise that the report has identified inherent issues. We commissioned that report so that we could hear what the issues might be. We are committed to listening, to learning from those issues and to implementing a programme of improvement, in line with our continued commitment not only to the concept of foundation apprenticeships but to their delivery as life-changing opportunities for our young people.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): We cannot just say that foundation apprenticeships are a good thing; we must be clear about why they are a good thing. They can give young people a head start in a career by providing the qualifications and experiences that employers are looking for. Will the minister commit to ensuring that foundation apprenticeships remain a vital and central part of our skills and training system?

Jamie Hepburn: I absolutely guarantee that, and I again emphasise our support for them. We are committed to responding to the report in order to drive further improvement and to continuing the delivery of foundation apprenticeships in 2022-23. We will continue to deliver, to learn and to ensure that young people get a meaningful experience that does precisely what Bob Doris says by getting them ready for the world of work.

School Curriculum

6. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether the school curriculum should be free from party political bias. (S6O-00979)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): It is important that our pupils understand the democratic process in Scotland, the UK and further afield. Learning and teaching should be conducted on a non-partisan and non-party-political basis. Individual schools develop their own curricula at school level, and Scottish ministers have no direct control or influence on those curricula.

Russell Findlay: The Scottish Government agency Education Scotland has told school children that the Loch Ness monster can help them form a view on an independence referendum. One education campaigner has described that as nationalist “propaganda” and an attempt to

“brainwash pupils into believing that Scotland is the victim of a wicked conspiracy”.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish National Party’s exploitation of our beloved Nessie is wrong, and will she commit to the removal of such embarrassing and ridiculous propaganda from the curriculum?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The resource in question was, of course, developed by two primary school teachers in conjunction with Professor David Martin-Jones at the University of Glasgow. Professor Martin-Jones is very well respected in his academic area, and the material was based on his research. I make it very clear that that resource, which was not developed in-house by Education Scotland and certainly not by the Scottish Government, is part of a resource for teachers.

There is no fixed national curriculum in Scotland, and we have no direct control or influence over the curriculum. I trust our teachers to deliver that curriculum—it is a shame that the Scottish Conservatives do not.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Teachers throughout Scotland do a fantastic job educating our children about political literacy in an impartial and responsible manner. Will the cabinet secretary recommit to empowering our teachers, through the curriculum for excellence—which the Tories want to tear up—to equip our young people with the knowledge, skills and understanding that they need to succeed in life?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Kaukab Stewart is quite right. As I alluded to in my original answer, we absolutely remain fully committed to the empowerment of our school leaders, staff, parents and pupils, including on decisions that affect learning and teaching. It is absolutely correct that we should empower our school leaders and teachers. They know their children best, and it is quite right that the Scottish Government and our

agencies provide them with the support and resources to allow them to do that.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Does the Scottish Government agree that the school curriculum should contain education on racism and colonialism and that such reforms are not party political, but are sensible and reflective measures on our common history?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Foyso Choudhury raises an exceptionally important point that I hope that we absolutely agree on. A great deal of ongoing work is being done on race equality education, and a lot of work is being done by the race equality and anti-racism in education programme, which I am sure Foyso Choudhury is aware of. The Government is committed to looking at the issue very seriously, to empowering our stakeholders to take it very seriously and to taking action on it. I look forward to the work that those stakeholders are taking forward as part of REAREP. As I have said, it is a very important issue that we need to tackle across the chamber.

Higher Education (Letter from Academics)

7. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the joint letter reportedly signed by 111 University of Edinburgh academics expressing deep concern about the future of higher education in Scotland. (S6O-00980)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I have received a copy of the letter that Richard Leonard has referred to, and I have responded.

As I have said in answer to other questions, I meet university leaders and trade union leaders on a regular basis, and I have met them on a regular basis in recent months to discuss many of the matters that are raised in that letter. Although universities are autonomous bodies, central to our fair work approach is the expectation that employers, workers and trade unions should work together to reach the right decisions and ensure that workers are treated fairly.

Richard Leonard: The letter, which is signed by more than 100 academics, is damning. Let me quote it. It says:

“Staff morale is lower than ever, eroded by job insecurity, gendered and racial disparities in pay and unsustainable workloads ... Meanwhile, university leaders fixate on driving through massive unjustified pension cuts”.

I raised the University and College Union pay and pension dispute with the minister last month. He told Parliament then:

“meaningful dialogue should take place on the basis and according to the principles of our fair work approach.”—
[Official Report, 17 March 2022; c 49.]

Does the minister have any shred of evidence that that is what has happened? What is he doing to resolve the long-running dispute in higher education, which, just this week, has been joined by a new dispute in further education? He is the minister for higher and further education. When is he going to act?

Jamie Hepburn: I can assure Richard Leonard that I act day in, day out to try to ensure that those who work in our university and college environments have the best possible experience of the world of work and, indeed, that our students have the best possible experience of higher and further education. However, I am afraid to say that there is no escaping the fact that there is no direct role for the Scottish Government in resolving those matters.

What I will do, what I am committed to doing and what I have laid out in previous answers to Mr Leonard's questions and in various answers today, is that I will continue to engage with all parties to ensure that they speak to one another in a culture of mutual respect to try to resolve matters amicably. That is what I want to see, and I am sure that that is what Mr Leonard wants to see, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There are a couple of supplementary questions. The first is from Jackson Carlaw, who joins us remotely. No—his is question 8.

There is a supplementary question from Michael Marra.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Anybody working in the college or university sector across Scotland will be dismayed at the standard of the minister's answers today to the various questions about the situation faced by our colleges and universities across Scotland and the real, tough and worsening conditions that our staff are working under. What does he have to say about the fact that research funding capture has declined in the past eight years from a 10 per cent lead over the rest of the United Kingdom to parity now? He talks about the great funding package that he believes he has put forward for our universities, but this is an active role that he is taking and a decision that is being made by him and his Government colleagues—they have frozen the unit of resource for 13 years in a row. What can he do about that?

Jamie Hepburn: I come back to my earlier point, although what I did not mention is that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has made it very clear that, this financial year, we are operating against a backdrop of a 5.2 per cent cut in real terms to the Scottish Government's budget across the entirety of Scottish Government expenditure. In our higher education sector, we are maintaining expenditure

worth more than £1.8 billion. Again, I would have thought that Michael Marra would welcome that.

Again, I make the point that there is no direct role for the Scottish Government in resolving that dispute in higher education. Universities are and should be, as I think everyone agrees, autonomous from the Scottish Government. It is my responsibility to engage with all parties and encourage them to resolve this matter.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I just put on record that further and higher education will always welcome more resources. Can the minister tell us whether the Labour Party has, at any point, identified how much more resource it would give or where the money would come from—or is this just hollow and empty rhetoric in the chamber?

Jamie Hepburn: I leave others to conclude what the Labour Party's rhetoric is, but it has not come forward to me with any proactive or positive suggestions.

Teachers (Permanent Posts)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to question 8 and it will surprise nobody to hear that, as previously billed, Jackson Carlaw is joining us remotely.

8. Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I do so after a moment of some consternation, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its progress in increasing the number of permanent teaching roles available. (S6O-00981)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The recruitment and deployment of teachers, including permanent teaching posts, are matters for local authorities. We have provided £240 million of additional investment over two financial years, and a further £145.5 million of permanent funding from April this year, to support the employment of additional teachers and support staff. There are more than 2,000 more teachers in Scotland's schools than there were before the start of the pandemic in 2019.

Jackson Carlaw: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer but, according to the Scottish Government's most recent annual statistical publication for schools, there was at the last count an increase in the proportion of temporary teachers. There are thousands of temporary and supply teachers in Scotland; many would like nothing more than a guarantee that their job is permanent and secure, but they are continuously being let down by what appears to be a fairly ancient and utterly inflexible recruitment system.

Several of my constituents who are affected by the situation contact me regularly, and the uncertainty and worry that it causes them are considerable. The annual battle just to keep their job is completely demoralising and, sadly and even more worryingly, I know that the situation is contributing to a number of teachers leaving the profession for good. Will the Scottish Government offer a plan that would fundamentally address and update the process and, in so doing, secure the continued availability and commitment of many of those teachers and their futures?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have much sympathy for where Jackson Carlaw is coming from, but I point out, as I did in my original answer, that the process that he is talking about is one for each local authority to determine. The role for the Scottish Government is around resourcing. As I have mentioned, we have provided and baselined £145.5 million to ensure that local authorities have the resources to turn temporary staff posts permanent.

We were told that one of the issues stopping permanent contracts being given was that some of the funding that had come through during Covid was in itself temporary and could not be relied on, and we have listened to that and have acted to ensure that that funding has been baselined. I therefore see no reason for the number of temporary contracts that we have. However, I must point out to Mr Carlaw that, unless he is saying that the Scottish Government should take over a process that, at this point, is for local government, we have done what we can. I am happy to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the issue, but it is a matter for every individual local authority to look at the process involved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stephanie Callaghan has a brief supplementary question.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary give us an update on the pupil-to-teacher ratio in classrooms and how that will benefit pupil wellbeing and attainment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The current pupil-to-teacher ratio is 13:2, which is the lowest since 2009. We now have more teachers than at any time since 2008. Having more teachers per pupil will undoubtedly help support pupil wellbeing and attainment, which is one of the reasons why the Scottish Government has been very adamant that one of our top priorities for this parliamentary session is the recruitment of more teachers and support staff.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause

before we move to the next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change.

Blue Carbon

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Màiri McAllan on progressing Scotland's leadership on blue carbon. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:57

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): I am glad to deliver this statement setting out how this Government is progressing Scotland's leadership on blue carbon, which is a critical climate policy.

The global ocean life-support system produces 50 per cent of the world's oxygen and absorbs 23 per cent of man-made CO₂ emissions and 90 per cent of the excess heat created by man-made greenhouse gases. It is also the world's largest store of carbon, with 93 per cent of the earth's CO₂ stored in and cycled through marine ecosystems.

Oceans are therefore critical in the global fight against climate change, and Scotland has a great deal to offer here. Scotland has almost six times more sea than land, and our seas play an essential role in all of our lives. They regulate our climate and support a rich biodiversity, and, in turn, they support our economy, wellbeing, culture and heritage—especially for our coastal and island communities.

The 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—highlighted the centrality of the ocean in tackling the twin nature and climate crises. In particular, it highlighted the potential contribution of blue carbon habitats as a marine nature-based solution. COP26 also shone the spotlight on the climate change impacts that are already being observed in the marine environment, including ocean acidification, sea-level rise and coastal erosion.

Blue carbon is a relatively new concept, at least in public discourse. It refers to the carbon that is captured and stored in marine and coastal ecosystems, which has been accumulated over great swathes of time through natural processes. Blue carbon habitats include, but are not limited to, salt marshes, seagrasses, kelp beds and biogenic reefs, as well as so-called geological sedimentary stores such as sea-floor and sea-loch sediments. Blue carbon habitats store globally significant amounts of carbon and represent important long-term natural carbon stores.

As well as locking up carbon, those habitats provide ecosystem services, supporting biodiversity, providing nursery beds for fish

species and providing coastal protection, for example from flooding. Many of the key habitats and species that research is identifying as being important for blue carbon are priority marine features and therefore are already recognised in Scotland's marine protected area network.

However, as with much in the marine world, recognition and understanding of these complex systems is somewhat behind the understanding of terrestrial carbon stores. The Scottish Government recognised that early and, given the climate emergency and the size and importance of our maritime zone, in 2018 we established the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum to help us to identify Scotland's blue carbon habitats and understand their value, as well as their vulnerability to human and environmental pressures. Our blue carbon research programme, which we developed in partnership with NatureScot, the Scottish Association for Marine Science and St Andrews, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt, Stirling and Napier universities, has put Scotland at the forefront of blue carbon research in the United Kingdom and internationally.

Since 2018, we have invested more than £650,000 to support projects to grow the blue carbon evidence and skills base in Scotland and ensure that we use that wealth of knowledge to inform decision making. Thanks to our early, collaborative action, we now know that, together, our blue carbon habitats store roughly the same amount of carbon as Scotland's land-based ecosystems, such as peatlands, forestry and soils. We know that our coastal blue carbon ecosystems—specifically seagrasses and salt marshes—are highly efficient natural carbon sinks on a per area basis. We have a detailed assessment of the carbon stored in our salt marsh habitats and an increasingly complete map of our seagrass habitats, which includes the identification of potential sites for restoration. That work has been made possible, in part, by a drone funded by the Scottish Government.

We have led work to identify Scotland's blue carbon hotspots and have invested £200,000, through the nature restoration fund, to develop a specialist blue carbon laboratory at the University of St Andrews. We have also recently published work that maps the quantity and quality of sea-shelf carbon stocks in the UK's exclusive economic zone. That collaborative work, which we moved early to develop, has proved invaluable.

Recent developments elsewhere highlight the growing importance of blue carbon. I recently welcomed the publication of the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee report on blue carbon, which gave a balanced assessment of the current evidence base and outlined the small but important climate mitigation potential; the

significant co-benefits of those habitats for climate adaptation, resilience and biodiversity; and the importance of continuing to improve our understanding of how those habitats function, how they are impacted by human pressures and how that affects their ability to sequester and store carbon. I am pleased that the Scottish Government, with the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum, has already been taking action to address many of the report's recommendations.

The Climate Change Committee identified gaps in scientific knowledge. Our forum's leadership is already helping us to progress many of those knowledge gaps in Scotland and more widely across the UK, including through our support for the new cross-UK blue carbon evidence partnership, which will help to accelerate the blue carbon actions required at a UK level, including inclusion of salt marsh and seagrass in the UK greenhouse gas inventory, which was a key recommendation of the Climate Change Committee report. Inclusion of salt marsh in the inventory—and, as evidence develops, seagrass—would be a step change in how blue carbon is viewed, and is critical to attracting future investment and driving restoration, in a way that is similar to what we have seen with peatland restoration following its inclusion in the inventory.

The unique contribution of the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum deserves much recognition. Not only has it developed understanding but it has done so by leading the way internationally. It has also actively helped to encourage and shape other forums. I put on record my sincere thanks to everybody involved in the forum. Its future programme will consider how to minimise the vulnerability to human activities of our blue carbon stores.

The forum's programme will also include support for our ambitious marine protection programme in Scotland, which is part of our shared policy agenda with the Scottish Green Party. On that, we are starting from a strong base: 37 per cent of Scotland's seas are already designated within marine protected areas. We will complete the management measures within the MPA network by 2024 and, separately, we have committed to designate at least 10 per cent of our inshore and offshore waters as highly protected marine areas, in which there will be no extractive activity by 2026. That is a world-leading commitment to protect our marine environment; blue carbon will be used as one of the key criteria for site selection.

As well as building our own knowledge base and encouraging UK partnerships, we are continuing to develop international connections as part of our COP26 legacy.

Scotland's role as a global leader has never been more evident than during COP26, at which the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum hosted an international conference of experts. In recognition of our ambitious programme, Scotland's forum was invited to join the International Partnership for Blue Carbon, which has expanded to comprise 51 members globally since its establishment at COP21 in Paris.

The climate and nature emergencies present an existential threat to this planet and all life on it. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been clear that it is now or never to limit global warming to 1.5°. In Scotland, this Parliament has moved to pass some of the most robust climate mitigation laws in the world, and it is now our job to deliver on those. We are also committed to treating the climate emergency on a twin-crises basis with ecological decline, and we will legislate for nature recovery targets in the current session of Parliament.

Scotland is a maritime nation. We have more sea than land, and we have moved quickly to become an international front-runner, but we will not stop here. That is why I am delighted to announce today the launch of our COP26 commitment—the blue carbon international policy challenge, which will provide seed funding for five policy challenge projects, with the intention to establish blueprints for international and domestic policy action.

The challenge topics are wide ranging, and the challenge will bring the global community together to learn and share knowledge and best practice in order to accelerate delivery of our climate change ambitions, both in Scotland and with our partner countries. As I launch the challenge, I encourage blue carbon research and policy specialists to apply.

We know that climate change is a global emergency that requires urgent global action, and international collaborations have a critical role to play in bringing us together to work towards a common goal. In fact, the interconnectedness of the ocean is a great symbol of the imperative of co-operation.

The blueprints from the policy challenge that I have announced today will provide a vital link between our COP26 and COP27 blue carbon ambitions, both delivering at home in Scotland and demonstrating our commitment as an outward-looking nation and proactive partner for ambitious marine climate action around the globe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. I urge members

who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible, if they have not already done so.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for early sight of her statement. However, the fact that I could have watched the opening few minutes of an episode of “The Blue Planet” and got the same information suggests that blue carbon is only just coming on to the Scottish Government’s radar.

Given that 93 per cent of the world’s CO₂ is held in the marine environment—in sediment, kelp, seagrass, salt marshes, maerl beds and biogenic reefs—it is essential that, in our drive to net zero, the marine environment and specifically blue carbon sequestration are given much greater emphasis. The destruction of our offshore environments is certainly not given the same level of attention as the destruction of those that are onshore.

Good policy requires good scientific data. I note the minister’s statement that the Scottish Government has invested £650,000 since 2018 to grow the blue carbon evidence and skills base, but that amounts to little over £160,000 a year—or, to put it another way, two months’ salary for the boss of Ferguson Marine. Does the minister agree that there is a need for a huge increase in investment in data collection to bring blue carbon investment up to the same level as that for on-land carbon capture, such as peatland restoration?

Secondly, exactly how much money will the Scottish Government commit to the seed funding in the blue carbon international policy challenge?

Thirdly, a Scottish Parliament information centre briefing suggests that there is no evidence that climate change has been considered in the designation of current and proposed marine protected areas. Will the Scottish Government address that in its blue carbon policy in order to protect significant marine habitats?

Màiri McAllan: I think that it is really rather cynical for Brian Whittle to suggest that this is just coming on to the Scottish Government’s radar. I cannot help but feel that he perhaps did not listen to the statement, because the whole thing was about how Scotland has been a pioneer in this area, both in the UK and internationally.

However, he is absolutely right to say that scientific data is key. We recognise that there are gaps in the evidence base. We recognised that in 2018 when we set up the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum, and the Climate Change Committee has equally recognised that there are gaps in the evidence base. Evidence is key to driving policy and investment. That is exactly why we have the forum and it is exactly why I am launching the policy challenge today. To provide the detail about

the challenge that Mr Whittle asked for, the total sum for the next year will be £50,000; up to £10,000 per topic for five applications.

Mr Whittle’s final point, which was his suggestion that climate change has not been taken into account during the process of designating marine protected areas, when the entire *raison d’être* of those areas is climate change, is flatly wrong.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

How can we take the Scottish Government’s commitment to net zero seriously when it repeatedly misses its climate targets, and then releases a statement like today’s about something that it has already announced but has failed to do?

I will explain. In November last year, the blue carbon international policy challenge that the minister has just announced was announced by another minister. I have here the press release from November, which states that the policy challenge will run from January to March 2022. Well, we are now in April 2022, so why was the challenge delayed? What is the new timeline? Why was that information not included in the statement?

The Scottish Government has also previously committed to provide £150,000 through the nature restoration fund to support the establishment of specialist blue carbon research. Applications closed earlier this month for the second round of the nature restoration fund. Is the minister able to update us on whether any applications relating to blue carbon research were received and, if so, how they are being progressed? If no applications have been received, when does the minister envisage that that £150,000 that was reserved for blue carbon research will be allocated?

Finally, the minister referred to the Scottish Government’s pledge that it will designate at least 10 per cent of Scotland’s seas as highly protected marine areas by 2026, with blue carbon protection being one of the criteria that will be used to identify sites. Can the minister give an update on what progress has been made in selecting sites for highly protected marine areas to ensure blue carbon protection?

Màiri McAllan: I will take each of those issues in turn.

It is quite simple. I do not think that Mercedes Villalba has uncovered some great secret, as she seems to think that she has. We said at COP26 what we would do, and I am doing that today. I am launching the challenge and the terms of the challenge today, as well as the five project areas, which we have been developing since we said at

COP26 that we would do this. It is really not a controversy.

I will not pre-empt the results of the applications from the nature restoration fund. My colleague Lorna Slater is overseeing that fund, which seeks to fund projects from our marine environment. I hope that there will be applications.

With my officials, I am currently working on the site selection protocol for the highly protected marine areas and I am not able to speak to the detail of that yet. However, the protocol will consider the imperative of environmental protection and, equally, socio-economic factors for our fishing and coastal communities.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Marine ecosystems have historically suffered degradation from human activity. What adaptations to our current relationship with Scotland's seas and oceans will potentially be necessary in order to realise the full environmental potential of our blue carbon stores?

Màiri McAllan: As was highlighted in the recent Climate Change Committee report on blue carbon, which I mentioned in my statement, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge of how those habitats function and the impact of human pressures on them, which is important. The Scottish Blue Carbon Forum's research continues to help us to address those gaps and to build a stronger picture of how blue carbon habitats can help us to meet both our climate and our biodiversity ambitions.

However, we are not starting from zero: many of the species and habitats that research is identifying as being key for blue carbon are already priority marine features within our MPA network. As I have already said, we will move to designate 10 per cent of our waters, both inshore and offshore, as highly protected marine areas by 2026. In doing that, we will draw on evidence from the Blue Carbon Forum.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister rightly highlights the vital role that research by Scottish universities will play in developing blue carbon opportunities. She referred in her statement to £650,000 that will be allocated to support that research, which is all good stuff. However, that figure must be seen in the wider context of the funding cuts that Scottish universities have been subject to, which mean that today, research studies by Scottish universities are being carried out at a loss of £300 million a year, according to the Scottish Funding Council.

Does the minister recognise that the funding that she has announced for blue carbon research is a mere drop in the ocean compared to the massive cuts that her Government has imposed on Scottish universities?

Màiri McAllan: I appreciate the pun from Mr Lockhart but I do not agree that it is a drop in the ocean. From my perspective, it is a new and important area of scientific research. It is fundamental to Scotland, given our maritime zone. With my responsibilities, it is up to me to ensure that it gets the funding that is required to drive forward that progress. Given the successes of the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum to date, I am comfortable with that.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I note that, as the minister says, Scotland is perceived to be a leader in blue carbon. Will she say anything about the UK's position and whether there is any risk to Scotland's leadership from the UK not pulling its weight?

Màiri McAllan: The Scottish Government is proud of the role that we are playing on carbon research in the waters around Scotland and the UK and, indeed, is proud of our international contribution. Although we are leading, we see no lack of interest in our work from others in the north-east Atlantic sea basin, including our European neighbours. I am glad to have set an example for the UK and beyond. The Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive are now following our lead.

Delivering on our commitment to HPMA's in offshore waters will require collaboration with the UK Government, as the powers for that are reserved. I will, of course, seek that collaboration and I expect it, but would far rather that those powers were in this Parliament's hands.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Although any investment in our vital blue carbon is welcome, does the minister share concerns that we might see in our seas what we have seen on land, which is some big businesses—so-called green lairds—investing in huge swathes of land for forestry to offset their excessive carbon footprints rather than taking responsibility for reducing their emissions? It could be argued that that might leverage badly needed investment to support projects in our seas, especially given the modest Government investment, but does the minister agree that that is not an alternative to genuine emissions reduction by big business?

Màiri McAllan: I thank Colin Smyth for that pertinent question. It is absolutely true that, as the centrality of our natural environment—be it the terrestrial or maritime environment—to our work on the climate and nature emergencies becomes clearer, so does the investment opportunity that is linked to it. I mentioned in my statement that, in the marine zone, we are somewhat behind terrestrial developments but, when it comes to development in the marine environment, we will need to be as mindful of the responsibilities of

those who are investing in it as we are in the terrestrial zone.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In the programme for government, the Scottish ministers committed to designating at least 10 per cent of Scotland's seas as highly protected marine areas by 2026, which the minister reiterated. How will the policy and selection framework for HPMAAs ensure the protection of blue carbon habitats, and how will that process be taken forward to help to secure a just transition to net zero?

Màiri McAllan: NatureScot and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee are currently developing the site-selection guidelines for HPMAAs. I made a commitment to Mercedes Villalba to keep Parliament up to date on that; I repeat that to Mr Gibson.

Regarding management of the process, as I said, socioeconomic factors that affect the resilience and viability of marine industries, and our coastal communities that depend on them, will be taken into account in the selection and designation process for HPMAAs. We must ensure that we do not leave marine industries, or our coastal communities that rely on them, high and dry. Indeed, marine industries are a major beneficiary of the natural capital that our seas provide.

Our MPA network, together with our HPMA network, will institute world-leading environmental protection in Scotland's seas in a targeted and evidence-led way that is cognisant of socioeconomic factors and, therefore, delivers the just transition for which Mr Gibson asks.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

I note that the seed funding that was announced, as well as the work of our universities and academics, will further blue carbon research, which is welcome. Will the minister confirm whether Marine Scotland, which covers many areas of sea and ocean policy, will play a role, and will she say what that role would entail in the important research and management? If there is a role for Marine Scotland, what additional resources, such as for recruitment, will the Scottish Government provide to ensure that that already-stretched body can carry out the necessary work?

Màiri McAllan: As a body of Scottish Government officials working in the area, Marine Scotland has been fundamentally involved in development of the Blue Carbon Forum since its inception in 2018. It will continue to do so by being part of the policy challenge that I am launching

today, including through joining a board that will look at applications for funding and the process.

Beatrice Wishart asked an important question about resources. She and I had a conversation about that earlier in the week in relation to the multitude of activities that are going on in our maritime area and the need for Government oversight. I was able to reassure her then that the Scottish Government and Marine Scotland are preparing themselves well for that.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The minister's statement touched on the fact that marine habitats such as kelp beds and sea-floor sediments contain large stocks of blue carbon. I am interested to know how Scotland can maximise the potential of those carbon stores while also realising the role that they can play in social and economic activities such as fishing.

Màiri McAllan: As has been rehearsed a little already today, it is clear that, although blue carbon habitats might offer a nature-based solution, they are also vulnerable to the effects of climate change and human activity. Since the establishment of the Blue Carbon Forum in 2018, that has been a key area of focus. We are continuing to improve the evidence base; however, as was highlighted in the recent UK CCC report on blue carbon, there are key evidence gaps that need to be filled.

Of course, reaching net zero is not just about emissions reduction; it is also about protecting biodiversity and ensuring climate resilience, which in turn are vital to our marine industries that are dependent on marine natural capital. That is why we must continue to investigate—as the CCC says we must—the interactions of fishing and blue carbon stores and ensure greater protection through the HPMA programme.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

Restoration of coastal environments helps to tackle climate change by increasing blue carbon storage and sequestration, as the minister said. At the moment, however, that important work, like the community-led seagrass restoration project at Loch Craignish, does not count towards net zero, because blue carbon is not yet included in the national carbon accounting framework. Can the minister say more about how the Scottish Government will work with its UK counterparts to add blue carbon to the greenhouse gas inventory, in order to incentivise scaling up of coastal restoration?

Màiri McAllan: Ariane Burgess has asked a really important question. Work with UK counterparts to support inclusion of salt marsh and seagrass in the UK greenhouse gas inventory is

already under way. It will be a priority focus of the UK blue carbon evidence partnership, which will meet for the first time in May this year. Inclusion of habitats in the inventory requires robust greenhouse gas reporting and accounting; the evidence base for salt marsh and seagrass is, as we have discussed, still developing.

The subject has been an important focus for the Scottish Blue Carbon Forum, which has supported fundamental research to map and account for Scotland's blue carbon habitats, including salt marsh and seagrass. Those are the first studies of their kind in the UK and they will make a significant contribution to the goal of including those habitats in the greenhouse gas inventory. Again, I put on the record my thanks to all the great minds who have been involved in that.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which was published in February, states that

“Current changes in the climate system and those expected in the future will increasingly have significant and”

damaging

“impacts on human and natural systems.”

Given the stark reality that is faced by the planet and its people, does the minister agree that we must all redouble our efforts, through initiatives such as the one that has been announced today, to combat climate change whenever and wherever possible?

Màiri McAllan: Yes—Fiona Hyslop is absolutely right. We must do everything that we can, in the face of a global climate emergency that remains the greatest long-term threat that faces this planet. As the recent series of IPCC reports has made clear, that means taking action both to urgently reduce emissions to net zero globally and to build resilience to the impacts that are already locked in. Scotland's precious marine environment has a really important role to play in both mitigation and adaptation.

I also agree with Fiona Hyslop's call for even greater action; that applies to all of us, whether we are in the Government, the Opposition or outside Parliament. As I said, the Scottish Parliament has set some of the world's most ambitious statutory targets to reduce emissions over the decade. Our collective focus must now be on delivering the transformational change that is needed. The Scottish Government has set out a comprehensive package for how we intend to do that, but we also need enhanced action from the UK Government.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The minister rightly highlights that our seas play an essential role in our lives with regard to climate change and biodiversity and, in turn, the

economy—especially for coastal and island communities. However, given the shambles over which the minister's Government presided, through lack of scientific evidence, regarding the Clyde cod fishery legislation—which has resulted in a loss of trust right across the fishing and environmental non-governmental organisation sectors—why should our fishers and coastal communities have any faith in the leadership of this virtue-signalling Scottish National Party Government, which is failing on almost every measure to halt terrestrial biodiversity and species decline? A shocking one in nine species is endangered.

It is all very well setting world-leading targets, but they are worthless if they are not delivered. Can the minister outline any financial assistance for a just transition for the sectors, including the fishing sector, that will be expected to deliver the blue carbon ambitions?

Màiri McAllan: With the cynicism that is coming from Tory members, one would almost think that they had not voted for the world-leading climate targets that this country is now working under. *[Interruption.]*

On Clyde cod, after years of an approach that was not achieving the objectives, it is right for the Government to seek to change tack. The new arrangements are stricter, but they are also more targeted, which is certainly good from an environmental perspective. There is, undoubtedly, an important interaction between fisheries and blue carbon. We agree with the Climate Change Committee that scientific uncertainty about that impact is preventing an accurate assessment. The picture is far from clear, which is why we are investing in research, through our Blue Carbon Forum and today's policy challenge, to fill the knowledge gaps, to improve science and to inform future policy development.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the ministerial statement on progressing Scotland's leadership on blue carbon.

Antimicrobial Resistance

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-04070, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the Scottish approach to managing the global risk of antimicrobial resistance. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now.

15:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):

Over the past two years, we have understood what it means to be faced with a health crisis that, at first, we could not treat, and we have seen its impact on so many areas of our lives. What would happen if many more infections could not be treated? What if antibiotics no longer worked to protect patients while they were undergoing surgery or chemotherapy? In reality, that is what could happen if antimicrobial resistance—AMR—was allowed to rise uncontrolled.

Today's debate on this important global issue is the first in the history of devolution. I do not use the term "global threat" lightly, but AMR is a global threat. I want us all to be under no illusions about the severity of that threat. The World Health Organization has described the rise of antimicrobial resistance as

"one of the top 10 global public health threats facing humanity",

and *The Lancet* has published research that estimates that almost 5 million deaths in 2019 were associated with bacterial AMR. Of those, 1.27 million were directly caused by antimicrobial resistance.

However, there are things that we can do to address the threat and I want to focus on three key ways in which we can contain it. The first involves people, not only recognising the extraordinary efforts of those who are already working in the field in Scotland but looking into the future and thinking about those whom we will need to help us to combat AMR. The second way is through information flows. To address any problem, we must, of course, understand the nature of it, so I will talk about how we gather and share that data, both domestically and internationally, and the rationale for doing that.

Finally, we need to recognise the global nature of the issue. As we know, AMR does not recognise borders, so I will talk a bit about our international work in that regard. We know that AMR does not just spread between humans across borders and around the world but can develop and spread via animals and the environment. I will speak about the people and

information flows across health and social care and about our work with global partners.

In closing the debate, my colleague Maree Todd will give some focus on our work in animal health and the environment. We need action in all those sectors and for them to work together to control and contain AMR, taking a one health approach to the problem.

I want to talk about all the people who are involved in helping us tackle AMR, because they are critical to our success in containing it. AMR control starts with infection prevention. Every time we use an antimicrobial drug, resistance has a chance to develop. Therefore, health professionals across Scotland work hard to prevent as many infections as possible and control them quickly when they happen, which not only helps the patients of today but avoids the use of some drugs altogether. That work helps to keep drugs working for the patients of tomorrow.

Sadly, we know that not every infection can be prevented. When infections occur, we need to use our life-saving antimicrobial drugs in the most appropriate and effective way. As a Government, we have invested in specialist antimicrobial pharmacists, healthcare scientists and researchers, who work together to get the right drug to the right patient at the right time. The right diagnostic tests, when they are undertaken promptly in our laboratories, can help identify the right drug for a patient's particular infection and protect important treatments for the future.

In Scotland, we are fortunate to have groundbreaking organisations that lead the way on AMR. The Scottish Antimicrobial Prescribing Group—a consortium of prescribers from within the national health service—publishes regular guidance and educational materials for colleagues on the best possible use of antibiotics and other antimicrobial drugs. Prescribers have continued that critical task alongside their clinical work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. With the SAPG's help, spotting opportunities for good stewardship of those drugs can be part of every health and care professional's job.

However, we are not just thinking about how to tackle the issue with our current workforce, as important as that is. A long-term problem requires long-term planning, so we are also taking stock of our on-going specialist workforce and staffing needs, building on the lessons that were learned during the pandemic by the infection prevention and control, antimicrobial stewardship and health protection workforces. We are working hard to determine and address our evolving service needs. That workforce not only safeguards antimicrobials but supports health and social care in the prevention and control of existing and new,

emerging infections, which is of course critical to any future pandemic.

Every effective workforce needs to have appropriate data to manage their task and our clinicians have shown strong leadership in collecting surveillance data on AMR. In Scotland, we have the uniquely wide-ranging Scottish one health antimicrobial use and antimicrobial resistance reports, which are published every year in November to coincide with world antibiotic awareness week. The reports cover humans, animals, the environment and the food chain and are hugely important to our understanding of AMR. Only with the most accurate and up-to-date information can we keep track of how resistance is changing and evolving, in order to guide our health system continually towards the best possible treatments to use.

However, we want to go further. Learning from the Covid-19 pandemic, Scotland needs and deserves a once-for-Scotland electronic surveillance system for infection, which could support patients and staff on the front line of infection control and underpin our important AMR work. I have asked my officials to start looking into the best systems for Scotland.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Although that is important, is it not also important to have communication between healthcare staff, so that they are able to talk to one another and see one another's notes?

Humza Yousaf: Dr Sandesh Gulhane raises an important issue—of course, he has first-hand experience in his clinical role—and that is why we have published our data strategy for health and social care. I commend it to Dr Gulhane and anybody in the chamber. Importantly, the strategy talks about not necessarily uprooting every information technology system across health and social care but about creating the cloud-based infrastructure that will be critical for sharing the information that the member talks about.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The minister talks about surveillance and issues of stewardship. Is the third leg of the tripod not discovery, and the fact that we need new interventions? Will the cabinet secretary or the minister cover that in their speeches?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, of course—we will cover that aspect. That is why—I was going to come to this at the end of my contribution—I am keen to accept the Scottish Labour amendment in the name of Jackie Baillie, as it is very important that work is done on research and the various different research streams that exist. It is a very good amendment, and that is why we will accept it later today.

Lastly, I turn to the global nature of the issue that we are dealing with. It is a global crisis—AMR leaves no part of the world unaffected—so it requires a global response, and Scotland is rising to meet that shared challenge. Like climate change, AMR is an issue that does not respect borders. Resistant microbes can and do spread widely through the environment, and via people and animals travelling.

We work closely on the issue with colleagues from all four United Kingdom nations—in fact, I will be attending a ministerial round-table meeting on AMR with my colleagues from the other UK nations next month. With them, we will be discussing a new way to incentivise pharmaceutical companies to invest in research and development for new antimicrobials.

Scottish experts have played a leading role in the development of the UK's national action plan on AMR, which runs from 2019 to 2024. The University of Strathclyde is undertaking some of the key research and modelling work underpinning the delivery of the plan on the contribution that is made by infection prevention and control. Nevertheless, I take Michael Marra's point—there are various pieces of work under way, and it is important that we get an understanding of the landscape and bring that work together in a collaborative way. That is why, as I said, we will be supporting the Labour amendment on the role that the Scottish Funding Council could play in that regard.

We are also looking much further afield. Like climate change, AMR is a threat to the achievement of the United Nations sustainable development goals and to the hopes and aspirations of millions, which is why we seek to work globally on the issue. To give one example, the Scottish Antimicrobial Prescribing Group has been working in partnership with Ghanaian colleagues for several years on helping to improve antimicrobial prescribing and practice in Ghanaian hospitals. We are now considering what further work we can do as part of Scotland's international development work.

I note with slight disappointment that the free trade agreements that the UK Government has concluded since European Union exit have been lacking in ambition on AMR. My ministerial colleagues have written to the UK Government to express Scotland's regret on that issue and to push the UK Government, perhaps in future free trade agreements, to increase its ambition in that respect.

I suspect that most people in the country have probably not heard of the threat that AMR poses—why would they? However, given the severity of the potential impact of AMR, we have a collective duty to raise awareness of the dangers of

antimicrobial resistance. We all have a role to play—we can all listen to our healthcare and veterinary professionals and take their advice on whether we, our family members and our cats and dogs really need that antibiotic. We can take unused drugs back to the pharmacy, where they will be properly disposed of so that they do not end up in our environment.

AMR is an enormous challenge, and tackling it requires conscientiousness and creativity in health and social care, in veterinary surgeries, on farms, in laboratories and when working with international partners. It requires professionals from different sectors and backgrounds to work together, and we in Scotland have been doing that. Despite the threat of resistance and the many ways it can spread, what is happening in Scotland is a positive story, but there is much more to do. As I said, we intend to accept the Labour amendment today. I look forward to what will undoubtedly be a thoughtful and considered debate.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the extraordinary positive impact of antibiotics and other antimicrobial drugs in the health and social care system; recognises the terrible costs, in terms of morbidity and mortality and wider societal and economic impact, of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and notes the ongoing risk posed to Scotland and the world if AMR continues unchecked; acknowledges the effective One Health approach to tackling AMR taken by Scotland; welcomes the ongoing commitment of the Scottish Government to contain and control AMR, including through participation in the UK's 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance and five-year National Action Plan; recognises the hard work and commitment of those working to contain and control AMR within the NHS and across all One Health sectors in Scotland, and acknowledges that everyone in Scotland has a role to play in antimicrobial stewardship, preserving the effectiveness of antimicrobial drugs in the years to come.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the next speech, members will wish to be aware that there is time for me to give time back for any interventions.

15:38

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Although I absolutely understand the importance of discussing the global risk of antimicrobial resistance, this debate was supposed to be a chance for us to discuss the impact of long Covid in Scotland. I hope that the Presiding Officer will allow me just a little latitude to mention that first, before I turn to the substance of the debate.

In doing so, I note that the one health approach to tackling antimicrobial resistance was actually adopted in Scotland in 2016. The Government has had six years to bring forward a debate, but it has not done so until now—not once in that entire six-year period. The situation surrounding long Covid could not be more urgent and, for the 132,000

people across Scotland who are living with the condition, the debate could have provided much-needed information and impetus for the Scottish Government to act. This could have been the opportunity for the Scottish Government—

Humza Yousaf: Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: Let me finish my point, and then I will give way by all means.

This debate could have been the Scottish Government's opportunity to tell us whether it has finally spent any of the £10 million that was announced for long Covid treatment seven months ago, and to share what research it has done on the condition since we first learned about it two years ago. I suspect that the reason why the debate has been cancelled is that few bids have been made for the money, because health boards are too busy fighting the latest wave of Covid overwhelming our hospitals. Perhaps just giving them the money for them to get on with making the provision is the best thing to do, rather than micromanaging help for long Covid sufferers who, in the meantime, have to suffer for even longer.

Instead, the debate was changed at the very last minute. Scared of criticism, and with political spin at the forefront of its consideration, the Scottish National Party Government cancelled the debate. It made the wrong decision. In truth, both debates are required.

I will give way to the cabinet secretary and then I will turn to antimicrobial resistance.

Humza Yousaf: I thank Jackie Baillie for giving way, but I regret her inaccurate characterisation of why the debate is being held. It is not unusual for business to be revised, but the debate has not been cancelled; it will take place in a few weeks. The reason for that is precisely because we will then be able to put into the public domain the detail that Ms Baillie is rightly asking for. That is what she wants and it is what stakeholders want. To suggest that the debate has been cancelled is incorrect. Subject to the Parliament's agreement, it will take place in the next few weeks.

Jackie Baillie: I simply say that people will look at the record and will see that we have waited for six years for a debate on antimicrobial resistance, but there has not been anything in that entire time, while a debate on long Covid, which is about people experiencing the most dreadful symptoms now and not getting treatment, has been put off until some point in the future.

If left unchecked, resistance to antimicrobial drugs could have long-lasting and profound effects on global health. Routine surgeries such as hip replacements and organ transplants could become less safe. Childbirth could be more dangerous. A number of infections such as urinary tract

infections, pneumonia and tuberculosis could become harder to treat or require a stay in hospital.

A report that was published late last year found that the total use of antibiotics in Scotland has fallen by 17.1 per cent in the past five years. That is positive progress, but the report also found that antibiotic use in hospitals is up by 2.3 per cent since 2016. Despite the statistics showing that the use of antibiotics has generally decreased, it is important to recognise that Covid-19 might have altered the picture. Although antimicrobial usage has decreased in primary care, there have been increases in prescribing by dentists, for example, because of limited options for dental treatment during the pandemic. It is also important to consider greater public awareness of infection prevention during the past two years, including hand washing and mask wearing, and an overall decrease in socialising, which has reduced infection transmission.

However, this is not an issue that is reserved to Scotland or one that can be fixed simply by taking a Scottish approach. Antimicrobial resistance is prevalent across the globe, with countries in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia experiencing the highest death rates. In Europe, rates of resistance in the south are greater than in the north and, as we saw during the pandemic, the spread of virus and bacteria is not stopped at a border.

If the global spread of a disease is coupled with antimicrobial resistance, there is the threat of future pandemics. The Government must have plans in place to support our NHS and care sector. Scotland's hospitals are already under great strain. Patients are waiting for up to eight hours to be seen in accident and emergency departments, and we know from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine that there is clear evidence that long waits in emergency departments are directly associated with patient death. We must therefore act to prevent antimicrobial resistance from impacting on the NHS in the future.

As antimicrobial resistance makes infections more difficult to treat and leads to longer hospital stays, the NHS will be faced with higher medical costs and increased mortality, so it is right for us to co-operate across the UK and globally to deal with that. When the MRSA crisis posed a similar threat more than a decade ago, Scottish Labour took action, which was then followed up by the SNP.

We established a system of national mandatory surveillance of MRSA, developed the introduction of an antimicrobial resistance strategy, created new standards for hospital infection control and cleaning services, and invested in better facilities for decontaminating reusable medical devices. Those steps were delivered quickly and

effectively, and made the difference between life and death for many people.

The World Health Organization ranks antimicrobial resistance as one of the 10 greatest global public health threats facing humanity. It has highlighted the concerning development of multi and pan-resistant bacteria that cause infections that are currently untreatable. As we come out of the pandemic, many people will be left with weakened immune systems, which means that there is a danger of long-term health problems such as long Covid interacting with untreatable diseases. That is a cause for concern.

Labour's amendment seeks not just to highlight but to support the Scottish research environment. There is much work being done by Scottish research groups on the key themes of surveillance, stewardship and discovery. We know that their share of research council income peaked in 2012-13 but has declined since then. As we are now outside the formal EU research environment, we must do everything that we can to rebuild the international collaboration and the partnerships across the UK that are so critical to advancing research in antimicrobial resistance. Tasking the Scottish Funding Council with a rapid review of resource options would be a simple yet impactful step.

Eighteen higher education institutions in Scotland already conduct research in this area, which is welcome. The Scottish Government should outline what financial support it can give to ensure that Scotland is on the front foot when it comes to dealing with the looming crisis. How much funding is being allocated to such work? The NHS must also be given the research and development capacity and the funding that are required to tackle the issue effectively, to monitor microbiological data, and to train and educate staff on such issues.

WHO scientists are concerned that Covid-19 has caused greater inappropriate use of antibiotics, which makes the risk of antimicrobial resistance greater still. People in care homes with specific needs are particularly susceptible. I hope that the Scottish Government will make sure that the rise of antimicrobial resistance in our care homes is addressed at pace, because we cannot allow residential care to become the ground zero of antimicrobial resistance.

Antimicrobial resistance is real, it is a threat to modern medicine and it is important that the Scottish Government acts now to fund research and to prepare the health service and our care sector for all eventualities. We need to learn from the mistakes that were made during the pandemic to ensure that Scotland is not once again caught on the back foot.

I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for his support for the Labour amendment.

I move amendment S6M-04070.1, to insert at end:

“, and believes that the Scottish Funding Council should be tasked with a review of domestic and global funding streams available to Scottish universities and research groups to contribute to the global research efforts in AMR and avenues to UK and international research partnerships.”

15:48

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a practising NHS doctor. Therefore, I am probably the only member here who can legally prescribe antibiotics.

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I declare that I, too, am a prescriber.

Sandesh Gulhane: I said “probably”.

Today's debate is very important in its own right, and I believe that there is consensus across the Parliament on much of our approach to tackling antimicrobial resistance. That said, the Scottish Government's motion, like so many of its other motions, is somewhat self-congratulatory, and it does not call for any specific action. That is why, like the Scottish National Party, we will support the Labour amendment.

Before I drill into the subject, I would like to pay respect to the more than 130,000 Scots who are struggling with the debilitating condition that we were supposed to be addressing today, before the SNP-Green Government pulled the debate from the schedule. We received the revised agenda only about two days ago. That move did not go unnoticed by many of the people up and down the country who are struggling with long Covid and are still waiting for the Scottish Government to deliver a credible action plan.

The cabinet secretary has said that the reason for the delay is to allow the Government to make an announcement, but I have been talking about long Covid since I got here and it has been eight months since the cabinet secretary announced money for it. Despite that, we are still apparently not ready for a debate on the issue. We look forward to the discussions that will take place after the elections.

In today's revised business, we are focusing on Scotland's approach to managing the global risk of antimicrobial resistance, or AMR. I will start by travelling back some 94 years. Before Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, in 1928, an infection caused by a simple cut could mean the end of life. The discovery of penicillin was a game changer in

medical history. There was a famous case of a surgeon performing the amputation of a limb in which that one surgery killed three people: the patient, the surgical assistant who was holding the patient down and who was cut, and the surgeon, who managed to nick himself with his blade. They all died because of the inability to treat infection.

Why did that happen? When antibiotics kill bacteria, there is a chance that a random mutation—such as the one we see in the Covid virus—will allow the bacterium to evade antibiotics, giving it an advantage from which it profits. The bacteria then reproduce and dominate. As antibiotics lose their ability to kill strains of microbes, and if we cannot deliver new drugs that can beat those bugs, then by 2050 we can expect about 10 million deaths per year worldwide in people aged under 30 to be caused by drug-resistant infections. That would be more than the number of deaths caused today by cancer and diabetes combined.

Back in 2013, seven years before Covid, Professor Dame Sally Davies, the former chief medical adviser to the UK Government, said that AMR was a “catastrophic threat”. She said:

“If we don't act now, any one of us could go into hospital in 20 years for minor surgery and die because of an ordinary infection that can't be treated by antibiotics. And routine operations like hip replacements or organ transplants could be deadly because of the risk of infection.”

Can we imagine a return to the days when childbirth, a cut in the arm or even an insect bite could give rise to the serious risk of death? That might seem far fetched, but did we heed the warnings about a possible respiratory pandemic? We are not working fast enough to deal with long Covid. Warren Buffet once said:

“What we learn from history is that people do not learn from history.”

I hope that he is wrong about AMR and long Covid. We cannot allow ourselves to emerge from the Covid pandemic and enter another crisis, either of AMR or of long Covid.

AMR infections cause an estimated 700,000 global deaths each year. In the UK, AMR causes an estimated 12,000 deaths per year. It was recently reported that antibiotic resistance increased by 4.9 per cent between 2016 and 2020. That means that one in five people with a bloodstream infection in 2020 had an infection that was resistant to antibiotics, which is a potentially life-threatening situation.

There are now strains of tuberculosis that are resistant to almost all lines of treatment. The number of TB deaths has increased for the first time in a decade and global targets are no longer being met. When I was on my infectious diseases

rotation during my training, I saw a patient who was stuck for months and months in a small negative pressure room because he had a multidrug-resistant strain of TB. His mental health was awful. He was sick because of the severity of the side-effects of the antibiotics that he had to be given.

What are we doing about AMR? Clinicians are reducing their use of antibiotics, where possible. GPs have decreased prescribing by 20 per cent since 2016, although we have seen a 2.3 per cent increase in hospital prescriptions over the same period.

Can we come up with new drugs to replace the ones that do not work any more? Unfortunately, it is not that easy. No new class of antibiotics has been developed since 1987, and the market for antimicrobials is broken. Developing new antibiotics is massively expensive and there are only 40 antibiotics in clinical trials globally. The problem is compounded by the fact that new antibiotics should be used sparingly, which affects the risk-to-return ratio.

In order to overcome the high failure rate of new antimicrobials, the UK Government has stepped in and developed an innovative solution that is now being tested. The model moves away from paying for individual packs of antimicrobials and towards making an annual payment that is based on the health benefits to patients and the value that the drug adds to the NHS. That new subscription-style payment is a win for the NHS and for industry. Patients benefit from a secure supply of new antimicrobial drugs, while pharmaceutical companies can reliably forecast a return on their investments.

The UK Government is also committed to investing in health research, increasing public research and development investment to record levels equating to £20 billion by 2025, which is an increase of about a quarter in real terms. I take it that the cabinet secretary welcomes that commitment.

In Scotland, we are fortunate to have expert intelligence, evidence-based guidance, clinical assurance and clinical leadership. NHS National Services Scotland has a department that is dedicated to reducing the burden of infection and antimicrobial resistance, and its experts are represented on the UK's advisory committee on antimicrobial prescribing, resistance and healthcare-associated infection. That four-nation body provides practical and scientific advice to the UK and devolved Governments on minimising the risk of healthcare-associated and drug-resistant infections. I am interested to know whether the cabinet secretary shares my view that AMR and, indeed, other pressing health crises that may emerge are best tackled on a four-nation basis,

with not just Scottish data and research solutions but four-nations ones.

In 2019, the UK and devolved Governments set out a joint vision for containing and controlling AMR by 2040. That is supported by a five-year national action plan with clear targets. The commitment to reducing the need for antimicrobials by lowering the burden of infection in our communities, in the NHS, on farms and in the environment is serious. That one health approach has seen antibiotic use in farmed animals decrease by 52 per cent since 2014, and there has been a decrease of 79 per cent in the sales of veterinary antibiotics that are most critical for human health.

The UK plays a leading role in tackling AMR on the world stage. That was witnessed when Britain used its G7 presidency to secure an ambitious commitment on AMR to strengthen the resilience of antibiotic supply chains and develop sustainable, clean and green solutions for antibiotic manufacturing.

AMR is a global problem that requires global action. This is not the time to pat ourselves on the back. We cannot be distracted, and our children would never forgive us if we failed. We must step up our efforts to work seamlessly across the UK to deliver on the national five-year plan and control AMR by 2040. In doing so, we can ensure that Scotland's world-class expertise maximises its contribution to global research efforts through the UK and international research partnerships.

15:57

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Anyone who works in, or has worked in, the NHS or, indeed, anyone who knows someone who spends a lot of time in hospital or a care home will understand the massive importance of tackling antimicrobial resistance.

I admit that, back in 2020, when we first started putting antibacterial gel on everything, I felt a bit anxious about what that—and the inevitable group of people who, no matter what doctors tell them, insist that amoxicillin somehow makes their viral infection go away more quickly—might do to bolster the other, slower pandemic. It is important to reiterate now what the Scottish Government, health advisers and many others have been saying weekly for the past few years: washing our hands is the best thing that we can do to prevent spreading viruses. Washing for 40 seconds will prevent bacteria from developing resistance, and the overuse of hand sanitiser might do the opposite.

Anti-infectives such as antibacterial spray and hand sanitisers have their place in hospitals and homes in which there is an active infection, for

example, but they also deserve real consideration in tackling AMR. Indeed, reducing unintentional exposure to them is a policy in the five-year action plan that we have signed up to. Using them more responsibly may have been quite a difficult circle to square in the peaks of the pandemic, but now is probably a good time to start to educate people better and encourage them to read labels, use the appropriate kind of sanitiser and stick to hand washing when possible. We desperately need to be able to rely on disinfectants and other anti-infectives in hospital, and it is simply not worth risking that to save 40 seconds of our time.

We also have to be able to trust that, when we are prescribed antibiotics, we need them. The reduction in unnecessary antibiotic use due to increased awareness of, and action against, AMR as well as research that has provided better knowledge of when antibiotics are not needed is a key part of building that trust.

Similarly, we have to be able to trust that, when we need antibiotics, those antibiotics will work. That will continue only as long as everyone honours their responsibility to preserve the effectiveness of those drugs. What the Scottish Government needs to do—we have heard from the cabinet secretary that the Scottish Government is doing this—is ensure that the public are armed with the knowledge that they need to understand when antibiotics are simply not useful and why AMR is a very real threat to our future healthcare standards.

It is heartening to see that Scotland's efforts in tackling AMR are already showing strong results. We have cut the number of post-surgical deaths and we have a patient safety record that is among the best in the world.

It is right that part of Scotland's approach to managing the risk is signing up to the UK's five-year action plan and 20-year vision. Alongside in-house efforts such as our world-leading patient safety programme, Scotland is working closely with other countries in the UK on this global issue. That is exactly the sort of international co-operation that Scotland should seek to nurture.

Following Brexit, it is more important than ever to build links and share knowledge, funding and efforts. Resistance anywhere in the world poses a risk to Scotland and the UK, and a global effort is required to overcome that. I am glad to see Scottish Labour's amendment recognise that, and I am happy to support at decision time its position on the Scottish Funding Council reviewing the funding streams that are available to our universities and research groups.

Whatever constitutional situation Scotland is in, co-operation is vital. The Scottish approach of working closely with other countries to promote

best practice and tackle AMR is undoubtedly the right one to take, and I look forward to seeing the trend of better managing antimicrobial resistance continue.

16:00

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I compliment Emma Roddick on her fine speech, which included practical advice on how we can all contribute to tackling AMR. We appreciate her support for and comments on Labour's amendment.

AMR is, as other members have said, near the top of most lists of global risks that we face collectively. However, so was a pandemic, and our preparedness in Scotland and internationally was chronically limited. Some of the exercises that we undertook to prepare for a pandemic were insufficient. We have to take such big global warnings an awful lot more seriously.

We should be clear that no one anywhere is doing enough to deal with AMR. That point was made clear to me time and time again in my conversations with clinical and research colleagues on the subject in recent days. There has been limited progress in different places, but the pandemic has been a huge distraction for our scientific and medical communities, which would otherwise have been focused on other issues. It is entirely appropriate that that effort was put in, but we know that there has been a lack of progress on AMR as a result. That is just one of many deep and hidden consequences and opportunity costs that come from dealing with the global ramifications of the Covid pandemic.

However, as other members have pointed out, the warnings about AMR are nothing new. The great Scottish scientist Sir Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin, the first antibiotic, spoke of microbial resistance in his acceptance speech for the Nobel prize in 1945, which was five years after resistance was first detected. He specifically highlighted underdosing—that is, the need to use a limited and low-level amount of prophylactic antibiotics to prevent such medicine from being rendered ineffective over time. Therefore, as has been pointed out, the analysis of the issue is nothing new.

As colleagues have pointed out, for many, the idea that childbirth, routine surgery or nothing more than a cut finger could result in death is unimaginable. However, that is the day-to-day lived experience for many people across the world. The advances that Fleming and his many collaborators and successors unleashed have transformed health systems across the world, and they have held out the promise of more certain, happier lives to billions.

It is estimated that the retreat of the broad applicability of antibiotics risks global costs of \$100 trillion by 2050. Each year, more than 1 million people globally die as a result of antimicrobial resistance. If we do nothing, or continue on the current course, the figure looks set to reach 10 million lives lost a year, which will eclipse the 8 million lives that are lost to cancer each year.

The O'Neill report, which was issued in 2017, was a call to arms on AMR. The review was requested by David Cameron, the then Prime Minister. In my view, he is probably the most incompetent Prime Minister that the country has seen in a more than 200 years—although the incumbent PM is in competition with him in that regard—but that was one of the very few positive things to be issued during his premiership.

Our work in surveillance, stewardship and discovery has been utterly critical and, as a country with highly advanced medical and research infrastructure, it is incumbent on us to do much more. The response to the 2017 report has been nowhere near commensurate with the scale of the threat that was identified.

In my last few seconds, I want to highlight some of the outstanding research work that is being done in our universities. I am keen to draw attention to the work of Professor James Chalmers at the University of Dundee. Professor Chalmers has become a familiar figure on our television screens due to his vital work on the Covid pandemic. He and his research team are having a global impact. Prior to the emergence of Covid-19, his studies included phase 1 and phase 2 studies of non-antibiotic alternative therapies for respiratory infections, diagnostics to reduce antibiotic use and much more.

I would have been citing Professor Chalmers's work today, if the promised long Covid debate had been delivered. His research is proving the high prevalence and debilitating nature of that condition and the various groups to whom it is a particular risk. That is an illustration of the displacement that has been a result of the pandemic and its impact on the research community.

We are grateful for the support of the Scottish Government and the other parties for our amendment. AMR work is vital, and it must be not just put back on the track that it was on previously, but reinvigorated and accelerated.

We are keen to have a health check on the research environment that has been blown off course. We have to acknowledge as a Parliament the fact that our universities have lost their lead in research funding capture over the past decade. As Jackie Baillie pointed out, in 2013 we had a 10 per

cent lead on the rest of the United Kingdom, and we are now in a situation of parity.

That analysis by the Scottish Funding Council should focus on surveillance and stewardship, but it must also focus on discovery and the idea that new therapies can be put in place. We can be proud and hopeful that the drug discovery unit at the University of Dundee—the most influential institution on pharmaceuticals in the entire world—is turning its guns on antimicrobial resistance by developing entirely new kinds of drugs.

Our Scottish Government should be doing everything in its power to support those efforts and avoid the terrible and unfortunately predictable consequences of failure.

16:06

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this very important debate.

As members have said, Scotland has always proudly been at the forefront of revolutionary scientific breakthroughs, and it was of course a Scotsman, Alexander Fleming, who pioneered research into antimicrobials almost 100 years ago. In the century since Dr Fleming's work, innumerable lives have been saved thanks to the discovery of antimicrobials. It is impossible to put an exact figure on that, but the World Health Organization estimated that antimicrobials have added roughly 20 years to global life expectancy.

For many, antimicrobials have seemed to be a miracle cure, and although that sentiment may be true, it is a double-edged sword, as we have heard today. Overreliance on antimicrobial treatments can encourage evolutionary pressure favouring antimicrobial-resistant organisms. Indeed, the WHO noted that, in 2019, 1.27 million global deaths were attributed to ineffective treatments due to AMR.

Even for less severe ailments and conditions, AMR can lead to longer recovery times, resulting in lengthier hospital stays, higher medical costs for our NHS and prolonged suffering for patients—Dr Gulhane made that point very well. Tackling AMR must remain a key priority for the Scottish Government and our NHS. I am proud to say that Scotland is already a world leader in fighting antimicrobial resistance, and that must continue.

Both the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland contributed to the UK Government's five-year action plan, "Tackling antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024". The action plan is a stepping stone towards the aim that, by 2040, AMR will be effectively contained and controlled through strong mitigation. It is important to emphasise that the plan does not foresee the eradication of AMR, as

AMR is, by definition, an ever-evolving issue that requires constant vigilance.

A key step taken by Scotland that came from the action plan was the establishment of the Scottish one health national AMR action plan group. The group works in collaboration with UK and European colleagues in conducting research to understand the risk factors for developing new antimicrobials, as well as research into the effectiveness of interventions, aiming to drive behavioural change around antimicrobial use among healthcare professionals and the general public.

I mentioned that Scotland has been a world leader in fighting AMR, and that is evident in the Scottish patient safety programme, which was introduced in 2008. The programme is a national quality improvement scheme that aims to improve the safety and reliability of care and reduce harm. Importantly for this debate, a key facet of the programme is ensuring that patients are treated responsibly and safely with the right medicines across a wide range of care settings. Since the implementation of the programme, the number of hospital and post-surgical deaths and complications has been cut significantly. Two major illnesses that have direct links to AMR—MRSA and *C difficile*—have seen their numbers fall year on year since the programme began.

There are three methods by which the Scottish Government could continue to mitigate AMR. The first is to reduce the need for antibiotics, which can be achieved by measures such as continuing to hold food standards to the highest level, ensuring animal safety through protection from infection and preventing environmental changes that can cause epidemics to develop.

The second is to ensure that antimicrobial use is optimised and used only when necessary. Programmes such as the aforementioned SPSP are vital in educating healthcare professionals on the matter. However, as the cabinet secretary said, we all need to take personal responsibility for when we, our children or other dependants, and our pets need antibiotics.

The final method is for the Scottish Government to continue to invest in expert research on the topic of AMR. As well as basic research, specialised research into new therapeutics, diagnostics and best practice will be invaluable in our continued fight against the problem.

In 2018, at the start of the previous parliamentary session, I did some work with Christine Bond from the University of Aberdeen. Among her many titles is trustee of Antibiotic Research UK. She said that there was a test that could show whether antibiotics would work and questioned why health authorities around the

world were not using it. She has also done quite a lot of research on probiotics. The Scottish Government and others should look at her work, if they have not already done so.

I thank the Presiding Officer for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. There are things that the Scottish Government and our NHS have done very well, but we will need to continue that excellent work to challenge the problem in future.

16:11

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):

Antimicrobial resistance has emerged as one of the most serious public health issues of the 21st century. It poses a threat to the effective prevention and treatment of an ever-widening range of infections caused by bacteria, parasites, viruses and fungi that are no longer susceptible to common medicines. Antibiotic resistance in bacteria makes the problem of AMR even worse. To varying degrees, over several decades, bacteria that cause common or serious infections have developed resistance to each new antibiotic that comes to the market. Faced with that fact, we must all—not just here in Scotland but worldwide—take action to avert a global health crisis.

We have heard warnings from the Wellcome Trust that, without effective antimicrobial drugs, many routine surgeries could become life threatening, with common infections becoming untreatable. Several fields of modern medicine that every one of us takes for granted, including hip replacements, intensive care for pre-term babies, chemotherapy for cancer treatment and organ transplants, depend on the availability of effective antibiotic drugs. Those treatments, along with many other activities, could not be performed without effective antibiotics.

The economic impact of antibiotic resistance is difficult to assess because a number of far-reaching consequences must be taken into account. For example, increased resistance leads to elevated costs associated with more expensive antibiotics, specialised equipment, longer stays in hospital and isolation procedures for patients.

In 2015, the Review on Antimicrobial Resistance estimated that, by 2050, failure to act on AMR could result in 10 million lives being lost each year to drug-resistant strains of malaria, HIV, tuberculosis and certain bacterial infections, at a cost to the world economy of \$100 trillion. That is further compounded by startling figures from the World Bank Group, which estimates that, unless resistance is contained, an additional 28 million people could be forced into extreme poverty by 2050 through shortfalls in economic output. The World Health Organization has declared

antimicrobial resistance to be one of the top 10 global public health threats facing humanity. With numbers like those, it is clear to see why.

The symptomatic misuse and overuse of antimicrobial drugs such as antibiotics is widely believed to be one of the main drivers for microbes developing resistance. The inappropriate use of antibiotics is also a factor, particularly self-medication, because it almost always involves unnecessary, inadequate and ill-timed dosing, which creates an ideal environment for microbes to adapt rather than be eradicated.

There is also recognition that a substantial percentage of total use occurs outside the field of human medicine, with the use of antibiotics in food-producing animals and agriculture a major contributor to the overall problem of resistance. The one health approach to tackling AMR, adopted in Scotland in 2016, acknowledges that the health of humans, animals and the environment are interconnected and that an efficient approach to tackling the issues must be co-ordinated in a nationwide effort.

“Tackling antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024: The UK’s five-year national action plan”, which supports “Contained and controlled: The UK’s 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance” and which the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland contributed to, recognises that AMR cannot be eradicated. The planned focus is on three key aims to tackle it—reducing the burden of infection; optimising the use of antimicrobials; and developing new diagnostic therapies, vaccines and interventions with the core ambition of securing a world in which AMR is contained, controlled and mitigated.

The establishment of the Scottish one health national AMR action plan group, which is led by Health Protection Scotland, to co-ordinate the delivery of a UK five-year national plan has seen research undertaken to enable us to better understand the risk factors for acquisition of certain resistant organisms and the outcomes, as well as research into the effectiveness of interventions that are aimed at driving behavioural change around antimicrobial use.

Globally and at home, the progress on AMR is hugely encouraging. Initiatives such as Scotland’s world-leading patient safety programme are delivering substantial results, for which our NHS Scotland staff must be commended.

I welcome the significant work that is under way to develop new evidence-based interventions to prevent infections, decrease the need for use of antimicrobials and, in turn, reduce the potential for the development of resistance. I also applaud the commitment of those who are working to contain

and control AMR in our NHS and across the health sectors in Scotland.

This slow-burning pandemic affects every one of us, and awareness must continue to be raised globally, nationally and locally. We all have a role to play in sustained action to prevent the need for antibiotics to be used and reduce drug-resistant infections in order to secure the future delivery of our healthcare.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Mackay, who is joining us remotely.

16:16

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Antimicrobial resistance is a global concern and my speech will focus largely on the global situation. AMR threatens our ability to treat common infections and could lead to the rapid spread of so-called superbugs, which cause infections that are not treatable with existing antibiotics. According to a report that was published in January on the global burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance, an estimated 4.95 million deaths were associated with such resistance in 2019, including 1.27 million deaths that were directly attributable to bacterial AMR.

The World Health Organization has warned that not enough new antimicrobials are being developed and that a lack of access to quality antimicrobials remains a major issue. Antibiotic shortages are affecting countries and healthcare systems all over the world. The UK Government’s five-year strategy states:

“Antimicrobials are crucial medicines in modern healthcare, yet up to two billion people still lack access to them.”

For most antimicrobials, few replacements or alternatives are being developed. According to the UK Government,

“Research and development of the vaccines, diagnostics, tools and tests needed to prevent infections is similarly lacking.”

The WHO has highlighted that greater innovation and investment are required in the research and development of new antimicrobial medicines, vaccines and diagnostic tools. The UK Government must provide greater support for that as a priority.

The cost of antimicrobial resistance to both healthcare systems and patient care is significant as it means prolonged hospital stays and more expensive and intensive care.

If we do not tackle AMR, more people will be pushed into poverty. Although it is true that AMR is a global problem that affects all countries regardless of borders, it does not affect all countries equally. Studies have shown that the

burden is disproportionately higher in low and middle-income countries. We therefore have a responsibility to act.

High rates of resistance to antibiotics that are often used to treat common bacterial infections have been observed globally, and they indicate that we are running out of effective antibiotics. A well-known example of a bacterium that is resistant to a number of antibiotics is MRSA, which has caused infections around the world that are difficult to treat.

As we have heard, antibiotic resistance is not purely a health issue. Evidence and research papers continue to be published on the implications of routine antibiotic use in farming, which can expose people to antibiotic-resistant micro-organisms through contaminated food or water. Although routine antibiotic use is less prevalent in Scotland, we should keep it in mind when scrutinising trade deals that the UK Government is seeking post Brexit.

That is also not confined only to terrestrial farming practices. Globally, aquaculture is an increasing contributor to antibiotic use. According to an article in the journal *Nature* by Schar et al, global antimicrobial consumption in aquaculture was estimated at 10,259 tonnes in 2017.

While antimicrobial use in Europe is likely to reduce by 2030, in Africa, for example, it is likely to increase. We need to ensure that sufficient protein sources can be produced in developing nations to meet nutritional needs, while tackling the global issue of antimicrobial resistance. That makes it a social justice issue, as well as a health one.

Releasing antibiotics or their metabolites into the environment could increase the emergence of antibiotic genes. That release could be from hospitals or agricultural run-off, for example, and could enter the food chain or water system. Antibiotic resistant organisms can also follow the same path. Another paper by Schar et al, published in *Nature* in 2020 says that those types of environments become likely hotspots for the development of new antibiotic resistant genes. Humans come into contact with resistant micro-organisms through numerous routes, including the consumption of contaminated foods, interactions with animals and in contaminated environments. Ensuring that we minimise antibiotic use and explore other therapeutic avenues will, I hope, reduce the instances of those interactions.

Antiviral drug resistance is also an increasing concern among immunocompromised patients, as resistance has developed to most antivirals. Without the tools to prevent and treat drug-resistant infections, more treatments will fail and medical procedures will become more risky. While

new antimicrobials are needed now, if the way that we currently use antibiotics is not changed, then they will suffer the same fate as existing ones. Antibiotics have saved millions of lives since they were first invented. We must act now to ensure that treatment with antibiotics remains effective, now and for generations to come.

16:22

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am happy to confess that the subject is not my main area of expertise, either from my professional background or since I came to the Parliament. However, I did first come across the issue when I lived in Nepal in the 1980s, in relation to both leprosy and TB. I am focusing on the 'world' aspect that is mentioned in the motion and I welcome the cabinet secretary's mention of Ghana in his opening speech.

Leprosy was fairly common in Nepal, and for both that disease and TB, there was and is a problem with people not completing their treatment course and therefore not being cured while also building up resistance. That was entirely understandable as people were having to pay for drugs and many were from a very poor background. It was not surprising that when their symptoms receded they did not continue with treatment that they could ill afford. Money was very tight in the hospital in Tansen where I worked, and we had to assess people before they could get treatment, as sometimes richer people would turn up disguised as poor in order not to have to pay.

I understand that over the past 20 years, global numbers of new leprosy cases have remained stable, irrespective of available effective treatment. In 1981, the WHO recommended multidrug therapy against leprosy. In 1996, the first case of primary multidrug resistance was reported. Reports of mycobacterium leprae resistance rates have ranged from 2 to 16 per cent, while an Indian study of 239 relapses and 11 new cases found 21.6 per cent of cases to be drug resistant and 6.8 per cent to be multidrug resistant.

The TB Alliance reports that about 29 per cent of deaths that are caused by antimicrobial infections are due to drug-resistant TB. There are over half a million cases of drug-resistant TB each year, either because the somewhat complex drug regimen is improperly administered, or because people with TB stop taking their medicines before the disease has been fully eradicated from their body.

Treating a single case of multidrug-resistant TB or extensively-drug-resistant TB can be thousands of times more expensive than drug-sensitive TB. In South Africa, drug-resistant TB consumed 32

per cent of that country's \$218 million national TB budget, despite accounting for only 2 per cent of all cases.

Some of the figures that I quote are slightly out of date but, to give a comparison, for a drug-sensitive TB case, the cost is something like \$260. Multidrug-resistant TB costs \$7,000 and extensively-drug-resistant TB, \$27,000.

Antimicrobial resistance has a worldwide impact. It affects all areas of health, involves many sectors and has an impact on the whole of society. It is a drain on the global economy, as it causes economic losses due to sickness of humans and animals, along with higher costs of treatments. Just as we have seen with the availability of Covid vaccines, that is likely to mean that the poorest countries suffer most.

There now seems to be a global consensus that antimicrobial resistance poses a threat to humanity and, following the pandemic, could be one of the defining health issues of our time. I have seen the figure of 700,000 people a year dying due to antimicrobial resistance, although the figure of more than 1 million has been mentioned in the debate. That shows the need for a united approach across the world to tackle such a complex problem.

The WHO considers that the issue is one of the top 10 global public health threats. If it is allowed to continue, procedures such as caesarean sections, hip replacements, cancer chemotherapy and organ transplantation will all become riskier. The 2015 review on antimicrobial resistance estimated that, if we fail to act on AMR, an additional 10 million lives could be lost each year to drug-resistant strains of diseases such as malaria, HIV and TB by 2050.

The Scottish Government's action plan accepts that AMR cannot be eradicated, but the core ambition is that it should be contained, controlled and mitigated. I fully accept that the focus of the Government and the Parliament is rightly on Scotland. However, just as with Covid, one country cannot deal with antimicrobial resistance in isolation. As one of the world's richer nations, we have a responsibility to work with our partners worldwide, not least our closest partners in Malawi, Zambia, and Rwanda.

16:27

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Like my colleagues, I will discuss the momentous global challenge that antimicrobial resistance—AMR—presents in an evolving world. I will attempt to limit repetition, but there will be some.

In 2022, we face the imminent danger of climate Armageddon. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report outlines that current plans to address climate change are not ambitious enough to avoid catastrophic events. We also continue to fight the Covid pandemic—a global health crisis that is far from over. Those existential threats exacerbate inequality, poverty and displacement and tie directly into the battle against AMR.

Antimicrobial resistance is not a new challenge, nor is it on the horizon. It is with us now. As with the climate and Covid, scientists have been raising the flag of concern for years but we have not yet seen robust mitigations or the necessary global leadership.

We recently got the data from the global research on antimicrobial resistance project, which showed that AMR is third among the leading causes of death globally. A few members have already mentioned that, this year, up to 700,000 people will die from antibiotic-resistant infections around the world. That figure is worth repeating again and again.

The latest report from the UK surveillance programme for antimicrobial utilisation and resistance tells us that antibiotic resistance has increased by 4.9 per cent in the past four years. Covid has taught us that preparation is key and that inaction is abdication. Failure to act now means that countless families will be grieving in future.

What is needed? First, we need a strong system for monitoring the impacts of rising AMR in Scotland. The Scottish Government has been looking into recording AMR or antibiotic resistance as a cause of death and I would welcome an update from the cabinet secretary on where we are with data recording.

Secondly, we need to start slowing the increase of AMR through strengthened infection prevention and control, enhanced hygiene and improved sanitation. As Emma Roddick said, washing our hands is key. Scotland's world-leading patient safety programme is an excellent foundation for managing AMR. For example, in Scotland, infections from C diff and MRSA have dramatically reduced in over-65s—by 80 per cent and 94 per cent, respectively—under the SNP Government.

Thirdly, we need to have initiatives to address the systematic misuse and overuse of antibiotics, which has resulted in microbes developing resistance to antimicrobial drugs. Worldwide, the food sector needs to urgently listen to the WHO and its calls for farmers and the food industry to stop using antibiotics routinely to promote growth and prevent disease in healthy animals. Going back to the issue of overuse, my colleague John

Mason hit the nail on the head with his comments on TB and leprosy.

A further challenge is the severe lack of research and development for new antimicrobials. The way that pharmaceutical companies operate, with their dependence on sales for returns on investment, is not conducive to addressing AMR.

The UK's pilot scheme introducing a fixed-fee model to finance the development of antibiotics is innovative and encouraging, but to respond to the existential threat of AMR we need a global scientific response. The rapid development of Covid vaccines shows us what really is possible, and we can and must remove constraints on collaboration between scientists.

I am encouraged that Scotland has adopted a one health approach to tackling AMR since 2016. The acknowledgment that the health of humans, animals and the environment are interconnected is really vital.

I close by recognising those who tirelessly work on this issue. The scientists and public health experts have already achieved so much in the fight to hold back the next pandemic, but they cannot fight the war alone. They need the backing of legislators, big pharma and individuals to make sure that, this time, we prepare properly for the next pandemic. It absolutely will happen if we do not put the right steps in place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to closing speeches. I call Carol Mochan to wind up on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:31

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate so far for their very important and engaging contributions.

I must, however, note my disappointment that we have not discussed long Covid, as was planned. I believe that that debate is of the utmost importance and that it needs to take place soon. Tens of thousands of people across Scotland are believed to be suffering from it, so we must speak about it in the chamber. I heard, obviously, what the cabinet secretary has said, but I do not think that the Government has given us an adequate reason why the subject of the debate was changed. That should be noted by Parliament.

I return to the important issue of antimicrobial resistance. In closing the debate, I will reiterate some of the important points that have been made, and sum up my party's view on this important issue for the future of the country.

My colleague Jackie Baillie and Emma Roddick mentioned that there is some very good news

around. It is most welcome to realise that there is reduction in use in many places and, of course, that we are managing to prevent many more infections. Emma Roddick gave an excellent speech on the need to look at prevention first and to make sure that we have the right messaging and training in place to do that. I thank her for her speech, which I thought was excellent.

Sandesh Gulhane was the first to give us some of the history of antibiotics; many other members also mentioned it. His comment about antibiotics being a "game changer" is very important. That fact is why we have to take this issue very seriously. The number of deaths that would be associated with the loss of antibiotics' function would be, as many members have mentioned, a dreadful step backwards. TB in particular was given as an example of increased infections, and a disease for which we are unlikely to meet our global targets unless we really do something about it.

As a number of my colleagues have remarked, Scottish Labour very much welcomes the efforts to address the risks of antimicrobial resistance—in Scotland and around the world. It is important that we recognise that any attempt to do that must take place on a UK-wide basis and, indeed, globally.

The rapid development of the Covid vaccine was a great example of just how much can be done, in record time, when nations work together with a common purpose. That is the attitude that we should move forward with.

As we all know, any progress in healthcare begins with well-funded and effective research; antimicrobial resistance is no different. Ensuring that there is long-term support for that research is a vital step that we must take in order to preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics and other key medicines for years to come. The Scottish Government should be doing all that it can to support the many universities across Scotland that are doing that work, so that we can play our part in the promising international work on antimicrobial resistance. I am afraid that, at the moment, that support is not as good as it could be.

Unfortunately, Scotland trails behind England in terms of funding, and is devoting a third less per head of the population to clinical research of that kind. The British Heart Foundation estimates that without charitable funding the Government and other public bodies would need to increase direct funding by 73 per cent to make up for that shortfall. That does not sound to me as though the matter is a priority for the Government. That needs to change. If we want to be world leading, we have to put in the funds to achieve that.

It is with that in mind that my party is calling for the Scottish Funding Council to be tasked with a

review of the domestic and global funding streams that are available to Scottish universities and research groups, so that we can effectively contribute to the global research efforts into antimicrobial resistance, and of the avenues that are available throughout the UK and in international research partnerships.

As we have heard from other members, effective prescribing also has a role to play in preventing the rise of antimicrobial resistance, but the report from the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee on its inquiry into the supply and demand of medicines across NHS Scotland last year was very critical of the progress that the Government has made in improving prescribing practices in Scotland. In particular, the committee was very critical of the inability of the NHS in Scotland to collect data on the outcomes of medicine use in patients, which will make it much harder to understand antimicrobial resistance better.

Prescribing in primary care makes up the bulk of our NHS medicines spend, despite there being ineffective monitoring of those medicines when the medicines reviews are carried out with patients. Again, that does not sound like the kind of foundation that we want if we are to push ahead with tackling antimicrobial resistance. As the cabinet secretary said, those things have to change. My party wants to fully support efforts to do that.

I reiterate that although the debate has been useful—I have learned a lot and some very important points have been made—it is disappointing that after months of evading the question of support for long Covid patients, the Government still has no answer or solution in place that could give thousands of people some peace of mind. The habit that has been developed of kicking the can down the road and hiding behind unpublished reports is not a healthy one. It really is time that we start to reconsider the way in which we do business, so that we discuss in the chamber the true priorities of the people, not simply what suits the Government at a particular moment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sue Webber to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:38

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I echo the comments that have just been made by my Labour colleague Carol Mochan.

Antibiotics are among the most powerful tools in healthcare, and they underpin every aspect of modern medicine. We need them not just when we are poorly at home with an infection, but when we

are going through significant life-changing procedures such as chemotherapy and hip and knee replacements. Antibiotics work by killing bacteria, but in the same way that the Covid-19 virus mutates and evolves, so can bacteria, thereby developing resistance to antibiotics.

Antimicrobial resistance poses a substantial threat to human health. It is estimated that, by 2050, AMR could claim as many as 10 million lives a year worldwide—more than cancer and diabetes combined. Michael Marra made that point earlier. Already, AMR infections are causing an estimated 700,000 deaths each year globally, while it is estimated that, in the UK, AMR causes at least 12,000 deaths per year. AMR is not a vague threat that is happening elsewhere: it is happening in the UK, it is getting worse and it will continue to do so. Professor Jennifer Rohn of University College London has said:

“AMR has very much not gone away, and in the long term the consequences of AMR will be far more destructive.”

Although we have seen a welcome decline in total antibiotic use across the UK and in Scotland, their use continues to increase in hospitals.

The good news is that a great deal of action is under way. The O'Neill report, which was commissioned by David Cameron, was groundbreaking. It has been highly influential around the world, and 135 countries have finalised action plans on tackling AMR. Last year, the UK Government used its G7 presidency to try to deliver more tangible progress, as it did the previous time that it held the presidency in 2013, which was very welcome. As Dr Gulhane said, only 40 new antibiotics are currently in clinical trials, which should concern us all.

The UK Government is working with the devolved Administrations to tackle AMR effectively, including through its national five-year action plan. The five-year national action plan, which was developed in conjunction with the devolved Administrations, identifies three ways to fight AMR. They are:

“reducing the need for, and unintentional exposure to, antimicrobials;

optimising use of antimicrobials;”

and

“investing in innovation, supply, and access.”

Alongside its five-year strategy, the UK Government also published a long-term ambition for AMR. That document set out a vision

“of a world in which antimicrobial resistance is effectively contained, controlled and mitigated.”

It laid out nine ambitions for the UK. They are to

“Continue to be a good global partner ... Drive innovation ... Minimise infection ... Provide safe and effective care to patients ... Protect animal health and welfare ... Minimise environmental spread ... Support sustainable supply and access ... Demonstrate appropriate use”

and “Engage the public”.

With that, I would like to mention Ms Roddick’s comments, which were a reminder to us all that antibacterial agents do not impact on viruses. Ms Roddick also reiterated the instances in which antibiotics are not useful.

In July 2019, the UK Government announced that its investments in combating AMR included £32 million of capital funding to support AMR research, which included £19.1 million for AMR research at four National Institute for Health and Care Research biomedical centres, and £8.8 million for two NIHR health protection research units on healthcare-associated infections and antimicrobial resistance.

The UK is also working internationally on AMR. In September 2019, the Department of Health and Social Care announced a £6.2 million package of funding

“to strengthen existing surveillance systems tracking AMR trends across Africa and Asia”.

In our 2019 manifesto, the Conservatives pledged to turn our attention to the great challenges of our time, including solving antibiotic resistance. In order to do that, we committed to the fastest-ever increase in domestic public research and development spending to meet our target of spending 2.4 per cent of gross domestic product on R and D across the economy. Some of that new spending would go to a new agency for high-risk, high-payoff research, at arm’s length from Government.

Furthermore, at last year’s autumn budget and spending review, the UK Government increased public R and D investment to record levels, which equates to £20 billion by 2024-25, which is why it is important that we reinforce co-operation globally and across the UK, and why a Scottish approach is unnecessary.

However, we will do the same as the rest of the world. Although we will support the Scottish Labour amendment today, we need to reduce the gap in funding between Scotland and England, and come up to and match what is done elsewhere. We have to play an equal part.

The progress that we have seen in recent years is welcome, especially the UK Government’s new subscription-style payment model for antimicrobials, which will incentivise companies to invest in the area. The new subscription-style payment model is a win-win for healthcare systems and industry. It demonstrates that NHS patients can benefit from a secure supply of new

antimicrobial drugs, while pharmaceutical companies can reliably forecast their return on investment.

AMR is a serious issue and one on which we must continue to work together. It is heartening to see the UK Government taking positive steps to ensure that not only is action taken now, but that plans are put in place for the future.

16:44

The Minister for Public Health, Women’s Health and Sport (Maree Todd): My colleague has vividly described why we must keep antibiotics working. When modern medical procedures are so reliant on the ability to treat bacterial infections, the threat that antimicrobial resistance poses must not be underestimated, and we cannot afford to be complacent in our response to that risk.

I look forward very much to debating long Covid in a few weeks’ time, but I have to say that, as a pharmacist and—as Sandesh Gulhane would say—a legal prescriber, I have spent my professional life promoting the rational use of medicines and good stewardship of antibiotics, so I welcome the opportunity for the Parliament to give its attention to that global threat.

Jackie Baillie: I absolutely agree with the minister on the importance of the subject. Could she perhaps explain to members why, in the past six years, there has not been one Government debate about it?

Maree Todd: Actually, in the past 23 years—is it 23 years?—since devolution, there has been no debate on antimicrobial resistance, and I for one am delighted that we are finally debating it. When I was a student at university, my honours project was on antibiotic prophylaxis for caesarean section.

Jackie Baillie: The record will reflect that there were debates on C diff, MRSA and a variety of different diseases that are caused as a result of antimicrobial resistance.

Maree Todd: Indeed, but not on the specific topic of antimicrobial resistance.

In fact, I was going to highlight that back in my days at university—because I am decades beyond qualifying—C diff was called antibiotic-associated colitis. That highlights the change in perception over the decades. I am very proud that Scotland has made such massive progress in treating that particular hospital healthcare-acquired infection.

However, we need to recognise that AMR does not affect only humans. Bacteria with the potential to become resistant to antibiotics exist in animals and in the environment. For that reason, we require a one health approach to the threat that

recognises that the health of people is closely connected to the health of animals and our shared environment. In short, we cannot tackle AMR in humans in isolation, and I will step outside my usual brief to say more about that.

The Scottish Government has committed to a one health approach to combat AMR. In 2015, as Ms Baillie said, we formed the Scottish animal health and antimicrobial resistance group. That forum features representation from Government, industry bodies and both the human health and veterinary sectors, truly encompassing our one health vision. It provides leadership and engages with key stakeholders in taking a co-ordinated, quality-driven approach to anti-AMR measures, which include promoting good infection prevention and control practice for animal keepers; improving veterinary prescribing practice for both pets and livestock; and learning from the data that we have on AMR in animal populations.

A vital tool in tackling AMR is the provision of coherent, consistent advice for the animal-keeping public, including farmers and pet owners. We have established the Scotland's healthy animals website to centralise guidance for animal keepers and veterinary professionals and to promote responsible antimicrobial stewardship. Monitoring levels of antimicrobial usage and rates of resistance is also essential. To that end, as my colleague mentioned, NHS Scotland produces an annual Scottish one health antimicrobial use and antimicrobial resistance report. That provides information on the use of antibiotics by humans and in veterinary practices in Scotland, and on levels of antibiotic resistance that are found in a range of important human and animal infections and in the environment. Bacteria of particular interest are those that can potentially transfer between animals and humans, including bacteria that are common causes of food poisoning, such as salmonella and E coli.

Although I accept that there is much more to do in the battle against AMR, the achievements with regard to overall usage of antimicrobials in the animal sector should be acknowledged. On-going monitoring demonstrates an overall decline in the usage of antibiotics in livestock species; that is significant and demonstrates the hard work of producers and veterinarians to safeguard the efficacy of our antibiotics. We also aim to harness the power of genomic technology—something that, thanks to the pandemic, we are all much more aware of—to identify and track food-borne pathogens and antimicrobial-resistant organisms through the agri-food system and the environment.

I previously mentioned that one health includes the wider environment in which humans and animals live, and that is why we convened the AMR in the environment in Scotland stakeholder

group, including representation from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

I will address some of the points that were made about research. The Scottish Government is fully engaged with a research programme within the national action plan and across research categories of evidence generation, implementation, evaluation, co-ordination and guidance. Active Government-funded research is being done in many areas, including food safety, sustainable investment, environmental contamination, and diagnostics.

I will highlight just one of the environmental contamination research projects. Our efforts to combat AMR in the environment have led to the formation of the One Health Breakthrough Partnership, which is an initiative based in the Highlands that seeks to address environmental pharmaceutical contamination. That unique partnership is driven by NHS Highland, Scottish Water, SEPA and the environmental research institute.

Scottish universities and research institutions make a significant contribution to AMR research. We have ensured that the breadth of that contribution is captured by commissioning a register of all Scottish one health research into AMR from the previous five years. We will maintain that register as an active and updated resource, and it will continue to inform our evidence-based policy making in the future.

Michael Marra made a point about the pandemic creating immediate challenges in the past two years and derailing research. The pandemic has absolutely been at the forefront of everyone's minds for the past couple of years, and there will undoubtedly be transferable learning from this episode in history. We have seen strides forward in infection prevention and control in all settings, including hospitals and care homes, and there has been an astonishing level of global collaboration in everything from developing vaccinations to understanding the genomic sequencing of new variants of viruses.

Michael Marra: I fully acknowledge the minister's point about the long-term potential benefits in the changes to the research environment and the collaboration that she has described. I would not say, however, that the research agenda has been derailed by the pandemic. It was more that there was some displacement and that some members of the research community were doing other work. If we are going to get back on track and accelerate that work, the SFC review that we have asked for and the minister has graciously agreed to is critical to making sure that additional resource can be identified to allow that work to take place.

Maree Todd: Absolutely. I agree, and that is a fair point. We are committed to taking action on AMR throughout our work, including via international trade. As the coronavirus pandemic has also demonstrated, diseases do not recognise national borders, and that is also true of AMR. As the UK embarks on trade negotiations with prospective third country trading partners, Scotland continually presses for measures to be taken to tackle the development and spread of AMR in all UK free trade agreements. My ministerial colleagues have written to their counterparts in the UK Government several times to ensure that AMR is recognised during such negotiations.

I am grateful to the experts in many areas who lead Scotland's efforts to contain and control AMR but, as my colleague said in his opening speech, we can all help to support that work. For example, we can all listen to those who are treating us or our pets when they advise us that an antibiotic is not the best course of action. I am coughing furiously at the moment and I am living proof that antibiotics do not treat viruses. We can all ensure that we stay healthily hydrated, for example. That helps to reduce urinary tract infections and can prevent the use of some antibiotics and the development of further complications. We can all make sure that we never flush away unused medicines into the environment. As a pharmacist, I would of course tell people to take them back to the pharmacy for safe disposal.

I thank everyone who works to control AMR in their daily life, whether in a hospital, a GP surgery, a pharmacy, a lab, a farm, a veterinary surgery, a research institute or one of the many other settings in which such work is done. We recognise your efforts to keep our drugs working, and we all support you.

We in Scotland are vigilant to the threat that is posed by AMR. We are ready to meet that challenge and we have made great strides forward, supported by experts and by the Scottish public. However, we must not become complacent. We must maintain our focus and energy on ensuring that our antibiotics continue to work. To that end, we will continue to adopt a one health approach, which involves tackling AMR in humans side by side with protecting the environment that we exist in, and protecting the animal and plant life that we share it with.

Health and Care Bill

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-04074, which is a legislative consent motion on the Health and Care Bill, which is a piece of United Kingdom legislation. I invite Humza Yousaf to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provision of the Health and Care Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 6 July 2021, relating to commercial dealings in organs for transplantation: extra-territorial offences, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Humza Yousaf*]

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

I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.55 pm.—[*George Adam*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:56

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-04070.1, in the name of Jackie Baillie, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04070, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the Scottish approach to managing the global risk of antimicrobial resistance, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-04070, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the Scottish approach to managing the global risk of antimicrobial resistance, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the extraordinary positive impact of antibiotics and other antimicrobial drugs in the health and social care system; recognises the terrible costs, in terms of morbidity and mortality and wider societal and economic impact, of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and notes the ongoing risk posed to Scotland and the world if AMR continues unchecked; acknowledges the effective One Health approach to tackling AMR taken by Scotland; welcomes the ongoing commitment of the Scottish Government to contain and control AMR, including through participation in the UK's 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance and five-year National Action Plan; recognises the hard work and commitment of those working to contain and control AMR within the NHS and across all One Health sectors in Scotland; acknowledges that everyone in Scotland has a role to play in antimicrobial stewardship, preserving the effectiveness of antimicrobial drugs in the years to come, and believes that the Scottish Funding Council should be tasked with a review of domestic and global funding streams available to Scottish universities and research groups to contribute to the global research efforts in AMR and avenues to UK and international research partnerships.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-04074, in the name of Humza Yousaf, which is a legislative consent motion on the Health and Care Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provision of the Health and Care Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 6 July 2021, relating to commercial dealings in organs for transplantation: extra-territorial offences, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:57.

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