



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 27 September 2022

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 27 September 2022

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Chris Jewell, who is the chief executive officer of Ascension Trust (Scotland).

Chris Jewell (Ascension Trust (Scotland)):

Good afternoon. It is a real privilege for me to come here as chief executive of the charity Ascension Trust (Scotland), which oversees and encourages street pastors, rail pastors, school pastors and response pastors across Scotland. Some members will be familiar with street pastors, I am sure. We have 20 initiatives providing services in 25 different locations, from Orkney and Stornoway up north, down to the Borders. I hope and imagine that you will also find it a privilege to be appointed in your role as MSPs representing the people of Scotland.

Our ethos as street pastors is to care, listen and help as we are out on the streets most weekends until late into the night in our city and town centres, among those who are out enjoying the night-time economy. I imagine that that motto—to care, to listen and to help—might be attributed to you for the work that you do.

The basis of all our volunteers being out in all weathers is to help those in any need, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation or physical condition. That comes out of love for our fellow man and woman. It is love in action. Love is such a powerful force—perhaps the most dynamic force of all—and it brings out the honesty and integrity that we need to go about what we do. In street pastor terms, that includes helping those in distress, calming fears and supporting those who might be experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Each one of us should reflect on each aspect of love, as outlined in the New Testament and as it affects our lives and motivation. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. Love does not boast. Love is not proud. Love does not dishonour others. Love is not self-seeking. Love is not easily angered. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres. Love never fails.

I suggest not only that those are the standards for our personal lives, but some of the standards

of public office and of the role that we have. There is nothing greater than when people will lay down their lives and their time for the sake of others, and bring peace and hope to our communities. That is you and that is me.

Thank you for listening. *[Applause.]*

Topical Question Time

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would appreciate short and succinct questions and responses.

Fiscal Statement (Response)

1. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the United Kingdom Government's fiscal statement last week. (S6T-00893)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement provided little respite for many families who already face a winter being unable to afford essentials, such as buying food and heating their homes. The United Kingdom Government needed to use its reserved powers to provide support for those who need it most. Instead, we got tax cuts for the rich and not much for anyone else.

The chancellor is taking a huge gamble with public finances and the health of our economy, and the markets have reacted strongly. The pound fell to record lows on Monday, the cost of Government borrowing has risen to its highest level in more than a decade, and investor confidence is plummeting. Many householders will now face much higher mortgage costs as a consequence of the decisions that were made.

We are doing everything within our power to support people, public services and the economy, but our efforts are under threat from the UK Government beginning a new and dangerous race to the bottom. We are not willing to run that race. We will not replicate the Tories' reckless tax cuts but will consider carefully the correct measures for Scotland.

I intend to seek advice from an expert panel that will be convened specifically to consider the implications of the mini budget. I will also embark on discussions with business and trade union interests. The Scottish Fiscal Commission will incorporate the impact of any changes in its next forecasts. I intend to report to Parliament on those issues as part of the emergency budget review in the week commencing 24 October.

The damaging impact of the UK Government's decisions on Friday demonstrate why Scotland needs the full range of financial powers to avoid living at the mercy of bad decisions that are taken at Westminster.

Emma Roddick: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that very reassuring answer. Households across Scotland face real financial pressures right now due to the rising cost of living. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that the mini budget

"wilfully ignored families struggling through a cost-of-living emergency and instead targeted its action at the richest."

Does the Deputy First Minister think that letting the ultrawealthy keep more of their money during a cost of living crisis should be any Government's priority?

John Swinney: I do not think that that should be the case. The UK Government is pinning all its hopes on a discredited approach of trickle-down economics that benefits high earners as opposed to people who are most in need now. Supporting those people who are most in need should be the UK Government's priority.

Against a backdrop of political instability at UK level, we will continue to take a responsible approach to tax policy by building on our fair and progressive approach to taxation, which has protected low earners while raising additional revenue for public services. I can assure the chamber that the Scottish Government will take sensible and careful decisions that are about helping people who need assistance the most.

Emma Roddick: Time and again, almost every decision that the UK Government makes drags Scotland down a path that its voters have explicitly made it clear they do not want to go down. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is clearer than ever that only with the powers of independence can we deliver on the priorities of people in Scotland and build a fairer economy for all?

John Swinney: I agree with Emma Roddick on that point. From the mini budget on Friday, it is very clear that the United Kingdom Government wishes to take policy in a dramatically different direction, in contrast to the prevailing decisions that have been arrived at in this chamber, which are, of course, a product of the choices that have been made by the people of Scotland.

Those two factors are in no way separate, because the implications of the UK Government's decisions on Friday will be felt acutely by the Scottish Government and Scottish public finances. I would have thought that, during a cost of living crisis, the priority in a mini budget would have been to support the most vulnerable and boost public expenditure to cope with the raging levels of inflation that are undermining the value of public expenditure. None of that happened on Friday. Indeed, my concern, having looked at the UK Government's publications and statements, is that the pressure on public expenditure in the years to

come will become even more intense than what I set out to Parliament in my statement two weeks past Wednesday.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary said that he would reflect carefully on UK Government tax cuts following the announcements in the mini budget last week. However, today, he seems to have already ruled that out. Some of the Scottish Government's former economic advisers have warned that Scotland cannot afford to fall further behind the rest of the UK in relation to the tax gap. Why will he not ensure that tax cuts are passed on not to the rich but to our doctors, nurses, teachers and police, who face being taxed more during a cost of living crisis than their colleagues in the rest of the UK?

John Swinney: Mr Lumsden needs to work out what he is actually arguing for. I assume from what he said that he wants me to replicate in its entirety what the UK Government has set out. If I did that, I would be taking decisions to reward the already very, very wealthy with significant tax cuts. That is the reality of what Mr Lumsden is asking me to do. [*Interruption.*] I hear Mr Lumsden saying from a sedentary position that that is not what he asked for, but I have read numerous comments from the Conservatives demanding that I just get on and do what the United Kingdom Government has done.

I will consider all the issues carefully, which is why I will take the necessary time to do it, why I am going to draw together an expert panel to provide advice to the Government, and why I will engage with business and trade union interests.

None of us should underestimate the scale of disruption and damage that was done by the announcements on Friday—they were very damaging. I have to take a careful and prudential approach to managing Scotland's public finances, and that is what I am going to do. Mr Lumsden and his colleagues can engage in soundbites, but I will place a wager in front of Parliament that, at the same time as Mr Lumsden is arguing for tax cuts, colleagues of his will come to the chamber demanding that I increase public expenditure on other things. Those two things cannot be done at the same time in the fiscal envelope that is provided by the United Kingdom Government.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Black Wednesday, which hit almost 30 years ago to the day, trashed the UK economy and with it any reputation that the Conservative Party had for fiscal prudence, making its removal from office almost inevitable. The parallels with the financial crisis that we are experiencing now are uncanny. In recent months, much has been written about routes out of the cost of living emergency, but

literally no one has been asking, "Who will think of the millionaires?"

Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the UK Government must immediately recall Parliament to walk back the mini budget, reinstate the top rate of taxation and make energy companies pay their way, while delivering relief for struggling families?

John Swinney: I find myself in the rather unusual position of actually agreeing with most of what Mr Cole-Hamilton said, which is a slightly discombobulating situation. He raises serious issues, however. Future generations are being lumbered with colossal costs of borrowing because a windfall tax has not been applied to energy companies. Various very wealthy people are being given even more money, when people are facing destitution in our society.

I therefore entirely support the call for the United Kingdom Parliament to reconvene immediately in order to rectify those matters. We are already seeing the damage to individuals—there will be very disappointed people who expected to be able to acquire properties and get on the first step on the property ladder, but who will have had that taken away from them by the recklessness of the decisions on Friday. I therefore hope that Mr Cole-Hamilton's call for the recall of the United Kingdom Parliament is acceded to, and I would support it.

Scotland's Climate Week 2022

2. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to promote participation in Scotland's climate week 2022, which runs from 26 September to 2 October. (S6T-00876)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): Scotland's climate week focuses on encouraging climate conversations in order to deepen understanding of the climate emergency and to encourage action across the nation. That is supported by our climate conversations pack and a toolkit to help individuals and organisations to get involved in climate week, which are available on the [netzeronation.scot](https://www.netzeronation.scot) website.

We are encouraging broad participation across Scotland through our social media channels and our participation with the public, private and third sectors, including enterprise agencies, local authorities and the community network. The Scottish Government is also delivering three public events, which sit alongside a ministerial engagement programme and a series of announcements.

Monica Lennon: This week, Zoe and her mule, Falco, have arrived in Lanarkshire as part of the walk for earth—a journey that is taking them from

Oxford to Loch Lomond in support of the Stop Ecocide International campaign. Along the way, Zoe has been having many conversations with well-wishers, who have voiced their strong support for ecocide law. That is particularly poignant during Scotland's climate week, given the role of the late Polly Higgins—who was a Scottish barrister, author and environmentalist—in spearheading the ecocide law campaign. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that Scotland plays a key role in the movement for ecocide law?

Michael Matheson: First, I record my thanks for the work of Zoe and Falco in bringing attention, through their walk, to a very important issue. Members will appreciate that in Scots law we have, at present, very robust protections for animals and habitats. We have also made clear our commitment to looking at how we can add to that through a new natural environment bill and our biodiversity strategy.

I am aware of the growing international campaign to see a fifth crime being added to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court, with a view to making provision for ecocide. We are very closely monitoring developments on that and the impact that it might have on Scots law. I am keen to make sure that, in Scotland, we are doing everything that we can to play our part at both domestic and international levels to support tackling the issue of ecocide. I am more than happy to engage with colleagues from across the chamber on how we can develop that further.

Monica Lennon: The director of Stop Ecocide International, Jojo Mehta, has said that one of the most important steps that national Governments can take is to publicly express their support for an amendment to the Rome statute to add ecocide as a fifth crime against peace. It has already been discussed at parliamentary and governmental levels in 23 countries. Will the cabinet secretary and his colleagues work with me and with Stop Ecocide International to explore further how we can include ecocide law in Scotland's response to the climate and nature emergencies?

Michael Matheson: We all have a collective responsibility to make sure that we protect our natural environment—not just for this generation but for generations to come. We should leave no stone unturned in seeking to do so, by ensuring that we have in place the necessary robust legislative provisions through which to achieve that. I am more than happy to accept the invitation from Ms Lennon to engage with her and other stakeholders on the issue of ecocide, and to ensure that Scotland is playing its part by helping to support not just what we do here locally, but what we do at national and international levels to

tackle the increasing challenges of biodiversity loss and nature loss right across the globe.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): Climate change and the destruction of nature are twin emergencies that need to be treated with equal urgency. What is the Scottish Government's assessment of the United Kingdom Government's Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the impact that it could have on environmental standards here in Scotland?

Michael Matheson: We are deeply concerned and are fundamentally opposed to the UK Government's Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill as it is currently drafted. Retained European Union law provides Scotland with very robust standards on environmental regulations in a wide range of areas. Our concern is that the bill seeks, in effect, to remove 40 years of protection, in what can only be described as an ideological drive towards deregulation and a race to the bottom.

The bill could undermine polluting substances controls that ensure that standards of water and air are maintained, and ensure protection of natural habitats and wildlife, which we have just touched on. That is why we are fundamentally opposed to the UK Government's bill.

To add insult to that, the UK Government also intends to use the bill to take powers to legislate in areas that are within the competence of this Parliament, without our consent and without consulting us. That is unacceptable.

I believe that the bill could undermine both our environmental and natural environment protections.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Scotland's biodiversity and natural capital form vital parts of Scotland's climate response. The *Sunday Post* reported at the weekend that NatureScot had withdrawn its objections to a controversial wind farm application in the Highlands—apparently because the development of so many other wind turbines in the area means that it can no longer be categorised as wilderness. How does the cabinet secretary envisage ensuring that, in the drive towards renewables, the Government does not inadvertently compromise our biodiversity and natural capital, which are, of course, integral parts of the climate emergency and, thus, of climate week?

Michael Matheson: I cannot comment on individual applications for energy consents, because they come to me for ministerial consent. However, I can say that, as a Government, we are absolutely determined to do everything that we can to ensure that we play our part in tackling climate change through decarbonising our energy systems and investing in renewables, with all the

economic, social and environmental benefits that come from doing that.

Ways in which we would not help our environment include expansion of nuclear power provision, with the potential risks that it poses, and extension of fracking, which the UK Government has chosen to do and which will have a very negative impact on biodiversity and natural life.

Scotland's Population

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on a motion entitled "Scotland's population—Meeting the Needs of our Communities, Economy and Public Services". I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:21

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson):

I welcome the opportunity to open this important debate on Scotland's population. Scotland is its people: they are our most important resource. People deliver our public services, teach the next generation, build our communities and drive innovation. We are each a part of Scotland's population.

A growing population is vital for a growing economy. Population growth has been the most significant driver of economic growth in Scotland and the United Kingdom in recent years. As the Scottish Fiscal Commission noted in its recent report,

"population size and structure directly affects economic growth and also Scottish Government finances through the effects on revenue and spending."

Scotland's population has been shaped by our history of migration. In times past, as a nation of out-migration, people left Scotland to make a future elsewhere and to contribute to shaping other nations. Between 1825 and 1938, more than 2.3 million people left Scotland to move overseas. Emigration was such a strong thread in our population history that, in 1935, Edwin Muir could write of his concern that Scotland was

"gradually being emptied of its population".

Since the turn of this century, the narrative has shifted and we have become a nation of in-migration. Freedom of movement was a key driver of that change, but it has also been driven by people from the rest of the UK who have chosen to make their homes in Scotland. More people move to Scotland from the rest of the UK than move in the opposite direction and more people move to Scotland from outwith the UK than leave. Scotland is an attractive destination. People want to come here to build their future.

Scotland's population growth in recent years has been driven entirely by migration. However, National Records of Scotland now projects that Scotland's population will start to fall from around 2028 onwards, that almost half of our 32 local authorities will decline in population over the next decade and that, by 2045, the proportion of

children in the population will have fallen by 22 per cent. Further, the Scottish Fiscal Commission is projecting a 16 per cent fall in Scotland's population between 2022 and 2072.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

The cabinet secretary has set out some fundamental drivers. Within that, does he acknowledge that inward migration makes a bigger contribution to population growth in Scotland than in any other part of the UK, which is partly to do with the lower birth rate? We have to look at both sides of the equation. Does he agree with that point?

Angus Robertson: I agree whole-heartedly. Birth rate issues have been a core part of the deliberations of the Scottish Government and its partners when dealing with the population challenge.

I stress that the scale of population challenge that we face in decades to come is immense, so, following the first intervention, I take the opportunity to note that I really hope for and look forward to a constructive working relationship with members from all parts of the chamber, notwithstanding the differences that we might have on a series of different subjects. It behoves us to work in the interests of the communities that we represent, including—in the case of the subject that we are discussing today—but not limited to rural parts of the country. We need to garner the best ideas from all parts of the mainstream political spectrum to deal with the challenge that we face.

Scotland's history of emigration has implications. As a nation, we lost future generations. Communities lost not only the individuals who left but their children and grandchildren. There is a legacy to emigration, one that is most keenly felt in our rural communities.

Scotland has distinct needs. Our situation is unique within the United Kingdom: we are the only country within the United Kingdom where the population is projected to fall by 2045. We need to tailored solutions that meet our needs, yet the UK Government's focus is on restricting migration and putting barriers in place for those who might seek to come here to build a new life.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I am reflecting on the cabinet secretary's point that population decline in Scotland is far greater than that in the rest of the UK. Does he have any idea why that may be? Is it anything to do with the higher taxes that people might have to pay in Scotland?

Angus Robertson: No, I do not, but I take the opportunity to invite Mr Lumsden and other members to read the document that we are

debating and to reflect on the fact that we are trying to approach the challenge in partnership with representatives of local government from different parts of the country and with representatives of different parts of Scottish society. I would genuinely welcome a serious attempt by the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party to take part in that debate.

Last year, this Government published Scotland's first population strategy—one that was endorsed by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and that sets out the actions that we will look to take at local and national level to address our population challenges. Those actions were set out against four pillars, which set out that Scotland should be family friendly; be a healthy living society; be an attractive and welcoming country; and have a balanced population.

I chair a cross-cutting ministerial population task force, which is looking across Scottish Government to identify where policies should be strengthened and what new actions we need to take. In the past year, my task force colleagues and I have developed a new talent attraction and migration service that will be launched in 2023 to support both Scottish employers who will recruit and individuals who want to come to Scotland. We have committed to publishing an addressing depopulation action plan, working with communities facing the most acute population retention challenges. We have refreshed the independent expert advisory group on migration and population, which continues to provide expert advice, as it has done since 2018. We have commissioned new research looking at attitudes to family size and how those have changed over time and have looked to learn from work that other nations have done to address similar demographic challenges.

Scottish Government ministers have continued to reflect our demographic challenges in their own portfolios, through work such as the housing to 2040 strategy, the fourth national planning framework and the national islands plan.

Despite that work, there are crucial levers that are not within Scottish ministers' control, most notably immigration. Scotland's population is not a monolith. From Edinburgh to the Orkney Islands, from the Borders to Argyll and Bute, every local authority feels our demographic challenge differently. Some local authorities are experiencing rapid population growth, while others are experiencing population decline. Rapid population growth and depopulation both bring challenges, and we are committed to working with partners to support population balance.

I will focus today on the specific challenges that are faced by our rural communities. Let me be clear: there is no easy fix to local population

challenges, such as depopulation. That is why we are working collaboratively, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities in general, and through structures such as the convention of the Highlands and Islands and the convention of the south of Scotland, to ensure that we have a partnership approach that best addresses our population challenges. Migration is a crucial part of that approach, yet current UK Government immigration policy does not reflect the needs of Scotland's rural communities.

Daniel Johnson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Angus Robertson: I would like to make some progress on this point.

Scotland needs working-age people to settle here in the long term and to raise families here. Our rural communities want to attract families who will make their homes here, but the UK Government's family migration policy stops people from bringing their families here. It limits the family reunification rights of UK citizens. The "Migration Integration Policy Index 2020" assessed the UK immigration system as one of the least family-friendly migration systems. That UK immigration system was assessed as the second worst of all the immigration systems that it reviewed, in terms of family reunification policies.

The financial threshold rules are a significant barrier, not just for those who are seeking to migrate to Scotland, but also for UK citizens. Analysis by the Scottish Government shows that almost 50 per cent of the Scottish population would fail to meet the financial threshold to allow them to bring a spouse and two children into the country through a family migration route. Those rules force people to choose between their family and living in their home country. The rules do not meet Scotland's needs and they do not reflect our values.

On a personal level, I note that, as a child of someone who emigrated to this country, I would not be standing in the chamber today if the current UK Government immigration rules had been in place then. I wonder how many others in the chamber and across Scotland would similarly have been prevented from building a future here.

The rules also do not support the needs of our rural communities. There is clear evidence that the current UK immigration system is particularly poor at meeting the needs of those communities. That is not just the assessment of the Scottish Government; it is also the assessment of the UK Government's Migration Advisory Committee, which stated in its 2019 report:

"the current migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems remote communities experience."

The solution that was proposed by the Migration Advisory Committee and accepted by the then Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, was

"to pilot a scheme that facilitated migration to these areas, then monitor what happens over several years and evaluate the outcomes."

That was an evidence-based approach to policy making. Sadly, such an approach did not survive a change in Home Secretary.

However, this Government made a commitment to progress the rural visa pilot proposal. We wrote to the UK Government offering to work collaboratively with it to deliver on the Migration Advisory Committee's recommendation. In the absence of engagement from the UK Government, we have worked with 12 rural and island local authorities and with rural employers, as well as academic experts, to develop an evidence-based, practical proposal that could be delivered today.

At the moment, the UK immigration system issues visas to people that tie them to a specific job with a specified employer or a specific university course at an identified university, so the notion that a rural visa is inoperable within the current immigration system is simply untrue. The fact that the UK Government's expert advisory group recommended such a visa is evidence of the fact that such a system could be made to work.

Our proposal, which has been led by my colleagues the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands and the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development, is based on international evidence of what works. It builds on analysis from the independent expert advisory group on migration and population and it uses elements from Canadian and Australian immigration systems to show how a Scottish rural community immigration pilot can be delivered through a partnership approach.

The pilot would present a distinctly new, community-driven and employer-based migration route. It would offer a world-leading approach to spread the benefits of immigration to our rural communities. Above all, as has been done successfully in Canada, it would be tailored to meet the economic and societal needs of specified communities in Scotland.

The proposal that is included in the motion today sets out how that would be delivered in partnership between the UK Government, the Scottish Government, local authorities, employers and communities. The proposal has been jointly developed by the Scottish Government, local authorities and partners. I will quote just one of those partners. Councillor Paul Steele, the leader of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, said:

“The Scottish Government’s ‘Rural Community Immigration Pilot’ offers a thoughtful, safe, well-founded option as to how new labour can be streamed to island and rural communities”

to help respond to the issues that are faced. He continued:

“As such I am highly supportive of the proposed Pilot.”

Our ask of the UK Government is clear. If it means what it says when it suggests that its aim is to deliver an immigration system that works for all of the UK, that immigration system has to work for Scotland and for our rural communities.

I will listen closely to what colleagues across the chamber say in the debate, because I am keen, as we try to build partnership with the UK Government, to deliver the pilot. Working with a unified approach would make the proposal all the stronger. I will listen closely to what we hear from the front benches of other parties and I hope that we can work in partnership over the months ahead.

I move,

That the Parliament notes that the Parliament has previously endorsed a motion calling for the development of a differentiated, more flexible migration policy tailored to meet Scotland’s specific needs; celebrates the social, economic and cultural contribution made to Scotland by those who have chosen to live here; notes that the UK Government’s own immigration advisers concluded in 2019 that the UK migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems that remote communities experience and recommended the establishment of a pilot scheme to support migration to rural areas, and that this recommendation was accepted by the then Home Secretary in a statement to the House of Commons in July 2019; further notes the distinct demographic challenges that Scotland faces, and that all of Scotland’s population growth is projected to come from migration; notes that the independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population concluded in its 2019 report that the demographic challenges for rural areas would be exacerbated by the ending of freedom of movement; further notes that the Fresh Talent scheme introduced in 2005 was a differentiated migration approach for Scotland, and calls on the UK Government to accept the Rural Visa Pilot proposal, which has been jointly developed by the Scottish Government, rural and island local authorities and rural employers, and to engage constructively to support the delivery of Rural Visa Pilots that meet the needs of rural communities.

15:34

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives welcome the opportunity to debate the serious and important issue of Scotland’s population. It is no exaggeration to state that we face significant demographic challenges. Countries across Europe are experiencing the same decline in their working-age populations, largely as a result of fewer births and people living for longer.

There are other reasons, of course, and it is clear that they are multifaceted and that no single Government can be held fully responsible for our current position, much of which predates not only the Brexit vote but devolution. There have been some clear policy failures, which have partly contributed to our own situation in Scotland. I will focus on those later in my remarks.

Daniel Johnson rose—

Donald Cameron: Daniel Johnson has beaten me to it.

Daniel Johnson: Although Donald Cameron is right that the situation is a challenge, and that, potentially, there are failures, it also comes from some successes in prolonging life and giving people control over their own fertility. Will he reflect on those points?

Donald Cameron: Absolutely. I was not seeking to make any judgment either about the decisions that people make about having children or about their general health and being able to live longer. The issue has many causes and many symptoms. However, there are things that the Scottish Government can do to improve things, both in the short term and in the long term.

I welcome the mostly constructive approach of the cabinet secretary in his opening remarks. However, much of what he said, and much of what the motion states, focuses solely on the issue of migration. The Scottish Conservatives recognise that that is clearly part of the issue that Scotland faces. However, the reasons why we have such significant population issues run much deeper than just migration. Population growth, or the lack thereof, is an issue with many causes and goes much wider than simply migration. That is why we believe that there must be a sharp focus on identifying new ways and approaches for resolving our population crisis.

The Scottish Government appears to agree with that. Its 2021 report, “A Scotland for the Future: The opportunities and challenges of Scotland’s changing population” recommended 36 action points. It is a thorough report that forms the basis of a lot of what I am going to say. It explains the problems that we face. It recognises and attempts to address them.

In her opening comments in the report, former cabinet secretary Fiona Hyslop states:

“While the population of Scotland as a whole has grown and is projected to grow into the 2020s and 2030s, this masks a set of real and very significant demographic challenges”.

She goes on to say that, demographically, three things will impact Scotland: mortality, fertility and migration. I will look at those in turn.

The issue of mortality is very concerning, as recent data published by NRS shows. The data states that

“Scotland has the lowest life expectancy of all UK countries”

and that life expectancy for men and women declined between 2018 and 2021. Although NRS attributes that to the pandemic as a key reason, the same could be said for all countries that have experienced the pandemic. It is therefore particularly concerning that Scotland has been impacted so profoundly.

Fertility is also discussed at length. Scotland has the lowest total fertility rate of all the UK nations and has been in gradual decline since the mid-2000s. According to the report,

“Scotland’s total fertility rate ... has fallen from 2.5 in 1971 to a record low of 1.37 in 2019.”

Concerningly,

“early evidence from several European countries, including the UK, suggests that the pandemic has already had”

another

“significant impact on plans to have children.”

From children, I turn to our elderly. Although, undoubtedly, innovative policies are needed to address the workforce shortfalls among the working-age population, we cannot forget about older workers. Age Scotland notes that, by 2045, almost 50 per cent of the Scottish population will be over 50, and the number of people aged over 65 is projected to grow by a third. Surely it is right to say that the Scottish Government should send a message that older workers

“are a valuable asset to business, the economy and the country.”

The Scottish Conservatives whole-heartedly agree.

I turn to migration, which, as I said, we recognise is an area of policy with a part to play. We remain of the view that immigration should remain a reserved matter. A UK-wide immigration system is intrinsic to the proper functioning of the economy. However, we have always believed—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Donald Cameron: Can I make a bit of progress?

We have always believed that we need to target migration at sectors of the economy in Scotland with labour shortages. In our 2019 general election manifesto, the Scottish Conservatives said that we would

“create bespoke visa schemes for new migrants who will fill shortages in our public services, build the companies and

innovations of the future, and benefit Britain for years to come”.

That remains our view. As I noted over the weekend, media reports suggest that the new Prime Minister is looking at that, too.

In the past, the UK Government has taken action in respect of food and agricultural workers and heavy goods vehicle drivers. I hope that that imaginative ad hoc response continues and, more broadly, is seen to enhance Scottish economic growth.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Does the member accept that the requirement for seasonal agricultural workers exceeds 75,500—it is between 75,000 and 90,000—that the current extension of the scheme is looking to bring in only 40,000, and that Scotland is already ploughing in much-needed fruits and vegetables that we cannot harvest because of the lack of labour?

Donald Cameron: I acknowledge the problem, but it is worth noting that the UK Government took action in 2018, and that that action continues.

I turn to the Scottish Government, which indicated in its national strategy for economic transformation that it wanted to target inward migration from the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government’s strategy said:

“A 25% increase in people relocating from the rest of the UK to Scotland would double net migration and add 100,000 people to Scotland’s labour pool over the course of this strategy.”

I would be interested to hear whether that remains the Scottish Government’s position.

We have to ask a key question: why is Scotland less attractive to economic migrants who come from the rest of the world than it is to those who come from other parts of the UK? That question needs answered. Scotland has consistently taken the lowest population share of migrants of all the UK nations, and that is a problem that we have to solve.

Presiding Officer, I think that the clock might not quite be adequately recording my time, but no doubt you will indicate when my time is up.

I will briefly talk about the rural visa pilot. It is premature for us to support that specific measure today, given that it has only just been published, but I give the cabinet secretary the commitment that we will consider its contents in full. We note the idea’s genesis in 2019, and we acknowledge the role of the UK Government’s advisers, the Migration Advisory Committee, and the comments of the then Home Secretary.

We will communicate, in short order, with colleagues in the UK Government, including the

Home Secretary, about the scheme, and we agree with the broad thrust of what the pilot seeks to achieve, because urgent action has to be taken to tackle depopulation in our rural and island communities.

According to the national population strategy,

“8 out of 32 council areas experienced depopulation—the greatest ... declines ... in Argyll and Bute, Inverclyde, and the Western Isles.”

I recently visited a fish and shellfish processing firm in Barra, in the Western Isles, and it told me about the challenges that it faces in recruiting locally.

The causes of rural and island depopulation are undoubtedly varied, and we have discussed them at length. Many of the barriers to growing our rural and island populations have largely come about as a result of domestic policy failures—and here I plan to be more critical. They include a failure to build more houses, a failure to deliver superfast broadband on time and a failure to provide robust and reliable transport infrastructure. They cannot be ignored.

Housing is particularly important, with many rural areas suffering from a lack of affordable housing. Rectifying that has to be a focus when we are simultaneously trying to encourage migrants to live in rural areas.

We point to the fact that the Scottish National Party Government has spent only about half its rural housing fund and islands housing fund since they were made available in 2016. We know about the failure to deliver 100 per cent superfast broadband, and we know about the on-going ferries crisis, which is causing misery for our island communities. The only way that we can ensure that people will want to move to rural and island communities is by resolving those problems. In short, we need sustainable solutions and not short-term sticking plasters.

There will be much that we can agree on today. We all acknowledge the need to address labour shortages in sectors and areas that are experiencing them. We all agree that there is a need to grow the population in a sustainable way and that resolving the issue of rural and island depopulation is key to spreading prosperity throughout Scotland. However, we on these benches believe that both Scotland's Governments have critical roles to play in addressing the fundamental reasons behind the worrying demographic trends that we continue to see.

I call on Parliament to support our amendment, and I move amendment S6M-06063.3, to leave out from first “notes” to end and insert:

“celebrates the social, economic and cultural contribution

made to Scotland by those who have chosen to live here; acknowledges the Scottish Government's 2021 report, A Scotland for the future: The opportunities and challenges of Scotland's changing population, which states that Scotland faces “very significant demographic challenges” and that the reasons for this are multi-faceted; further acknowledges recent figures from the National Records of Scotland that show that Scotland has the lowest life expectancy in the UK; recognises that rural areas in particular face a significant depopulation crisis; supports an immigration system that assists parts of Scotland that need migration most, in particular, remote and island communities, and believes that a new approach is required to reverse rural depopulation, as well as meet the wider population challenges facing Scotland as a whole.”

14:45

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I begin by responding to the cabinet secretary's remarks about the scale and fundamental nature of the challenge. He was absolutely correct. I would put it along the following lines. Economically and in terms of public policy, we face three great challenges: first and most fundamentally, climate change; secondly, the adoption of technology, automation and big data; and finally, population decline. Although I would put all three challenges in the same category, the third category is probably the least explored. We know, broadly, what we need to do about climate change and technology, but I do not think that we have begun to explore what it means to have an ageing population.

All three of those challenges do the same thing. They challenge us to rethink how we organise our economy. They challenge us to think not only about what our public services need to deliver but about how those public services should be organised. They also challenge the make-up and fundamental nature of our society and our communities. I share the cabinet secretary's sentiments about the need for a genuine consensus to take that forward. Scotland has particular demographic challenges. We have a population of 5.5 million, but that has already started to decline, with a projected fall of 16 per cent by 2072.

It is important to note that, as has already been acknowledged, Scotland has some particular features. Although Donald Cameron is right to point out that we have attracted a smaller share of inward migration, that has been more important to our population growth. We have to challenge ourselves about why that is. What are the underlying reasons? Some of those reasons will be straightforward. We are a remote part of the UK and we have a more dispersed population. However, we particularly need to question issues around fertility rates.

I emphasise, however, that it is not all bad news. The fact that we are living longer and have

greater control over our fertility is a good thing. Those are areas in which we have been more successful and are giving people more control.

The point in the motion about immigration cannot be overstated. Brexit has caused a fundamental challenge to our primary source of inward migration. We cannot ignore that, but we are not alone in facing the challenges that we have in our labour market. To blame Brexit alone misses the point, but Brexit certainly makes it harder for us to deal with those challenges.

As proponents of devolution, Scottish Labour absolutely support devolved measures. I welcome the mention of the fresh talent scheme in the motion; indeed, I think that we should have more control. I did not quite understand Mr Cameron's statement that devolved immigration cannot work, because lots of other countries make it work. As someone who is committed to the devolution settlement, I believe that this place is best suited to understand what our labour requirements are and to have input and participation in an immigration system.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I think that Daniel Johnson and I were on the same side of the Brexit argument. However, it is important to note that it was estimated that, since Brexit, 3.8 million immigrants would apply to work in the UK. In fact, the number who applied was 5.8 million, with 5.4 million having been accepted. We cannot just sit here and blame Brexit.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful for that comment, because that was broadly my point. It is also worth noting that the contribution of the European Union towards our net migration had been falling, largely because central and eastern European countries had been getting wealthier.

We will support the Government motion. In some ways, I would like to support the Conservative amendment, because it raises some important points about the nuances and challenges that we face. Ultimately, however, I do not think that we can accept the obliteration of all the points that the motion makes about inward migration. We are supportive of the sentiments in the amendment but will not support it in the division.

We have to bear in mind two critically important contexts when facing this. First, Scotland has a deep productivity challenge that goes beyond just demographics. That is set out very clearly in the Scottish Fiscal Commission's most recent work, which shows that the wage and employment growth of every single region of Scotland is slower than the UK average. Indeed, Scotland's employment and wage growth is not only slower than the UK average but slower than that of regions that we would expect to be our rough

peers, such as the midlands, the south-west and the north-west. That is not only to do with oil and gas. That is a significant part of the issue, but the regional breakdown shows that the south-east of Scotland also underperforms, and that is an area that is more connected to professional services and tourism than it is to oil and gas. We have to understand that challenge and the importance of growing tax revenues per capita, because that is the fundamental basis of the fiscal framework. Frankly, even without the fiscal framework, that is a critical measure of the health of our public finances.

The more fundamental point in context, however, is that world demographics are inescapable. In the past 50 years, world population growth has halved. It will halve again by the middle of this century and, by the end of the 21st century, world population will be declining.

The fundamental point is therefore that to think that we can solve these problems by attracting people from overseas and by importing our labour is simply not sustainable. We absolutely must mitigate that and try to attract people. However, ultimately, we cannot import our way out of this problem. Indeed, we must rethink our understandings of human capital and how we seek to build our workforce. It is a mistake to continue with a model that seeks to import cheap labour and sustain the economy in that way.

We need to realise that human capital is precious and finite. With that realisation, a number of things follow.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I will in a moment.

First, in relation to the working-age population, we must maximise skills and wages. We cannot allow people simply to have default skills. We need to accept the challenge of upskilling in a much more urgent and fundamental way. Secondly, we need to ask questions about the relationship that older people have with work. I will develop that point, but I will give way to Ms Grahame first.

Christine Grahame: I must intervene on behalf of employers in the Borders and Midlothian, because they have certainly not lost "cheap labour". They do not have bus drivers or people in hotels, and they certainly were not taking them on the cheap.

Daniel Johnson: If that was how my sentiment came across, that was not my intention at all. However, there is an assumption that we can somehow bring people in from overseas, which has led to a sense of perhaps undervaluing labour.

We need to invest in labour, maximise skills and invest in equipping people so that we can maximise what they can deliver. That is a fundamental part of the solution.

I will also point to other places in the world, such as Japan and Finland, that are dealing with this problem and are very much engaging with the concept of what people can do for work in later life. That is not working beyond retirement age but supplementing retirement with work. That is an interesting point that needs to be developed.

I am running out of time. We also need to think very carefully about how we organise our public services. Again, places such as Japan and Finland organise their support for older people in a much more municipal way. I agree with the minister's points about local focuses and local needs, but I question whether the national care service, as conceived, is able to deliver that; I think that it is moving in the other direction.

Finally, briefly, we must also look at why people are having fewer children. We must question whether the cost of living, housing and transport is inhibiting people and forcing them to put it off. Although we cannot reverse population decline, we should question why people are choosing to have fewer children.

I move amendment S6M-06063.2, to insert at end:

“; notes that there are high levels of economic inequality across the regions of Scotland; acknowledges that investment in housing, jobs, services and infrastructure is necessary to retain existing populations in communities across Scotland, particularly in rural areas, which have faced depopulation in recent years; believes that years of inadequate funding and investment will mean that local authorities will face challenges in providing the necessary infrastructure and services to enable communities to grow; understands that a shrinking working-age population will negatively impact Scotland's budget while an ageing population will place greater demand on health and care services, and calls on the Scottish Government to show the vision and ambition to meet these challenges and use all policy levers available to grow the economy and spread wealth and opportunity across every part of Scotland.”

14:54

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats recognise the challenge of population decline and agree with the principle that immigration is a good thing that can provide benefits across Scotland. It can be a means of bringing in new workers and people to jobs and areas with populations that are currently in decline.

My MP colleague Alistair Carmichael has been campaigning for changes to immigration visas for fishing crew, to address shortages. The Migration Advisory Committee previously suggested that such shortages in the fishing industry could be

filled by young people on gap years, which demonstrated a lack of understanding about employment in one of Scotland's important industries.

Although rural visa pilots could be a way to help to reverse depopulation if there were greater understanding than exists in the current system, they would not be a magic bullet. As other members have said, there is no single solution to growing the population. We cannot encourage new workers and others to areas that have insufficient housing and strained services. There needs to be infrastructure to support both people who are newly arriving and those who are already here. That is why my amendment, which was not selected, called on the Scottish Government to look at practical solutions to help to reverse depopulation, which is a major concern for rural communities. Having too few people in a location threatens the viability of an area. That risk is felt severely in island communities, especially when the working-age population reduces so much that those who are left bear the brunt of doing necessary and often multiple jobs.

Lack of housing is a significant factor in areas with declining populations. Ross-shire is one such area in which the housing shortage is felt acutely. Doctors are unable to find housing—even just for the short term—to enable them to plug gaps in the national health service. We need more homes—and homes that live up to 21st century standards. That means creating sustainable and accessible housing and different varieties of housing.

Scottish Liberal Democrats are also pressing for greater connectivity. Broadband connections are still a problem in rural and island communities. I have had constituents tell me that they fear that they will have to close their online businesses due to poor connections. Others are losing custom due to the lack of mobile signal required for modern payment systems. Rural mobile networks can be overwhelmed by surges of—very welcome—tourists and will need to be updated for population increases. Questions about new homes being connected to the broadband network must also be resolved. We need guarantees from the Scottish Government about infill for new housing to the broadband network once the reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme and voucher schemes wind up.

We also need investment in transport infrastructure. The cabinet secretary referred to tailored solutions. Building tunnel infrastructure is about so much more than providing social benefits to local communities. I am confident that having such infrastructure in Shetland would help to reverse depopulation in the isles. The evidence is already there—in Trondra, where the population fell to 14 but rose again after a fixed link was built.

It is all happening in Shetland. SaxaVord—the “Spaceport above all others”—is bringing exciting investment and innovation to Scotland. We can unlock more potential by providing infrastructure to dramatically reduce travel time between the islands of Unst, Yell and mainland Shetland. That would also benefit the thriving aquaculture sector and the export of millions of pounds’ worth of white fish that is currently landed at Cullivoe, both of which currently rely on the ferry service between those three locations.

However, it is not just local communities that would benefit from tunnel infrastructure. Given the greater economic growth that it would create, as well as the bringing of more jobs and people there, the islands’ contribution to Scotland’s economy would increase. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for meeting me recently to discuss building tunnel infrastructure in Shetland and the role that it could have in reversing depopulation. He reflected on the need for folk to adjust their mental maps as investment and opportunities develop in the north of Scotland. I agree.

Depopulation needs an array of solutions to help us to reverse the present scenario. The motion has the potential to deflect from the failings of the Scottish Government’s existing powers in transport, housing and digital connectivity policies, all of which should help to reverse depopulation.

Finally, will the Scottish Government look at infill of the broadband network for new homes to enable their owners to join the service with ease and with equivalent subsidy once R100 and the voucher scheme come to an end? Will it also work to increase affordable homes under the rural and islands housing fund, which, since 2016, has built only 135 homes across Scotland? Further, will it commit to supporting feasibility studies for building tunnels in Shetland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate.

15:00

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Three weeks ago, the Finance and Public Administration Committee received an update from the Scottish Fiscal Commission. Some will remember, perhaps rather too fondly, that I had lost my voice, so the session was diligently chaired by the deputy convener, Daniel Johnson. We welcomed the new chair of the SFC, Professor Graeme Roy, and were updated on trends in Scotland’s population and the effects on the economy and income tax. We heard that, on current trends, nearly 900,000 fewer people will live in Scotland by 2072.

Crucially, the number of 16 to 64-year-olds is declining rapidly, leaving us with fewer people of

working age. Scotland has long had demographic challenges, from the Highland clearances to losing 2 million people to out-migration in the second half of the 20th century—many to other parts of the United Kingdom. Indeed, we had the lowest rate of population growth of any country on earth in the 20th century—the union dividend in action, no doubt. I gently point out to Douglas Lumsden that that was long before the existence of the Parliament, let alone tax-raising powers being part of our remit.

We can embrace the likelihood that most of us have longer and higher-quality lives ahead of us than previous generations did, but not having the ability to make up retirement numbers in the workforce will lead to an economic decline and a decline in services. We must incentivise working for longer by making it as easy as possible for older people to do so, if that is what they wish to do. An example of that is the Scottish Government’s retire and return scheme, which streamlines the process to let experienced national health service staff take up a part-time post while drawing their pension. That is an innovative way to retain staff and prevent a reduction in high-quality service provision across Scotland.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to the member for giving way, because I rushed through this point. Does the member agree that, fundamentally, this is about work supplementing, not delaying, retirement? That has to be a fundamental principle of what he is talking about.

Kenneth Gibson: I am happy to accept that point of clarification, because that is exactly what I mean. It is about choice, not forcing people to retire at an older age. Many people want to work a lot longer—we have examples of such people in the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I urge Mr Gibson to show respect.

Kenneth Gibson: It has long been recognised that population growth in Scotland will require immigration. The end of freedom of movement within the EU because of a Brexit that we did not vote for has caused some people not to come here and others not to stay. I therefore support the Scottish Government’s rural visa pilot proposal and the talent attraction and migration service, which is to be launched next year. As Daniel Johnson alluded to, immigrants who come here will also retire and need assistance, so we have to go beyond that. I will talk about that in a second.

We should also consider how we can recruit more people of working age from elsewhere in the UK, and crucially, how we can ensure that people who were raised and educated in Scotland feel that they want to stay here. In our life-forming

years, we go to school, connections are made, relationships form, homes are found and roots are put down. The University of the Highlands and Islands clearly plays a role here, as does the expansion of digital infrastructure, but we still haemorrhage a disproportionate number of young and educated people, such as doctors whose studies we have invested in only for them to go elsewhere, sometimes never to return. A good example of action that the Scottish Government is taking to weather that issue is the recruitment campaign that was launched to attract general practitioners from other areas of the UK and further afield. That builds on measures to create undergraduate and training placements to incentivise moves to rural practices and provide a wide range of development and support.

Overall, a growing economy relative to the rest of the UK is fundamental, and a greater focus on growth by the Scottish Government is essential if Scotland is to prosper demographically. As my constituency includes rural and island communities, I am acutely aware of how important it is that we make it possible and affordable for people of working age to build their lives in those places.

Population projections by National Records of Scotland anticipate that by 2028 the population of the Western Isles will have declined by more than 6 per cent while the population of urban areas such as Edinburgh and Midlothian will have grown by 6.6 per cent and 13.8 per cent respectively.

Funding the conversion of abandoned and derelict rural housing could revitalise many rural and island communities, and we should look to Spain, Estonia and Austria and learn from them and other nations that face similar challenges. The issue is not only the decline in our overall population but the distribution of our population and service delivery.

In March this year, the Scottish Government announced that there would be £4 million to help to improve infrastructure on Scotland's islands, such as Arran and Cumbrae. That package is part of the Scottish Government's islands plan, which is designed to improve the quality of life for island communities, with 13 objectives and more than 100 specific measures to address population decline.

Finally, we must address the issue of our woefully low birth rate in Scotland. I first raised that issue in the Parliament 22 years ago. That rate is currently the third lowest in Europe after those of Malta and, understandably, Ukraine. I doubt that all the economic chaos that we have witnessed in the past few days will encourage more people to have children.

The Scottish Government is trying to make it easier and more affordable to have and raise children, with access to free fertility treatment, the baby box and best start grants and the provision of free nursery care and childcare, free school meals and free higher education. However, powers to improve the duration and distribution of parental leave remain reserved. In Denmark, the Faroes and Sweden, mothers and fathers are offered generous leave after having a baby, and birth rates have grown in recent years. In Sweden, fathers now take around 30 per cent of the number of days that mothers take. That makes for a more balanced approach and the quicker return of women to the workplace—although not after two weeks, as was the case after my twin sister and I were born, right enough.

Being pregnant and giving birth should not be career stopping. My former mother-in-law was the first woman whom the University of Glasgow employed who was not sacked upon getting married. She was, of course, sacked when she became pregnant. We have made significant progress since then.

The Scottish ministers should consider initiatives to help more people to raise families. It is interesting that Hungary exempts all mothers of four or more children from income tax for the rest of their life—although I do not think that we will go down that road.

The Scottish Government is encouraging rural and island repopulation through community empowerment and, tentatively, encouraging those who wish to have children to do so. However, as long as we do not have the full powers of independence, major decisions on attracting people from abroad to come to live and work in Scotland and delivering more flexibility on parental leave will be reserved to the UK Government.

15:06

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): It is welcome that we are speaking in a Government debate in which there is definitely potential for depth and purpose. We should be discussing real issues around negative working-age migration in Scotland and the changes that the Scottish Government can make to improve the situation.

When we discuss migration, we should discuss not only inward migration—which was the focus of the cabinet secretary's speech—but migration from rural Scotland to the cities and migration from Scotland to England and further afield. With that in mind, I listened to the cabinet secretary's speech with interest. I certainly hope, but I found myself a little disappointed because the focus—as with much of the Scottish Government's focus—was on what everybody else should be doing and not on

what the cabinet secretary and his Government should and could do. That was another missed opportunity to take positive steps.

Angus Robertson: In a spirit of generosity and for the sake of the record, will Brian Whittle briefly comment on something? We heard from his front bench a degree of open-mindedness, which I really welcome. We have had a specific proposal published in relation to a Scottish rural visa pilot. That is being worked on by the Scottish Government, local authorities and other economic partners. Will Brian Whittle join me in welcoming that, and will he join the Scottish Government and other parties in trying to deliver what it sets out to do? It is a firm proposal.

Brian Whittle: I absolutely agree with the objectives, but I am going to give some other suggestions on how to deliver those.

I came across a report from the Government of the Netherlands, which said:

“When young people move to bigger towns and cities, the average age of the population in the place they leave behind automatically goes up. A community with a higher proportion of older inhabitants may be less attractive to businesses, which may additionally have difficulty finding suitable staff locally. Other effects of population decline include ... fewer schools ... a drop in house prices ... fewer care facilities ... fewer sports facilities”—

which is a big issue for me—

“fewer people going to the theatre, cinema”

and so on,

“so these facilities are eventually cut back”.

The last point is crucial, because the only way in which to reverse the migration away from rural areas—I would like the cabinet secretary to recognise this—is to create an environment that encourages people not only to migrate to rural areas but to stay and not leave them.

A real solution is available to the Scottish Government in the shape of the fast-emerging green economy and all the fantastic opportunities for our economy and future prosperity that that brings. We should be investing in and driving the green economy, which is especially pertinent to rural areas.

Despite the Scottish Government’s propensity for trumpeting world-leading net zero targets, the work that is happening behind the headlines falls way short of what it should be. Investing in innovation and the green economy to create a whole new economy would surely drive growth in the rural economy.

That brings me to a quote that I have always tried to get in from Frank Dick, who was an old mentor of mine and was the director of coaching for British Athletics in my time. He said that the

only competitive advantage that we have is learning and improving faster than our opposition. However, according to the Office for National Statistics, full-time employment in the low-carbon and renewable energy economy in Scotland has fallen by an average of 428 jobs per year since 2014. Given the noise that the Scottish Government makes about its green credentials, and given that the Greens are in partnership with the SNP Government, that must be a damning indictment of the SNP-Green approach, which is more about public relations than delivering anything that is tangible.

In a recent publication, Jason Higgs, who is environmental, social and governance and energy transition leader at PWC Scotland, said:

“While we are in a unique position north of the border, with a strong concentration of green jobs connected to the growth of offshore wind, hydrogen and carbon capture—and the potential to create a Global Energy Hub in the north east—there is a real need for investment and the creation of a diverse pipeline of talented and skilled individuals to help Scotland capitalise on its position.”

That is the crux of the matter. We need to not only develop a green economy that is focused on renewables, which is yet to materialise, but weave the green economy completely through the education system. That will produce the right skills and jobs to keep our talent here and stop the brain drain out of Scotland.

The biggest disappointment is that, although this Parliament has complete control of education and health and the ability to innovate and rethink how we deliver health and education provision, the Scottish Government has only tinkered around the edges and has chosen to keep the status quo—it is content to be in and around what is happening in the rest of the United Kingdom.

While we are on the subject of public services and the part that they play in where our population and immigrants choose to live, I note that a lack of transport links and public transport plays a significant part in rural decline. I invite the cabinet secretary to visit the south of Scotland and see for himself how poorly the community there is served by road and rail links and by public transport. The arterial routes into and out of the south-west, such as the A75 and the A77, as well as the single-track rail link, have been consistently overlooked and bypassed for investment by the Scottish Government in the past 15 years. People need to be able to get into and out of the area if they are to live there.

If we want positive migration and to retain our talent, especially in our rural areas, we need to stop playing at investing in the green economy and start creating a sustainable economy, based on renewables, that encourages our young workforce to stay and supports positive migration

from outside our borders. We need to develop transport links that make it easy to stay in rural communities and we must recognise that communities need access to amenities, healthcare, schools and leisure facilities.

The Scottish Government wants to talk about inward migration and put all the responsibility on Westminster, without recognising the need to encourage our working-age population to stay and without creating an economy that encourages inward migration. As ever, the Scottish Government is reluctant to accept its responsibilities and take the positive action that could make the difference that our country needs.

We all want Scotland to be the destination of choice for people to live and work in. That will take more than just the politics that has been on display from the Scottish Government today. It is time that the Scottish Government took governing seriously.

15:13

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): My region—the Highlands and Islands—is more dependent on migration than the rest of the country is. With depopulation continuing in many of the places that I represent, alongside an overall ageing population, we must attract people who want to move in, work and contribute to our communities.

It is therefore absolutely grim that, despite voting to stay in the EU, the Highlands and Islands are deeply suffering the effects of Brexit and the end to free movement. Hospitality, agriculture and health and social care services are struggling to recruit, and seasonal workers have disappeared.

It seems that, with every decision that recent Tory Governments have made, the costs of building materials and other imported goods have gone way up. Everyone from housing associations to wee town shops is feeling the hit and struggling to carry on.

A rural visa could help to address the massive gap in the workforce. Many EU nationals I have spoken to who live here and are thinking of moving away or who have already moved away feel that the path to stay is no longer clear. If we have a clear path—a clear route—that serves as a massive welcome sign, Scotland will quickly become more attractive.

As always, I would urge the Scottish Government to ensure that communities—people who already live in the areas where a visa would be proposed—get to input into the process. Employers should be able to share what the current challenges are and to let us know whether there are housing, connectivity or other public

services issues that would need to be addressed before we bring in more people.

We can take lessons from Canada, for example, where the rural and northern immigration pilot is not only driven by communities, but provides mentorship and local involvement opportunities for incomers, ensuring that they can be a real part of their community and that they are supported not just to come and work but to stay and work.

I am glad to see that that principle is already being built into the process. Today, my Twitter feed is scattered with rural and Highlands and Islands organisations that are proud to have already played a part and fed into the process at this early stage. If communities feel that the scheme is helping them and addressing issues that they have raised, they will be more receptive to it. However, it would be a mistake to claim that visas would solve all our problems. There is no one fix—and certainly no quick fix—for depopulation.

The problem runs deeper than simply needing more folk to come here. We need to make it an option for people to stay once they arrive or after they grow up.

I have said before in this chamber that the Highlands are still suffering the effects of the clearances. Not enough is being done to reverse that damage and support communities to continue to exist. People are more likely to hear someone ask, “Why not move to a city, then?”, than they are to hear the question, “How can they justify charging you that much for energy?” Worse, people are likely to be told in the cafe or the pub that young folk just want to go to Glasgow or Edinburgh for uni and then they do not come back. Young people who want to stay are facing the choice between likely being homeless for a few years and then maybe managing to find a home, which might be near suitable employment or study, that they might be able to afford, or biting the bullet and moving.

Why, in 2022, are constituents telling me that they have made the heartbreaking decision to move away because fuel is just too expensive, and that building materials are so expensive that they cannot get someone to fix their roof?

The consultation for the new Scottish languages bill discusses the creation of a Gàidhealtachd. We have one—I live in it. We do not need to create it; we need to support it. The Highlands and Islands are home to many Gaelic speakers; to artists of all kinds, in areas from music to crafting; and to people who know how to work land or to harness the renewable potential of the area. The region has a strong sense of culture. If it becomes too hard to live there, we would lose that, which Scotland cannot afford to do.

Many folk here might not know that there have been calls—mainly tongue in cheek—in my region for the Highlands and Islands to be an independent country. That is not as ridiculous as it sounds when people realise that a lot of the arguments for Scotland becoming independent hinge on the resources, skills and international draw of the Highlands and Islands and what we have to offer. I often tell people that I represent half the country geographically—that is more than true. We have the whisky, the oil, the shellfish and the renewable energy. As Magnus Davidson, a researcher at the University of the Highlands and Islands said, that country would have more people living in it than Iceland and 28 other countries across the world. While my constituents feel that they are not being served well enough, that local democracy does not exist and that the central belt seems to get everything, the arguments will continue to stack up.

It should not be the case that broadband is so bad that folk in Sutherland cannot get logged on to work in the morning. It should not be the case that people tell me that their energy bills are more than their income, which is because the price is tied to the cost of a source of energy that they are not even using. It should not be the case that food is rotting in fields or that scallops are going off in the back of a lorry because the people who used to carry out that work are not sure that they are welcome in the UK any more.

The Highlands and Islands are being constantly harmed over and over by UK Government policies. The cost to Scotland of remaining in the United Kingdom is already high, but my region's future might well be added to that bill very soon. We need to be able to make our own choices on immigration—the punitive UK system is harming our rural communities and our agricultural sector. Scotland should get the powers that are needed to address the unique challenges that the Scottish Government has been tasked with addressing. Let us use those powers, and the ones that we have got, to make sure that there is no cost to the Highlands and Islands for staying in Scotland.

15:19

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

Just last month, the Scottish Fiscal Commission reported on trends in the population of Scotland and what that meant for income tax and for our economy. It forecast that the so-called dependency ratio would rise from 57 per cent today to 79 per cent over the next half a century.

To put it more starkly, there are currently three workers for every one retired person in Scotland. By the time we reach 2050, the ratio will be 1:1. It has always been my view that dignity in retirement is a basic inalienable human right. It is a mark of

how civilised a society is—an ageing population is something to be celebrated, not regretted—but the demographic change that we are facing will, more than ever, demand a reaffirmation of that old socialist principle, “From each according to their means, to each according to their needs”.

That is why last Friday's venal and vindictive Tory budget, which sanctions the poorest, sweeps away hard-won workers' rights and rewards the richest, must be met with stiff resistance. To the Tories, I say that they now have a policy of the survival of the wealthiest—one that accepts that the poorest can go under. It is a policy that is not only socially divisive and economically illiterate but morally repugnant.

Central to this afternoon's debate is the Scottish Fiscal Commission's conclusion that

“Compared to births and deaths, migration is more volatile, more responsive to economic and policy factors and is the most difficult to predict.”

I firmly believe that what we need is the establishment of the principle of the freedom of movement of people and of labour. We do not want to return to a world in which someone's passport and where they were born matter once again. We want to see borders coming down, not going up. That should be a first principle, too. However, we also have to distinguish between the noble principle of the freedom of movement of labour and the unethical practice of the freedom of movement of cheap labour, including human trafficking.

My old comrade Jim Sheridan sadly passed away a few days ago. Jim's greatest legacy was introducing the private member's bill that paved the way for the Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004, which won huge public support after the shocking deaths in Morecambe Bay of more than 20 Chinese migrant workers. To anyone who says that that could not happen here, I say that, just two years ago, over just one weekend, Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority patrols ran into 50 Chinese cockle pickers on the beaches of Fife and East Lothian. Let me also remind the Parliament that it was a soft fruits farmer in Perthshire employing Bulgarian workers who was the first person ever to be prosecuted under the 2004 act.

We know as well that the industries that face the biggest shortages of skilled workers in Scotland are the sectors with the poorest pay. It is those that rely the most on hire and fire, those with the worst health and safety records and those that are most notorious for exploitative scams—tax-avoiding scams such as umbrella companies and the excessive use of employment agencies, outsourcing and zero-hours contracts.

One in five of all workers on zero-hours contracts in Scotland are employed in health and

social care. One in four of all workers on zero-hours contracts are employed in Scotland's hospitality sector. That pattern predates Brexit, so let me gently suggest to the cabinet secretary that it is this economic system that allows the systematic exploitation of workers that is the principal culprit for labour shortages.

Let me make a couple of final points. Last year, as many as one in three students from the most deprived areas of Scotland did not complete their college course. The same was true of students with a disability—one out of every three did not do so. Among care-experienced students, more than 40 per cent did not complete their course. Added to that, for the past five years, there has been a shocking failure by the Scottish Funding Council, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Government to deliver on skills alignment and planning. We are witnessing not only damage to our economy but—worse—the stealing of a whole generation's ability to contribute to society. So, we want the freedom of movement of labour, but we want the liberation of our young people's opportunities, too.

Finally, Professors Christina Beatty and Steve Fothergill recently submitted evidence to this Parliament that I hope the First Minister, who last week spoke of Scotland's "high employment and low unemployment" record, will find time to read, because their analysis shows that, on top of an official claimant count in Scotland of 122,000 people, there exists hidden unemployment of 102,000 people, who are largely, in the words of those professors,

"the manual working class in the poorer parts of Scotland,"

who have been abandoned on incapacity benefits.

So, it is clear that we need urgent Government action that provides support and offers opportunities. It is clear, as the Tories push harder and harder to support those who do not need it, that it is the job of this Parliament to defend and support those who do. It is clear that the Labour Party's duty remains to the class that we represent and that the duty of this Parliament is to the people of Scotland, who we are sent here to represent.

15:26

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): East Lothian is often referred to as the bread basket of Scotland. It has high-yielding and high-quality land and many are employed in the county. Farming is the heartbeat of our rural community. East Lothian has more than 180 farms, with a mix of arable, dairy, pigs, upland farming, soft fruit and vegetables. Thousands of people are employed in the sector, which supports direct farm work, and

there are many suppliers of feed, agricultural equipment and support services.

East Lothian has a large rural community, which is about a third of the population of the area. Our population is forecast to grow, but not in rural areas. We need balanced growth. In the past few years, farmers have had to deal with the disaster that is Brexit, which of course Scotland voted against. Recruitment is a major issue for all rural businesses—our farmers cannot recruit essential workers, and fruit is left rotting in the fields. George Jamieson, the previous NFU Scotland education and skills policy manager, said:

"Keeping good workers makes good business sense for farmers".

He went on:

"Knowledge, experience and skills are a long-term investment, hard to replace, and ... essential to modern farming."

Just last Friday, I visited one of our largest food producers, which was very clear that Brexit was the catalyst for the problems that it faces with recruitment. As we heard from the cabinet secretary, Scotland needs tailored migration solutions to tackle depopulation challenges. Each area will be different, as we have heard in the debate.

Scotland's rural areas have been experiencing population decline for a number of years. By 2019, the share of the working-age population in our rural areas was 6 to 7 per cent below the Scottish average. That, combined with the loss of workforce through Brexit, as I mentioned, has restricted the local labour supply. Labour markets in rural areas in East Lothian are already impacted by demand from our agritourism and hospitality businesses.

The challenges of Brexit and demographic change mean that Scotland urgently needs the powers to increase inward migration. That is why the Scottish Government has, as we have heard, called for cross-party support for a rural visa pilot.

Brian Whittle: I have a slight issue here. As has been discussed, there are declining populations across Europe. There is even a suggestion that, within 20 years, Germany will have a lower population than that of the UK. Is it ethical that we should look to take so many people from countries where they will also be needed?

Paul McLennan: We often hear that we should talk about the issues in Scotland, and not about those in the rest of the UK or elsewhere. The Parliament should look at the challenges that we face. If we were part of the EU, we could have those discussions but, at the moment, we are not able to have them.

On the tightness of the labour market in East Lothian, the challenge of Brexit and demographic change mean that Scotland urgently needs the power to increase inward migration. I talked about the rural visa pilot, which would give that community-driven approach that I mentioned.

Scotland has its own distinct immigration requirements, as all future population growth is projected to come from inward migration, unlike in other parts of the UK. The current UK Government immigration system is a hindrance to our rural sector. Scotland is the only nation in the UK where the population is projected to fall in the next decade, following a peak in 2028.

The Scottish Government, in collaboration with local authorities and the business sector, has developed the rural visa pilot proposal, which is designed to help to meet the specific needs of some of Scotland's remote and rural communities within the existing UK immigration system.

As the cabinet secretary mentioned, the UK Government needs to engage positively with the Scottish Government to support the proposal as a practical reform to the immigration system. We have also heard that the Scottish Government will launch a talent attraction and migration service in 2023 to support Scotland-based employers and to support migrants to move here.

The rural economy and farming in Scotland are under intense pressure from energy costs—we are already hearing that the UK Government support scheme is not quelling fear for businesses—and from fertiliser costs, as inflation pressures are pushing those up. Since last Friday, of course, borrowing costs are rising massively, and supermarkets' control of supply contracts means that many farmers cannot even meet their costs. Food shortages will occur if we do not deal with the issue.

As I mentioned, migration is a crucial issue for our future, especially for our rural communities, but the Scottish Government does not currently have the powers that are needed to deliver tailored immigration policies for Scotland. Devolving immigration powers to allow a Scottish visa would allow Scotland to attract and retain people with the skills and attributes that we need for our communities and economy, including in East Lothian, to flourish.

Scotland's farmers and rural communities need all the help that they can get at the moment. We cannot sacrifice employment opportunities in rural areas, the prosperity of rural areas in East Lothian and Scotland or, quite frankly, the future survival of our rural communities. I ask members to support the motion to give our rural communities the chance to grow and thrive.

15:31

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I welcome the motion recommending the establishment of a rural visa pilot, delivering, as it does, on a commitment in the "National Islands Plan Implementation Route Map 2022".

In particular, I commend the collaborative approach taken to developing the proposal by calling on the experience and expertise of rural employers, communities and local authorities. It is those organisations, including all 32 Scottish local authorities, that rose to the challenge of welcoming more than 10,000 new Scots who had been displaced, first by the Syrian conflict and now by the Ukrainian crisis.

Scotland has shown that it has the space and communities that are willing to open their hearts to people in need of a home, and the Scottish Greens are committed to supporting community, civil society and charity action to aid integration.

Rural and island areas have been quick to recognise the positive impact that an influx of young, often skilled and motivated families can have on their communities—boosting school rolls, establishing new businesses and filling staff shortages.

What has been slower to react is Government policy in responding to the specific challenges of rural migration. A rural visa pilot is a step in the right direction but to succeed it also needs to consider the rural integration challenges that are faced by new Scots, many of which are already familiar to people who live in rural communities.

Brian Whittle: The member makes some very good points. Does she also recognise, though, that crucial to achieving that migration into rural communities is having a rural economy that those migrants can work in?

Ariane Burgess: I agree that we need a rural economy and will speak about that in a little while.

Since 2014, the University of Glasgow and Swansea University's joint project on social support and migration in Scotland has highlighted specific challenges that are faced by migrants who settle in the countryside. Migrants highlight loneliness and social isolation, exacerbated by poor and expensive rural public transport and a lack of community spaces in which to meet.

There is also a need to offer suitable and flexible English as a second language provision, which includes embedded support for building social relationships, learning about the local area and sharing customs and practices. As for the settled community, there is also the challenge of finding warm affordable housing in the midst of a housing crisis.

As the demographic make-up of rural communities shifts to become ever older—more than 22 per cent of residents in my region are over 65—the Scottish economy is facing specific challenges around rural depopulation and a need for on-going low-skilled, seasonal and flexible labour. There is no panacea for that. The reasons for depopulation in the Highlands and Islands are complex, interlinked and long-standing, as we have heard already from some of my colleagues in the chamber, but in my region, employers are increasingly desperate to find workers. Even those that weathered the challenge that was posed by the end of free movement—caused by Brexit—and the unprecedented challenge of Covid are reporting that they are, reluctantly, having to close their doors to trade due to staff shortages.

According to the Lochaber Chamber of Commerce, two thirds of local businesses have experienced problems in recruiting or retaining existing staff. Although a good deal of that is due to housing shortages, rural Scotland urgently needs tailored migration solutions to tackle its depopulation challenges.

With rural Scotland anticipated to benefit from the green jobs that will be generated by nature restoration and the just transition to net zero, I am encouraged to see that Scottish Government policy is moving to address the failures of the Tory Government in Westminster and its hostile environment policies.

There will be challenges with integration along the way, but I am confident that, with Greens in Government, the Highlands and Islands can provide a supportive community that welcomes everyone who wishes to call Scotland their home.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that there is some time in hand. Therefore, I can be generous with speaking times and, if members wish to take or seek to make interventions, that could be accommodated.

15:36

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will not threaten to double the length of my speech, but I am always open to taking interventions.

To say that Scotland's needs are being met by the current UK migration policy is patently untrue; indeed, that is on a par with the statement, "The UK economy is strong and stable". Therefore, I am delighted to support the Government motion.

Last Friday's budget statement by Kwasi Kwarteng and some of his subsequent interviews claimed that his approach is to tackle supply-side issues. That is why, he explained, he had to uncap bankers' bonuses—so that London could attract

more poor immigrant bankers who are in search of as much personal money as possible. If he had really been interested in addressing key labour shortages in our economy, he would have announced proper support for abolishing restrictions on inward economic migration. As the motion says, we need to attract more people to work on the land in rural areas, in the information technology sector, in our hospitals, in the hospitality and tourism sectors and so on. It would perhaps be easier to list the sectors that do not need to attract new workers.

However, it appears that, for the Tories, only London and the type of bankers who led to the crash of 2008 count. The huge-bonus culture has already been proved to be counterproductive if we want effective banking that serves customers, rather than the generation of quick speculative money.

Encouraging more inward migration of economically active people for the real economy would be a significant contribution to the sustainability of many businesses, including businesses in my constituency of Falkirk East. It would allow for business growth that is currently hampered, and it would contribute to addressing supply-chain issues that are caused by lack of access to skilled workers.

As the Government motion recognises, Scotland needs an open and flexible migration policy that is sensitive to the complex and differentiated labour requirements of the differing geographies in Scotland. I particularly welcome the motion's call on the UK Government to accept the Scottish Government's rural visa pilot proposal. I would go further and say that it should be fully implemented as soon as possible, and without the restrictions that inevitably follow pilots. I trust that that is the first policy suggestion of many in the area; indeed, we have already heard some others from the cabinet secretary. I welcome the rural visa suggestion for Scotland, but it is not nearly enough—as the cabinet secretary would agree, I am sure, were he in his seat.

Earlier initiatives such as the fresh talent working in Scotland scheme, which was introduced in 2005, were introduced while we were members of the EU. We have to face the reality of the Tory Brexit, topped off by Kwasi Kwarteng's bizarre financial and economic strategy.

Donald Cameron: Will Michelle Thomson attempt to answer the question that I posed in my speech. Why does Scotland consistently prove to be less attractive to economic migrants than the rest of the UK? What solutions can she offer?

Michelle Thomson: I clocked that point when the member made it earlier, but I do not think that he qualified it. What he pointed out was the

massive draw of London and the south-east. As I have already pointed out in my speech, that massive draw is the result of policy-making by the UK Government to favour London, the south-east and the City of London. It affects not only Scotland but other parts of the UK. I think that many Tories would concede that that it is true.

Brian Whittle: Will the member take an intervention? There is plenty of time.

Michelle Thomson: I will carry on, because I am going to talk about something else that has already been mentioned.

It is true that Scotland faces demographic challenges, but those have been exacerbated by Brexit. We no longer have welcoming open borders; instead we have a frankly mean-spirited and near-xenophobic attitude to many of the people whom we should be attracting. The truth is that inward migration enhances our society and culture in addition to supporting us economically, and that the SNP's philosophy runs entirely counter to the Tories' little Englander approach, with the stress on "little". In my view, the Tories display utter poverty of ambition and parade a set of values about the peoples of this world that I thought had been buried decades ago.

I recognise only too well that migration patterns and policy formation are complex matters. Jakub Bijak's book "Forecasting International Migration in Europe: A Bayesian View" points to the fact that migration is susceptible to many unpredictable factors, including political and economic crises and policy changes. His forecast, which was made in 2010, did not predict the political and economic crises that have been unleashed on an unsuspecting populace by the advent of Brexit, nor did it predict an immoral immigration policy or Trussonomics—three events that have created political and economic crises in the wake of Tory Government policy at Westminster.

My last point is to ask everyone to use their imagination. Imagine a Scotland that is open and welcoming: a Scotland in which people coming from other parts of the world—any part of the world—feel that their unique insights and talents are valued; a Scotland where it is recognised and understood that we live in a global world; and a Scotland that welcomes ambitious young people.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member accept an intervention?

Michelle Thomson: If Mr Lumsden is going to help me to imagine, I am happy to do so.

Douglas Lumsden: Can the member imagine a Scotland where ferry services run on time and are more reliable, and where broadband is actually delivered so that people can have superfast broadband? Can she imagine a Scotland like that?

Michelle Thomson: I could top that a million times over. I am delighted that the Scottish Government has taken the initiative to roll out broadband in the face of the abject failure of the UK Government—[*Interruption.*] There should be no barracking from the sidelines. I am sorry, Presiding Officer.

Imagine a Scotland where it is recognised and understood that we live in a global world and which welcomes ambitious young people who will work hard and contribute taxes to enable us fund our much-valued public services. Imagine a Scotland that is truly open for business and to entrepreneurship and which attracts entrepreneurs from around the world. That is what I would do if I was going to implement an immigration strategy.

We can imagine—but without real power to manage our own immigration policy, in the form of independence, imagine is all that we can do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Thomson. It is, indeed, my job to keep, or to attempt to keep, order in the chamber.

I call Alexander Stewart.

15:43

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I'm gonnae be good. I'll behave.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate as this Parliament considers how best to tackle Scotland's changing population. I support the amendment in the name of Donald Cameron.

Today's motion talks about the importance of an effective migration system that meets Scotland's "specific needs". It also talks about the cultural and economic contributions of the people who choose to live here. There is certainly much truth in those sentiments; my Conservative colleagues expressed similar sentiments when the issue was debated and discussed a few years ago.

However, although migration is clearly important in ensuring that Scotland's tax base continues to grow, it is just as important to look at the changes and challenges within Scotland's current population.

The Government motion talks about the "distinct demographic challenges that Scotland faces".

As our amendment points out, those challenges are "multi-faceted". Although it is true that Scotland's population growth is projected to come from migration alone, it is also the case that the most significant trend in Scotland's population is that it has been steadily ageing for the past 40 years. As my party's spokesperson for older people, I am clear that addressing the challenges that are created by that trend will be just as

important as any new approach to migration could be.

The percentage of the male population who are aged over 65 has risen from 11 per cent in the early 1980s to nearly 18 per cent in the most recent figures to have been published. By the end of the 2040s, the number of people aged 75 or over will have nearly doubled from the number just 10 years ago. At that time, according to some estimates, nearly 23 per cent of Scotland's population will be of pensionable age.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):

Do not the statistics that the member has read out all make the case for Scotland having a different and distinctive immigration policy, given that our demographics are different?

Alexander Stewart: I disagree with that. We have identified that Scotland has a problem, but other countries across Europe have similar problems. We need to make sure that we are trying to do all that we can, and the United Kingdom has certainly done that in recent times.

All of what I have said is true in spite of the fact that people who move to Scotland are generally younger than the average age of the population. It is a good thing that older people in Scotland, like those throughout the United Kingdom, are able to live longer lives. However, we need to be honest about the challenges that that situation creates and how we will deal with them.

Although people who choose to settle here are usually younger than the Scottish average age, it is also true that people aged over 50 make up a third of the Scottish workforce. We know that the workforce is ageing continuously. Not only that, but the number of people aged 65 and over who are employed has more than doubled from the number 10 years ago. Those individuals remain an important part of the Scottish workforce. They are a vital asset to businesses in every sector and every part of the economy. With a continuously ageing population, that will only become more true in the future. Given that, it is clear that supporting people to remain in work for as long as they wish to do so should become a priority for the Scottish Government.

The changing labour market means that reskilling and retraining have never been more important, but the skills landscape is in places confused and complicated, and it needs to change. That is especially important for older people, who are less likely than younger workers to move into new jobs. We need to make doing so easier for them. Providing more lifelong learning opportunities is an excellent way of allowing older people to change career paths, even at a late stage in their working lives. As things stand, however, there are simply not enough

opportunities in that respect. Recent research suggests that older adult learners are particularly disadvantaged in Scotland, and that people who are disabled are even more disadvantaged.

Last week's promise of a new and reformed skills landscape gives us hope. There is no question but that we want to change and improve what is happening in that area. However, I fear that the reforms may be too little, too late for many people, because they will fail to provide a system that can truly capitalise on older people's potential.

Scotland can and should be an attractive destination for those who choose to migrate here, and it should also be one of the best places in the world for people who are growing old to live in. With the age profile of Scotland's population continuing to increase, the challenges will continue, so it is important that we unlock the potential in our workforce.

Along with my Conservative colleagues, I will continue to push for policies that will deliver the skills and the economy that we need. Some of those skills will, no doubt, come through migration, as they have done in the past. However, many of them will come through acknowledging the challenges that are created by an ageing population, and through working to ensure that people can continue to work for as long as they choose to do so, which allows them to contribute to society. We must understand that housing, transport links and employment all play their parts.

Why is Scotland less attractive than other parts of the UK? We need to come up with the solutions in order to ensure that we succeed.

15:49

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): We have heard that Scotland is facing a reduced working population over the next 50 years. I am sure that every member of the Parliament is concerned about that.

As many members know, I grew up in Australia. Between 1945 and 1970, the Australian Government's immigration policy sought migrants from England and Europe. In the 1970s, the policy changed, and people from other countries were encouraged to come to Australia. Migrants came from Asia, the middle east and South America, as well as some more from Europe. That policy was known as the "Ten Pound Poms", and, in the 1970s, my parents decided to move to Australia with my brother and me.

I am sure that many of us have family members and friends who took up similar schemes, not only in Australia but in New Zealand and Canada. Many will also have family members and friends who have had the opportunity to go on working

holidays to those places—to enjoy a new country and to base themselves there to travel, gain employment and life experiences, and contribute to the local economy. A lot of those people also fall in love, and they stay in the country if they get married. It is a win-win situation for both parties.

As we recover from the pandemic, Australia, like many countries around the globe that are struggling with the health crisis, is actively recruiting healthcare workers, nurses and doctors from other countries, including the UK. They know their problems and can be proactive in addressing them.

Although there have been repeated calls from the First Minister and the Scottish Government to allow us to have a devolved immigration system that suits our needs, we have been denied that. More than ever, as we emerge from the pandemic and tackle the cost of living crisis, the necessity is evident of Scotland's having full powers not only to recover but to build a stronger Scotland, with Scotland's priorities at its heart.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): For as long as the Parliament has existed, we have not had a workforce plan for the national health service. That is ridiculous. Does the Scottish Government need to look at that, too? What the member has highlighted clearly shows that we need a workforce plan in order to run our public services in Scotland.

Siobhian Brown: We absolutely need a workforce plan, but we are restricted if we cannot actively go out and seek people from other countries to come to Scotland. I know many people from countries around the world who would love to come to Scotland, but if we do not have the immigration policy, we cannot have them. We are limited by that.

Brexit has been mentioned several times. It is such an important factor in so many things that we face. I will discuss the fishing sector. My constituency of Ayr used to have a thriving fishing industry, but the numbers have dwindled over the years, with Brexit making matters only worse. Since Brexit—from 2019 to 2021—fish landings in Ayr were down in value by 36 per cent.

I spoke to Spes Bona Superior Seafood, which is based in my constituency and is a long-term family business, spanning many generations. Once it was thriving, but now the business has one of the few boats that is left in Troon. Times have been really difficult for it for the past couple of years, since Brexit, and now, with the fuel price increases. However, despite all those added challenges, it continues. At the moment, its main challenge is the workforce. Recently, it recruited a talented employee from Lithuania, but he has gone back there because, after two weeks, he

could not secure a visa from the UK Government. The system results in a talented workforce getting turned away because visas are too difficult to access. The challenges that Scotland is facing with our working-age population are being experienced all over the world, but all the meaningful policy areas for addressing those challenges have been stripped away from Scotland.

However, we must not be all doom and gloom, as there are things to be positive about. Compared with EU countries, a high share of Scotland's population who are aged 25 to 64 have a tertiary education and the University of St Andrews recently topped *The Guardian's* list of the UK's best universities. That shows the strength of Scotland's higher education sector.

When people leave education and enter the workforce, the Scottish employer perspectives survey shows that the majority of employers are well satisfied with their workers' level of skills.

In the national strategy for economic transformation, the Scottish Government has addressed our need for a highly skilled workforce to drive forward our economy. One of the ways in which we plan to do that, as has been mentioned, is by trying to attract workers from elsewhere in the UK. However, if the UK Government has the same problem with a reducing working-age population and continues with its hostile immigration policies, how can the Scottish Government attract highly skilled people to contribute to our economy? Schemes such as the rural visa pilot will be welcome as a solution, but only in the short term.

This is another debate that highlights the problems of Brexit and the negative effects that it is having on Scotland. I look forward to joining my colleagues on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee in our future inquiry into workforce shortages. We will look into the issue in more detail and do what we can do in the short term to address it.

I, like many others across Scotland today, am extremely concerned. We have the highest rate of inflation in 40 years, yesterday the pound plummeted to an all-time low, today some banks and building societies announced that they will have no more new mortgages, and interest rates are predicted to rise to 6 per cent next year. The United Kingdom is in chaos. The broad shoulders of the UK and a stable Government are a fantasy. The sooner that Scotland becomes independent and no longer is shackled to the failing UK Government, the better.

15:55

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Almost half

the country's 32 local authorities will experience population decline over the next decade. We know that the issue is most acutely felt in remote and island areas. Local authorities have specific pressures in my constituency of Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale.

It is undeniable that Brexit, which Scotland voted against by 62 per cent, damaged Scotland's economy even before more recent events, and it has exacerbated the trend of a diminished workforce. Freedom of movement of the workforce was previously evident in practically all aspects of Scottish life, including in sectors such as hospitality, transport, and health and social care. The UK's skilled worker route excludes many from coming under the points-based system, with restrictions on salaries and so on. For example, for the skilled worker visa, someone must demonstrate that they have a job offer from a Home Office-licensed sponsor at the required skill level, and that they will be paid by their sponsor the relevant minimum salary threshold, which is normally £26,500 or the going rate for the particular job—whichever is higher.

In my constituency, I know from talking to local businesses—as I referred to in my intervention on my Labour colleague—that there are shortages of bus drivers and shortages in hospitality and health and social care directly as a consequence of the UK leaving the EU. It is not that people are being paid less; they are paid equally.

The loss of workers is exacerbated by the rurality of many areas for a range of reasons, not least that wages across the board tend to be lower and therefore beneath the UK threshold for visas.

We know that the population of Scotland grows older by the decade, and there also tends to be a more elderly population in rural areas. The young leave to work in more urban environments for understandable reasons, although they frequently return in older age, which adds to that elderly population. That puts additional pressure on services such as social care and health.

Delivery of services in rural areas is necessarily more time consuming, given the distances between towns and villages, and therefore more costly.

The need to retain a younger demographic has to be addressed. Rural life must be made more attractive, with reasonable access to urban areas. On that, I congratulate the Scottish Government on bringing back the Borders railway, which has seen the population grow in places such as Gorebridge and Newtongrange, with young families moving in.

There was a scheme, many moons ago—50 years ago, actually—in which the local authority offered houses to key workers, such as school

teachers and GPs, so that they would take up positions. That worked, and I benefited from it as a secondary teacher moving to Dumfries and Galloway. That, to me, is a community-driven approach, and it would be attractive to not just younger people and families, but migrants. Not only do we need more relevant immigration rules from Westminster, but they need to be targeted and more flexible, with input from local businesses and public services, as happened 50 years ago.

For my constituents—and not just the elderly population—to have mixed and thriving communities not only provides staffing for our social care and health sector, but sustains local services, such as public transport, and local businesses, such as the local plumber, and keeps the local shops on the high street open. It is essential that we are able to offer people Scotland as their home. I fully support rural visa pilots. I am glad that the cabinet secretary is back in the chamber, because I am bidding for the Borders to be one such pilot area. I know that he is a great favourite in the Borders—creep, creep!

We in Scotland surely understand better than the rest of the UK the economic need for immigration, because in many parts of the world we are migrants ourselves. We know the challenges and opportunities that exist when we make our lives in another country. The Scottish diaspora runs into millions—way beyond our indigenous population.

Unfortunately for Scotland, we are—for now—tied into the UK's useless, heavy-handed and counterproductive immigration system, born to appease the south-east of England, and Brexiteers, who falsely blame EU migrants for economic issues, particularly in the north of England. All of those are falsehoods.

I note that Donald Cameron, who is often consensual, referred to the commitment in the 2019 Scottish Tory manifesto to targeted migration. I do not, however, share his optimism that a Liz Truss Government will resuscitate that. In any event, she has her hands full with the economic chaos that she has brought about.

Independence gives us that essential control over the macroeconomy. Part of the reason why Scotland has been losing population is that we have not had control of our macroeconomy since the union. We need control over our macroeconomy and migration, and with the actions demonstrated by the Truss-Kwarteng financial duo, I tell you that it cannot come soon enough.

16:01

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Although Brexit is not the only reason why we have skills

shortages and employment gaps, it remains a sad period in Scotland's history, given that the particular model of Brexit that was presided over by the Johnson Government meant that, unfortunately, we lost huge numbers of EU citizens, and they were treated badly in the process. We should not pretend that that did not happen, and I agree with other members that it accentuated a pre-existing problem.

There are many ways to address Scotland's particular economic and social needs, but it is a critical part of the overall solution that UK immigration policy should be flexible enough to cater for the specific needs of nations and regions. I say to the cabinet secretary that I welcome the proposed rural visa pilot but, as I have said on many occasions, as someone who supports being part of the union, we should not fear a justified differentiated policy within the UK if it helps its nations and regions.

There are many sectors where there are skills shortages, such as, although by no means exclusively, in hospitality, as we all know. Improving career prospects, pay and conditions, and security of employment in some of those sectors is essential for fair work, but it might also address the huge issue of filling vacancies in those areas. I hope that the Government supports the Hospitality Rising campaign when it comes to address that issue.

Many people in their 30s who are considering starting a family are worried about the UK economy, interest rates, mortgage rates and rising energy prices. It may be anecdotal, but it is fair to conclude that the economy is a significant factor for any person considering whether to add to the population by having children. Unfortunately, the word "migration" is regularly used with negative connotations, quite often preceded by the word "illegal". Like many other members, I have always supported a progressive policy when it comes to immigration and asylum, because I believe that we should play our part in the world.

In truth, though, Scotland desperately needs an immigration and migration policy to avert a demographic catastrophe. As many other members have said, that is at the heart of the debate, because Scotland is set to lose nearly 1 million people—16 per cent of the population—over the coming decades. The Scottish Fiscal Commission has said that the low birthrate is a key driver of that. In fact, figures released at the end of June detailing Scotland's live birthrate show the second lowest annual total since records began in the 1800s, which tells us how serious the problem is.

I fear that we may become increasingly economically unproductive. There are fewer working-age people available to pay the taxes that

are needed to support the growing elderly population, our national health service and our pensions. Unless we do something about it, that fall in population will depress economic growth over the next 50 years; in fact, according to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, growth will be less than 1 per cent.

Interestingly, even the new Prime Minister, Liz Truss, now belatedly concedes that immigration is important for economic growth and plans to loosen immigration rules to boost the UK economy. I am sure that it will be an interesting rehash of the internal immigration debate within the Tory party. It is perhaps time for the Tories to make their minds up on it, but I believe that migrants contribute through tax and, despite popular myths, they tend to use health services less than others do. Immigration is a positive thing. I do not understand why the Tories are not committing to what their view is on the motion. I do not know what their fear of embracing some differentiated policy on immigration is. They have not explained that so far.

Brexit has undoubtedly made the problem worse. UK staff shortages have intensified due to the dramatic fall in EU migration since the vote in 2016. Data from the ONS shows that, since the EU referendum, European migration to the UK has fallen by a massive 72 per cent. The new post-Brexit system has introduced visa requirements for EU citizens who had previously been able to work in any job in the UK, and who are now ineligible for work visas. Predictably, therefore, we see that the EU migrant workforce has declined sharply. The hospitality sector has seen a decline of 25 per cent in the number of EU workers, and the agricultural sector has seen a decline of 28 per cent.

In a meeting that I hosted with the hospitality industry a couple of weeks ago, which many MSP colleagues joined, the businesses that attended said that they were struggling to recruit staff. That is backed up by press reports that suggest that staff shortages in the hospitality industry are reaching critical levels, causing nearly half of operators to cut trading hours or capacity in order to cope. Our problems are real, and they have been estimated to cost the industry £21 billion in lost revenue, causing an estimated £5 billion loss in tax for the Exchequer, which is clearly bad for growth.

I will address a point that Siobhian Brown mentioned earlier. Although I might disagree with her conclusion, I agree that there is a moral case for migration, particularly when it is about those fleeing from war, with Ukraine being the prime example. There must be room in an asylum and immigration policy to welcome and resettle displaced persons and to use their skills while they are here. However, in the long term, we must of

course hope that Syrians, Somalians, Ukrainians and the people of Afghanistan will see peace in their own countries, allowing them the choice to return to their own homes and rebuild their own countries.

We must also live up to our responsibilities in the world and embrace those who wish to make Scotland their home. I hope that the UK and Scottish Governments will continue to work together to try and solve what is an enormous problem for Scotland's population growth. It must be a central focus in the years to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Before I call John Mason, who is the final speaker in the open debate, I remind all members who participated that they need to be in for the closing speeches. I call John Mason for a very generous six minutes.

16:08

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): A generous six minutes—thank you very much.

To add to what Pauline McNeill said in her speech about people's attitude to immigration, I note that I was recently at the National Theatre of Scotland's production of "Exodus", which was on at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow. It is excellent and touched on some of those issues, so I commend it to anyone who would like to see it.

The emphasis in the motion is on rural areas, but there are also challenges in urban areas. I was speaking to a friend just yesterday who works in a factory in Ivan McKee's constituency. Their factory has been advertising for a forklift driver for six weeks and has been unable to find one, with the result that the driver who is there has to work many extra hours to keep the whole place going.

In the summer, I visited Keswick in the English lake district. There were adverts for staff in many shops, cafes and restaurants, and some appeared to be closing early or for an extra day each week because they were so short of staff. This is an issue affecting Scotland's rural communities, but it is also affecting many other communities.

As we have heard from other speakers, the Finance and Public Administration Committee had a good look at the Scottish Fiscal Commission's report on "Trends in Scotland's population and effects on the economy and income tax"—which is quite a snappy title.

In particular, it is important to note how the forecast for Scotland's population compares with that for the rest of the UK: our population is expected to fall by 16 per cent to 4.6 million in 50 years' time, whereas the UK's will fall by only 2 per cent. Before the Conservatives tell us—once again—that we should cut taxes so that people will

flock here from England, let us remember that that trend is very long term and has been going on largely since 1707, when Scotland's population was around a quarter to a fifth of England's, whereas now it is more like a tenth. *[Interruption.]* I am pausing because I thought that a member was standing up to intervene, but I see that a security officer was moving across the chamber.

Given that stark contrast—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take my intervention?

John Mason: Ah, Mr Johnson—yes.

Daniel Johnson: On a similar note, would the member not acknowledge that population decline is part of a global trend, which we need to embrace rather than completely offset?

John Mason: I agree absolutely. Germany and Japan are examples of places where that is happening.

A number of issues that have been raised today are valid. There are longer-term trends that we must deal with. Having more children might be part of the answer. Perhaps we can do something about that. However, in the short term—

Christine Grahame: I am too old for that—I am done with that sort of thing.

John Mason: Christine Grahame is laughing at my remark.

In the short term, our policy has to be focused on immigration and bringing people in from outside. We could go into that in more detail, and other speakers have mentioned it. There is a moral issue involved in pulling people out of other countries where they are needed, especially skilled people, such as doctors being pulled out of Malawi. However, we are not the only country that would see immigration as being part of the answer, especially in the short term.

Given the stark contrast in population forecasts, it cannot be right that there is one immigration policy for the whole of the UK. In one sense, it does not matter which revised fiscal framework we put in place, because Scotland will always be disadvantaged if we cannot grow our population.

I accept that, as other members have said, we can do things round the edges, such as encouraging more people into work through training and perhaps various incentives. The Construction Industry Training Board's briefing for members for the debate was fine, in that it focused on skills and so on, but it did not say much about growing the population, which remains key.

We can also encourage people to have more children. I confess that I am guilty of not having any. *[Interruption.]* I missed that remark, thankfully.

Policies such as the baby box, the Scottish child payment and free university education all make having a larger family less of a financial burden. However, I fear that none of those will have sufficient impact quickly enough.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission's report considers the size of the labour force and its impact on the economy, which, in turn, affects how much income tax we can raise and, less directly, other tax revenues as well.

The motion mentions

"social, economic and cultural contribution".

Certainly, the Finance and Public Administration Committee often tends to focus on the economic and financial benefits of immigration. After all, it is widely accepted that it is difficult to grow an economy if the overall population of a country is stagnant or falling.

Brian Whittle: Would the member flip that round and say that it is difficult for a country to grow its population if it is not also growing its economy? It is important that we consider how we develop our economy in order to draw people here.

John Mason: The two are certainly interlinked. However, the bigger problem, which we could address more easily, is the population one. The very fact that a country's population is increasing almost automatically makes its economy grow, too. It is very hard to do it the other way around.

As I was saying, the social and cultural benefits of immigration are huge, too. On Sunday, I was attending my own church and I was chatting to a guy from Sierra Leone who is working in the care sector. On the previous Sunday, I attended a church with a Nigerian background. I was the only white person there, which is always an interesting experience. That church has taken over a large Church of Scotland building that had a dwindling congregation. It is great to see that some of our cultural assets are benefiting from people choosing to come and live in Scotland.

Despite what some Opposition members would say, Scotland is an incredibly attractive place for many people from around the world. I know that some members will also say that having higher taxes here will put people off coming or staying. Let us try it and see. Let us have a more welcoming immigration policy here and see whether people want to come. I think that they will.

I move on to the amendments. The Conservative amendment is surprisingly good compared with some that I have seen in the past, so I will skip over it. The Labour amendment does what many Labour amendments do: it identifies problems but does not give much by way of answers. Problem 1: there are high levels of

economic inequality. Yes, but what should we do about it? Problem 2: more housing is needed. Yes, but should we have invested less in schools and hospitals? It does not say. Problem 3: local authorities could use more money. Yes, of course, but should we give less money to the NHS?

The amendment states that the Government should

"use all policy levers available",

which is a nice vague phrase, and that wealth should be spread across Scotland, but I do not know whether that means that Labour advocates a wealth tax.

To be fair to the Lib Dems, their amendment has some practical suggestions such as broadband and tunnels, although I think that tunnels almost bankrupted the Faroe Islands. There is quite a cost to that. Their amendment

"calls on the Scottish Government to look for practical solutions to depopulation".

I am sure that the Government is doing that without being told to by the Lib Dems.

However, and perhaps positively, what all that shows is that we have a national problem of a lack of people, and projections are for the population to fall further. Perhaps we can all agree that the problem exists, and perhaps we can all work together better than we often do in order to find solutions.

I am clearly a city person with a city constituency but, as some members know, I love visiting islands, and this summer I visited the world's largest island, Greenland. The most moving experience that I have had when visiting an island was much closer to home—St Kilda. It is fabulously beautiful, and sailing there seems unreal. Seeing the deserted village, walking among the houses and reading about the lives of the people who lived there until slightly less than 100 years ago was incredibly moving.

We cannot allow such a depopulation and evacuation to happen to more of our island and rural communities. We must tackle this problem.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Rhoda Grant to speak for around nine minutes.

16:16

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The length of speeches is growing.

Daniel Johnson: That is inflation.

Rhoda Grant: Indeed; inflationary speeches.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Population decline is complex and demographics are changing; Daniel Johnson and Richard Leonard explored many of those issues in their speeches. We all welcome long life, so it is hugely disappointing that Scottish life expectancy is falling for the first time in generations, which is a point that Donald Cameron made. We also have falling birth rates, which is not surprising given that the cost of living is rising, affordable housing is lacking and support for working families is sparse, which is a point that Daniel Johnson made.

In the areas that are most affected by skills shortages—rural Scotland—childcare is almost non-existent. We are all aware of skills shortages in our rural communities and of hotels and pubs shutting because of a lack of staff. Pauline McNeill pointed out that 25 per cent of the EU workforce has been lost in the industry, and that there has been a 28 per cent drop in the EU workforce in agriculture. Crops are rotting in the ground in the face of a food shortage, because the migrant workforce are struggling to get work visas to allow them to come into the country and harvest the crops. Those points were made by a number of speakers, including Paul McLennan.

Richard Leonard is right to say that it is often the sectors that pay less that suffer the greatest labour shortages, but shortages are not being met with higher pay. Sadly, they are being met in many areas by the growth of illegal trafficking. I join with him in paying tribute to the late Jim Sheridan for his work on combating labour exploitation.

Those skills shortages have led to long waiting lists to access care in the community and hospitals closing their doors due to a lack of staff. That is not always because staff do not want to work in our rural communities or there are too few staff, but often because staff cannot afford to live there.

That has been made worse by Brexit and having a one-size-fits-all immigration policy that does not fit all areas of the UK. As Pauline McNeill points out, those issues were there before, but Brexit made them worse.

We must also remember that there are other issues that are just as impactful on population retention, such as housing, jobs and services. I think that every speaker mentioned those issues in some measure.

I know from my casework that young people would stay in rural communities—Emma Roddick and others made that point. Most of them desperately want to stay in their communities, but they are being forced out. This generation faces not only a lack of jobs; it faces a lack of housing. Houses come on the market, but they sell at prices that are way beyond the means of young people. People who are retiring from the cities can buy with cash at prices that are way over the values of

the properties, and that is inflating all rural house prices. We have communities in which over half of the houses are second homes or holiday lets. Communities cannot sustain that level of absenteeism. Let me be clear: I am not against holiday lets or second homes, but they have to be proportional to the community that they are in.

The island bond was rightly scrapped because all that it would have done would have been to inflate house prices on islands by an additional £50,000, as those moving into the area would also have had access to that money. It would be much better to make that money available to local people—to young people—to build their own homes, and to protect that investment by public purse with a burden that the house remains within the community as a full-time home.

Jim Hunter has called for a Highlands and Islands housing authority. I believe that that requires consideration. That such an approach is being called for highlights the urgency of the problem.

Brian Whittle: I fully recognise that second homes are an issue in certain rural communities in Scotland, but there is another issue, especially in the south of Scotland. Many homes lie empty because there is nobody to take them up. There is a different issue in the south of Scotland that relates to amenities and local business.

Rhoda Grant: Yes. We need jobs and services. We also need good-quality homes, because we often see that the houses that are lying empty are wrecked. They cannot be heated because they are draughty old houses. Investment in those houses is needed as well as investment in the people who live in them to ensure that jobs and services are available. We cannot attract people into communities without that.

When we look at having visas to encourage repopulation, we need to consider having a finessed system. I live in Inverness, which continues to grow to the point that schools and facilities are overstretched. A report on demographic challenges in the Highlands and Islands pointed out that areas such as Argyll and Bute, the Outer Hebrides, Caithness and Sutherland are in need of intervention. It is projected that Highland in general will have a small population growth of around 1.4 per cent, whereas the populations in fragile communities such as Caithness will fall by more than 21 per cent, the population in Easter Ross will come down by nearly 14 per cent, and the population of Sutherland will come down by almost 12 per cent. We need to guard against swapping one broad-brush policy for another, and we should perhaps look at identifying repopulation zones.

I agree with Angus Robertson that those who migrate need to be able to take family with them. I know families who found it absolutely unsustainable to stay, which is a problem especially if they had elderly relatives who needed care at home and they could not bring them with them. That also impacts on grown-up children of the family. The bespoke immigration policy that Donald Cameron speaks about needs to take that into account. The policy has to attract the skills that we have shortages of, but it also has to take into account the family and their social needs.

Beatrice Wishart talked about broadband connectivity in rural areas. There are more opportunities to get high-quality jobs into rural areas, but that is dependent on having connectivity. We all work differently because of the pandemic, and home working is available to an extent. However, we need to ensure that there is connectivity. I know of cases in which families are considering leaving because they cannot work as a result of the lack of connectivity.

Kenny Gibson and Brian Whittle talked about urbanisation and about depopulation impacting on rural areas when urban areas are growing, which is an issue everywhere. We must think about how we support our rural communities with services to address that. We recently debated the centralisation of health services in the Highlands and Islands. For basic healthcare, some of my constituents travel the equivalent of a journey from Edinburgh to Newcastle.

Public transport needs to be available in rural areas, as Brian Whittle said, because, otherwise, people are dependent on cars. We know that the cost of living in rural areas was already 20 to 40 per cent higher than in other areas, and that is getting worse with the economic policies that the Conservative Government in London is pursuing, as Richard Leonard and Pauline McNeill said. Those policies are atrocious; they will impact on all of us and push the cost of living even higher for those who are low paid. Scottish Government back benchers have said that independence is the only response to all that, but what we need is proper devolution of migration policies and a Scottish Government that focuses on jobs, housing and services, which are all within its reach.

People are essential to our economy. If we do not have workers, our economy fails. They work and pay taxes. We need inward migration, but we also need to provide homes, jobs and services to keep our own young people, at the same time as attracting fresh talent into our depopulated areas.

16:26

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Overall, this has been a good and important debate. We all recognise the need to act to address the serious and important issue of Scotland's depopulation and demographic challenges.

I grew up in a village called Bankfoot, which is nine miles north of Perth. I say without—I hope—sounding older than my years that, ahead of the debate, I was considering what the village looked like when I was growing up. It had a GP surgery, a police station, a community nurse, a hairdresser, a post office and a petrol station, as well as two mechanic garages. The village had three shops and—perhaps most important to address isolation and encourage social life—it had three pubs, which were also hotels and a restaurant. It is interesting that many houses on Main Street had previously been thriving local businesses—from a butcher to a sweet shop and an ironmonger. Today, the village has one pub and one shop.

My point is that, across Scotland, our communities have changed and have seen a huge loss of key public and private services that used to help to sustain and provide local employment. That is all the consequence of changes to our shopping and working lives.

Recent figures from the Scottish Fiscal Commission suggest a projected 16 per cent decline in population over the next 50 years. That should be a wake-up call to all of us, regardless of party politics. Finding and developing the solutions that we need to put in place is important, and a debate on rural housing policy is well overdue. Perhaps today's debate will be the start of an annual debate on population decline—I think that all parties would like to have such a debate.

Perhaps a key starting point involves language. Referring to communities as remote does not often help the situation. Who would want to move to somewhere that was considered remote? What message does that send? We must consider language when we talk about the communities that we hope people will relocate to and bring up their families in.

Access to good affordable housing is often the critical factor in someone deciding whether to move to or stay in a community. Many rural areas suffer from a lack of affordable housing. Developing innovative housing solutions is vital; often, they will be small in scale.

The Scottish Government has committed to 10 per cent of the 110,000 homes that it has a target to deliver being located in rural and island communities. I welcome that, but questions are increasingly being asked about deliverability. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has heard about the decline in the

number of small and medium-sized builders, which may have a practical effect on all such developments ever happening in rural communities.

The committee has also heard evidence about the importance of rural housing enablers and community-led housing to develop new affordable homes in rural areas. We have heard a lot about that today from members with rural constituencies and regions.

Community Land Scotland said that

“there are unnecessary complexities in the funding and planning processes”.

That is something that we in Parliament must look at.

The Scottish Government’s forthcoming remote, rural and island housing action plan needs urgently to address all those issues if we are to meet the housing requirements of those communities.

As Donald Cameron said, we know that the SNP-Green Government has spent only around half of its rural and islands housing funds since they were made available in 2016. I hope that that issue can be prioritised. Developing new models presents an opportunity to bring back empty housing stock into use, which is an issue that a number of members have raised.

Research by Scotland’s Rural College has included the possibility of setting up an empty house bank. Through the akiya bank approach in Japan, local authorities are able to list unused houses for sale or rent with the goal of attracting incomers to use them. We should look at doing that in rural areas here.

One part of Scotland is bucking the trend: the capital. Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland continue to be resilient—the only part of the Scottish economy that has seen consistent and continuous economic growth. I welcome that.

Like the cabinet secretary, I am an Edinburgh MSP. The challenges that our communities face are also important and need to be put on the record. The Scottish Government is presiding over the lowest levels of funding for NHS Lothian and for the City of Edinburgh Council at the same time as we are seeing an increasing population with growing demands.

Ensuring the financial sustainability of public service delivery is becoming more difficult in the capital. SNP-Green ministers need to recognise that. There must be a genuine review and revision of the funding formulas.

The fact that levels of homelessness and children living in temporary accommodation are higher in the capital than anywhere else in

Scotland is a direct consequence of not being able to deliver on our housing needs. Ministers need to really understand that.

Attracting people to live, work and contribute to our—

Kenneth Gibson: Will the member accept an intervention?

Miles Briggs: Yes—I have plenty of time.

Kenneth Gibson: How will the rocketing increase in interest rates help the Scottish Government deal with the homelessness problem that we have talked about?

Miles Briggs: A number of factors are affecting the housing market at the moment. Next week, a rent control bill will be brought to this Parliament, which could see fewer homes being made available. The Scottish Government needs to be very much aware of unintended consequences.

It is important to consider the Scottish Government’s powers and what it has done with them. What message does it send to rural or island communities if no ferry service is available to individuals and families? Who would want to consider moving to those communities if they do not think that transport links exist?

It is also important to consider the design of health services. That issue has not really been touched on during the debate. People wanting to move to rural and island communities will see that, for example, maternity services are being lost and cottage hospitals are being closed. If people are to move to such communities, the vital services on which they would rely must be available.

Daniel Johnson: I agree with much of what the member said about solutions needing to be locally delivered and driven, and housing is central to all that. Will he explain why the Conservatives are rejecting the idea of having a devolved visa system, which would enable that critical lever to be put into the hands that are best placed to direct those solutions?

Miles Briggs: In our amendment to the motion, we asked for the detail of what that will look like. Which local authorities will people be asked to go to? How will that be managed? The cabinet secretary said that he wants to work with parties on that. We will be productive in doing so, but we must find out exactly how that will work in practice. That is incredibly important.

Daniel Johnson *rose*—

Miles Briggs: I want to make progress. I may have been given more time, but I have written more to say, too.

I was touching on the issue of health. One of the key briefings, which no member has mentioned, is

the vitally important one sent by Marie Curie ahead of today's debate. One key issue that is not being looked at is that of people living longer who need more care, such as palliative care. It estimates that up to 10,000 more people with palliative care needs will die each year. The greatest increase in palliative care need will be in those over the age of 85. Those dying with dementia will increase by 185 per cent, and the number of people dying with multimorbidities will increase by 80 per cent. Addressing that population health challenge is critical.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Miles Briggs: Very briefly.

Alasdair Allan: Miles Briggs has described the problems and challenges relating to palliative care and other aspects of health. Does he feel that the UK Government's priority of cutting income tax for the richest taxpayers will help with any of that?

Miles Briggs: I am not sure that that has a huge amount to do with what I was saying. It is interesting that no SNP members have decided to mention a key part of our fiscal transfer—the Barnett formula—which is used to fund public services in rural and island communities. We need to recognise that.

A number of members made key points. Daniel Johnson talked about the need to increase productivity in the country, which is important. Richard Leonard highlighted the failure to properly and effectively put in place sector skills planning across Scotland. It is also important that we look at that. The Scottish Government's responsibilities in that regard are key, but we have not heard a huge amount about them. NPF4 is one of the key ways in which we will shape our communities, but, in its current draft, I do not think that it will deliver what we need. Brian Whittle asked how, without real focus, we will deliver green jobs and the growth that such jobs can bring to our island and rural communities. That is also important.

In the 23 years since its re-establishment, the Scottish Parliament has failed to devolve powers to our local authorities and local communities. Scotland is one of the most centralised countries in Europe. That issue must be part of the debate.

Scottish Conservatives support an immigration system that assists the parts of Scotland that need immigration most, particularly remote and island communities. We welcome the proposal for a rural visa pilot, and we will work with the Government on it. I support the amendment in Donald Cameron's name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to wind up the debate for a generous 12 minutes.

16:36

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I have plenty to say to get me through that time, Presiding Officer.

I welcome all the contributions that have been made in this important debate. I thank all members for their engagement in what has been a rich and generally quite positive discussion across a range of policy areas relating to Scotland's population.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture started off the debate by setting out clearly Scotland's distinct population and demographic challenges, which are felt especially sharply in many of our rural communities. As we have heard, National Records of Scotland projects that

“almost half of our 32 local authorities will decline in population over the next decade.”

As it notes in its annual review, which was published at the end of August, the reason for that decline is that there are due to be

“more deaths than births, without enough migration to compensate.”

The Scottish Government is committed to addressing that challenge. I sit on the population task force, through which I work with colleagues across the Government to identify the policy interventions and actions that the Government can take to support rural communities. That includes the development of an action plan to address depopulation, which I committed to in March.

I want to go back to the statement by National Records of Scotland that, without there being enough migration to compensate, we will not be able to at least start to address some of the challenges. Migration is a key policy intervention in addressing our population challenge. In 2019, the independent expert advisory group on migration and population published a report that looked at the impact of the ending of freedom of movement and of the future UK immigration policy on Scotland. The report was clear in noting that, for many rural areas and islands,

“attracting working-age migrants ... is the only realistic option to avert a downward demographic spiral driven by the age structure legacy of selective out-migration during the last decades of the twentieth century.”

The expert advisory group noted that, with the ending of freedom of movement and the proposed changes to UK migration policy, those areas of Scotland seemed to be facing

“a demographic ‘double whammy’ ... which is likely to have far-reaching implications for economic activity, the provision of services, and levels of general well-being.”

In its 2019 report, the UK Government's Migration Advisory Committee accepted that the current migration system is

“not very effective in dealing with the particular problems remote communities experience.”

It further noted that the

“only way to address this question in the UK context would be to pilot a scheme that facilitated migration to these areas, then monitor what happens over several years and evaluate the outcomes.”

Brian Whittle: Does the cabinet secretary accept that poor transport, including public transport, and poor public services, as well as the lack of investment in business, are also contributory factors to migration out of rural areas and into urban areas?

Mairi Gougeon: As we have heard from members across the chamber, there is not one sole challenge here; a lot of factors contribute to the depopulation that we are going to see. We have also talked about Brexit, which has exacerbated the problems that we were already facing. That shows that we need to make a number of policy interventions, which, as I have said, is exactly what the task force that has been established is looking to address. I will come on to some of those other points in the course of my speech.

We have clear evidence and expert analysis that shows that Scotland faces a distinct demographic challenge. Because of the historical legacy of out-migration, that challenge particularly impacts on our rural communities, and the current immigration system is not effective at dealing with those challenges. We believe that our proposal for a Scottish rural community immigration pilot can help us to address those challenges in a meaningful and effective way.

I turn to some of members' contributions, starting with that of Donald Cameron. As I said at the start, I welcome the approach that has been taken to the overall discussion. Although we have not necessarily reached 100 per cent consensus, the debate has nonetheless been constructive. Of course, there are a few points on which we fundamentally disagree. In particular, we disagree on where the immigration powers should lie.

Daniel Johnson made a really important point in that regard. We see examples of differentiated immigration systems operating in countries across the world, so we know that they work. There is absolutely no reason why it cannot be the same here; all that is needed is the political will to make it happen.

The temporary fixes that the UK Government has introduced have not worked, because they are by their nature temporary and they do not encourage people to settle here. We want people to come here to live and work and to settle in our communities. For example, one of the temporary fixes that the Government introduced was the six-

month visa scheme for butchers, of whom there was a particular shortage.

Another issue is that the UK Government has introduced schemes for some areas where shortages are being experienced but not for others. As Beatrice Wishart said, the fishing industry is facing urgent and critical workforce shortages but, as yet, no schemes have been forthcoming for it. In fact, action has been taken in relation to that sector that will harm the industry further. The change to UK immigration rules relating to the use of transit visas will have a profound negative impact on the industry and the wider supply chain. The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture has raised those points with the recently appointed Home Secretary.

I turn to some other points that have been raised. Siobhian Brown and Ariane Burgess talked about the critical situation that many employers face due to workforce shortages. I hear about that as I go out on visits across the country. Most recently, on Friday, I was in Fraserburgh in Aberdeenshire, where the agriculture, fishing and seafood industries alike are all struggling.

Pauline McNeill touched on that as well when she talked about critical shortages in the hospitality sector. While I am on Pauline McNeill's contribution, I will deviate slightly, as she made important points and debunked some of the frustrating myths that we tend to hear about migrants. I welcome her contribution. That touches on Miles Briggs's point about the use of language and some of the words that we use. I do not particularly like using the term “migrant”, because ultimately we are talking about people. I think that Siobhian Brown put that into context best, when she said that these people are us in this chamber, and they are our friends, families and loved ones, who are stitched into the fabric of our country. Therefore, it is important to be careful with language.

To go back to my earlier point about some of the struggles that employers are coming across, Christine Grahame outlined some of the barriers that employers are up against. Some are struggling with the cost of sponsoring employees, and with the sheer length of time that it can take for applications to be processed under the current immigration rules.

I do not want to dwell too much on the negatives, because we have many positive areas to focus on and build on. However, it is important to recognise why the current immigration rules do not work. I hope that, when Donald Cameron and other members have had a chance to totally digest the proposal that has been put forward, he and others across the chamber can get behind it. As the cabinet secretary emphasised, we did not

develop the policy in isolation but worked with partners, local authorities, businesses and others to bring forward a proposal that we believe will ultimately work.

Rhoda Grant raised another really important point that I want to highlight. In touching on our young people, she discussed some of the casework that she receives and emphasised the importance of retaining populations as well as looking at depopulation. The voice of young people is absolutely critical. We need to listen so that we hear about some of the barriers that young people face in some of our most remote rural and island communities.

Recently, I visited Orkney to launch the young islanders network, to discuss some of the issues that they are facing and to ensure that we are listening to our young people. I highlight that we have invited representatives from the young islanders network to sit on our national islands plan delivery group, to ensure that we get that representation and that young people can feed in directly to the policies that impact them.

We have also heard a lot in the debate about other factors that are impacting migration and population retention, such as infrastructure and connectivity. We understand that it is crucial to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support our rural and island communities and to facilitate the growth of a more healthily balanced population profile.

We are working hard to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to deliver on the needs of our island communities. This year, we are investing £8.3 million to deliver the national islands plan and critical infrastructure projects that are based on local priorities. In addition to that, we are investing £11.6 million through our rural community-led fund, which is committed to developing a remote rural and islands housing action plan, as well as making substantial investments in Scotland's digital infrastructure, despite responsibility for broadband being reserved to the UK Government.

There is no quick fix for the challenges that are leading to depopulation. We must work with regional, local and community partners to ensure that, collectively, we deliver a sustainable solution to the challenges that our rural and island populations face. Delivering a cross-cutting collaborative approach to our population challenges will be at the heart of our addressing depopulation action plan, and our recently published national islands plan implementation route map is a really good example of how we are already delivering such a cross-cutting approach to policy. It sets out the extent of the work that is already being undertaken across the Scottish Government to support our island communities.

As I have said, we are not blaming depopulation on one particular issue. We do not think that there is one quick or easy solution that will fix it. That is why those other pieces of work, some of which I have outlined, are critical. The work of the ministerial population task force is so important in that respect, because it is about taking a cross-cutting, cross-Government approach to tackling the issues.

Brian Whittle talked about skills, which was a point that was also raised by Richard Leonard. That is an example of another area in which work is on-going. We are working in partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland and local authorities to develop and deliver a targeted, place-based approach to skills development across six identified islands. That responds to feedback from the islands bond consultation, which highlighted that a low-wage economy and challenges with accessing training are key barriers to population retention.

Working with partners, with the oversight of the population working group and led by the convention of the Highlands and Islands, the islands skills and repopulation pilot project will explore how best to identify local needs and employment priorities, and will then signpost and fund skills solutions that meet those needs in order to retain people within—or, ultimately, allow people to move to—locations that are suffering from acute population decline. The results of that pilot will be used to inform any future skills-related intervention to address depopulation.

Of course, that is just one strand of work. We also have the commission on land-based learning, which is considering a lot of the issues that Brian Whittle raised in his speech and is due to report later this year.

Miles Briggs touched on a point that I think he was looking for a response to, as was John Mason, about the changes that we see in our urban populations, too. I assure him and other members across the chamber that that strand of work has not been forgotten—in fact, it is being taken forward through the development of the depopulation action plan.

We do not often agree in this chamber, but today's debate and the strands that have emerged through the amendments that have been lodged show that there is recognition among members of the deep challenges that are presented by the declining working-age population in Scotland.

Just as previous Administrations focused on Scotland's population challenges prior to EU expansion, this Government is doing the same in the aftermath of Brexit. That is because population matters for Scotland, as is demonstrated by the

work of the ministerial population task force and through the delivery of the population strategy.

The latest Scottish Fiscal Commission report shows the challenge in the starkest terms. Scotland's projected falling working-age population will impact for many years to come on future fiscal sustainability, the delivery of our high-quality and highly valued public services, and the sustainability of our communities.

Ultimately, the Scottish Government believes that an independent Scotland would be best placed to deliver an immigration system that would meet Scotland's needs. However, employers, businesses and communities are all telling us that action is needed right now, which is why we are developing a talent attraction immigration service for Scotland—we will launch that next year and, in doing so, we will meet another programme for government commitment. It is also why we continue to call on the UK Government to make the required reforms to its one-size-fits-all immigration system with immediate effect, to avoid the on-going and further damage that is being done to Scotland.

There is an urgent need for new solutions for Scotland's communities and, in particular, for those in remote and rural areas of the country. As the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, I see the impacts of skills shortages and depopulation only too clearly in our communities.

The Government has fulfilled last year's programme for government commitment to develop a rural visa pilot proposal. The proposal that we have developed for a Scottish rural community immigration pilot has the support of local authorities and business sector leaders across Scotland. Councillor Emma Macdonald, the leader of Shetland Islands Council, has said that the council considers that to be an extremely important step in addressing demographic challenges and skills shortages. The proposal sets out exactly how a bespoke immigration solution could be delivered at local level in Scotland now. This Government has worked collaboratively with and listened to partners in developing the proposal, which will help communities. It is evidence based, deliverable and supported by all our partners. Our ask of the UK Government is clear: work with us to deliver the pilot. Let us take the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee, establish the pilot, run it for a number of years and properly evaluate it to see whether it works.

Today, we ask the Parliament to endorse the motion and support the proposal of the Scottish rural community immigration pilot. If we do that, it will send a concrete message of this Parliament's acknowledgement of the urgent need for practical and workable migration solutions that will deliver for Scotland's communities.

Urgent Question

16:52

Ferries Contract

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the claim in a BBC report today that the process for awarding the contract for ferries 801 and 802 may have been rigged.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):

The BBC's allegations were first put to me in advance of an interview that I conducted last week as part of a programme that is to be broadcast this evening. Scottish ministers are not aware of any impropriety in the procurement process, but take the claims that have been made extremely seriously. It is important that they are addressed carefully.

As I made clear in my interview, those issues are concerning. I know that the current management teams at Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd share that concern. I have already committed to ministers exploring what further steps the Government needs to take to ensure that all questions about the fairness and appropriateness of the tendering process are properly and independently investigated.

I confirm that, at the request of ministers, the permanent secretary has already proactively been in contact with the Auditor General for Scotland to discuss the matter. The Auditor General informed the permanent secretary that Audit Scotland will look at the substance of the allegations around procurement that are raised by the programme before deciding whether further audit work is required. I welcome that, and the Scottish Government, CMAL and Ferguson's all commit to fully supporting that exercise.

Graham Simpson: We found out today that the disastrous ferries contract appears to have been rigged in Ferguson's favour. The new documents appear to show that Ferguson's received a 424-page report to help its bid; no one else did. Ferguson's was allowed to change its design at the halfway mark; no one else was. Ferguson's was able to change its price after the deadline; no one else could. Ferguson's had a confidential, in-person, meeting; no one else got that.

In short, it appears that Ferguson's received special treatment that no one else got from this Government and its agencies. That special treatment might have broken laws that could open the Government to legal action. That is a scandal. It looks like corporate corruption, and the fact that

we are finding out about it only now means that there has also been a cover-up.

Will the Deputy First Minister tell us who chose to give Ferguson's special treatment and why the documents that we now know about were kept hidden?

John Swinney: As I indicated in my first answer, there is a lot of material in the BBC report. It was first put to ministers last week and I responded in good faith by giving an interview. I have indicated that there are issues of concern that require exploration and I welcome the comments that have been made this afternoon by the Auditor General, who has said that he will consider what further audit work is required in the light of the points that are raised in the BBC report.

There are issues of concern. I do not believe that it would be appropriate for the level of specific information that the BBC documentary says was available to Ferguson's to have been made available to the company. It is important for me to place on the parliamentary record that CMAL has made it clear to the BBC that it can find no trace of that document going from CMAL to Ferguson's. It is important that those points of factual accuracy are put on the record.

In relation to the wider questions that have been raised, that is why I gave a commitment that the new points of detail and information that are raised in the BBC documentary must be explored further. I welcome what the Auditor General said about that today.

Graham Simpson: It is no use for the Deputy First Minister to hide behind the Auditor General. The claims were put to him last week. I cannot believe that he has been sitting there doing nothing and not finding out what has gone on.

If the Government accepts that what is claimed is wrong, which it appears to do, but does not know how it has happened or who is responsible, it must now call in the police to investigate. If Ferguson's received special treatment, for whatever reason, that is beyond a scandal and is, in my view, a crime. The alleged rigging of the contract and the potential fraud has cost the country £250 million, and the figure is rising. Will the Government call in the police so that we can finally find out the truth of what has happened?

John Swinney: Mr Simpson asks what I have been doing since the points were put to me. I have been asking the permanent secretary of the Scottish Government to raise the issues with Audit Scotland, thereby enabling Audit Scotland to consider them. Audit Scotland has, of course, already undertaken audit work in relation to the Ferguson's procurement process and will establish whether any further inquiry is required. That would enable independent scrutiny of the procurement

process, which is something that Audit Scotland does on countless other issues and has already done on the Ferguson's contract.

That is what I have been doing, because I thought that Parliament would want an independent assessment process that allows the issues to be properly considered, so that any appropriate action can be taken as a consequence.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Today's BBC reports of historical allegations of potential impropriety between CMAL and Ferguson's during the procurement process are clearly concerning. Will the Deputy First Minister provide assurances about the timescale for full investigation of the matter?

John Swinney: Obviously, we do not want matters of this nature taking an inordinate amount of time to be investigated. If concerns are raised, they should be properly looked into. That is the step that the permanent secretary has taken, on ministers' behalf, in raising the issue with Audit Scotland.

As I said, I welcome what the Auditor General has said this afternoon to allow independent investigation of the claims that have been made in order to determine what further action is required to be taken.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): What is being trailed by the BBC is very worrying, as is the Deputy First Minister's answer about being unable to find any exchange of documents. The Auditor General struggled to investigate the procurement process previously. What changes has the Deputy First Minister made? What information will he make available to allow the Auditor General to investigate thoroughly? In the interests of full transparency, will he now agree to an independent public inquiry into the whole fiasco and, indeed, to call in the police if corruption is suspected?

John Swinney: In relation to the point that Rhoda Grant puts to me in connection with any further investigation, I have set out to Parliament the steps that we have taken to raise with Audit Scotland the issues that have been put to us, and Audit Scotland has made its own judgment, as it should do as the independent auditing body in Scotland.

In relation to documentation, I remind Rhoda Grant that the Government published a huge volume of material in—if my memory serves me correctly—December 2019, which included all the detail around information that was available on the procurement process and development of the contract with Ferguson's. As I have indicated in my answers today, the Scottish Government, CMAL and Ferguson's all commit to fully

supporting any investigation that is properly undertaken under the auspices of the Auditor General.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I very much share the concerns that have been expressed by Graham Simpson, Alasdair Allan and Rhoda Grant. We were told by ministers that everything was out in the open and that the Government had nothing to hide, so why is it that we are only finding out about this now? What does it say about the oversight function within this Scottish Government?

John Swinney: As I set out in my answer to Rhoda Grant, the Government published a huge volume of material in 2019, which covered all aspects of the procurement process. Obviously, specific points have been raised with us about information to which Ferguson's had access, which ministers did not previously know was the case. That is why we have taken the steps that we have taken in raising the issues with Audit Scotland today to enable it to make a judgment about the issues that are raised in the BBC documentary.

The Government wants to make sure that any question that is raised in this regard is properly and fully considered as part of the analysis that should properly be undertaken on the awarding of a contract, if concerns of this type are raised.

Point of Order

17:03

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I wonder whether you could outline to those of us who represent Moray and the Highlands how we could encourage the Scottish Government to provide a statement or, hopefully, a full debate on the future of maternity services in Moray. You will be aware that—*[Interruption.]*

Scottish National Party members are saying to raise it—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, members. We will hear Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I am sorry. We have the public health minister laughing and saying that this is not a point of order. I really hope that she comes back with more than laughter, because no one in Moray and no one in the Highlands and Islands is laughing about this issue—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): Will the member take an intervention? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: I am sure that all members of this Parliament are firmly committed to the idea that all voices are heard in this chamber, but I would prefer to hear one voice at a time. Could we hear Mr Ross? Thank you.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful, Presiding Officer. You will be aware that, at the Parliamentary Bureau this morning, the Scottish Conservatives proposed that the Scottish Government should dedicate time this week to debating the issue. That follows the amendment that I tried to make to the business on 28 June, because, as we know, NHS Grampian announced its plans for model 4 on 1 July.

At that time, the Minister for Parliamentary Business, George Adam, assured us that there would be opportunities for the Parliament to debate and scrutinise plans for model 4. Indeed, at the time, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care said to the BBC:

"I intend updating the Scottish Parliament as soon as is practicable at the beginning of the next session."

We are now just a couple of weeks away from the end of the session, and the Scottish Government confirmed this morning that it would not include time this week to discuss the issue, which continues to cause great concern for mothers-to-be and families in Moray.

However, today, NHS Highland looked at the proposal to transfer more Moray women to Raigmore hospital, to give birth in Inverness. The Keep MUM group, which has campaigned so hard for the restoration of maternity services in Moray, called that meeting “tone deaf”. It said that what it heard at the meeting of NHS Highland does not encourage it that anything is going to happen at any time soon.

Will you advise us, therefore, Presiding Officer, as to how we can get some statement or answers—some response on the issue—from the Scottish Government?

To the SNP members who do not want the issue to be debated, I say, please remember that, more than four years ago, we were promised that the downgrading of maternity services in Moray would be temporary, and for a year. It is now more than four years later. We need answers. We need a response. We need to hear from the SNP Scottish Government what it is going to do to ensure that we can get maternity services back at Dr Gray’s hospital, to deliver for the women and families of Moray.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ross, including for the advance notice. It is the case that whether a ministerial statement is to be proposed is a matter for the Scottish Government rather than a point of order for me to rule on. However, your comments are now on the record.

Motion without Notice

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, to bring decision time forward to now.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time shall begin at 5.07 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:07

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-06063.3, in the name of Donald Cameron, which seeks to amend motion S6M-06063, in the name of Angus Robertson, on "Scotland's Population—Meeting the Needs of our Communities, Economy and Public Services", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:07

Meeting suspended.

17:12

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on amendment S6M-06063.3, in the name of Donald Cameron. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-06063.3, in the name of Donald Cameron, is: For 31, Against 77, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-06063.2, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-06063, in the name of Angus Robertson, on “Scotland’s Population—Meeting the Needs of our Communities, Economy and Public Services”, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-06063.2, in the name of Daniel Johnson, is: For 41, Against 67, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-06063, in the name of Angus Robertson, on “Scotland’s Population—Meeting the Needs of our Communities, Economy and Public Services”, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)

McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-06063, in the name of Angus Robertson, is: For 79, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that the Parliament has previously endorsed a motion calling for the development of a differentiated, more flexible migration policy tailored to

meet Scotland's specific needs; celebrates the social, economic and cultural contribution made to Scotland by those who have chosen to live here; notes that the UK Government's own immigration advisers concluded in 2019 that the UK migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems that remote communities experience and recommended the establishment of a pilot scheme to support migration to rural areas, and that this recommendation was accepted by the then Home Secretary in a statement to the House of Commons in July 2019; further notes the distinct demographic challenges that Scotland faces, and that all of Scotland's population growth is projected to come from migration; notes that the independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population concluded in its 2019 report that the demographic challenges for rural areas would be exacerbated by the ending of freedom of movement; further notes that the Fresh Talent scheme introduced in 2005 was a differentiated migration approach for Scotland, and calls on the UK Government to accept the Rural Visa Pilot proposal, which has been jointly developed by the Scottish Government, rural and island local authorities and rural employers, and to engage constructively to support the delivery of Rural Visa Pilots that meet the needs of rural communities.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Adopt a Road

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-05590, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on adopt a road. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, please.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes calls on local authorities to consider introducing the Adopt a Road initiative, which, it understands, works successfully across North America; understands that such a scheme offers individuals, organisations, companies and volunteer groups the opportunity to contribute to their community and local area by taking responsibility for a length of road, usually in the vicinity of the sponsoring group or person, from one junction to the next and that, while no money changes hands, the sponsor agrees to keep the sponsored road free of litter and reasonably clean, contacting the local authority to uplift any refuse gathered, having given at least 24 hours' notice; further understands that such a scheme recognises sponsors through the provision of signs on the sponsored road, which are designed, provided and erected by the local authority; understands that the programme originated in the United States when an engineer for the Department of Transportation sought the help of local groups to sponsor the cleaning of sections of the highway, as litter pick-up by the local authority was too expensive to undertake as often as was necessary; is aware of reports that, as of 2021, more than 120,000 California residents have participated in the initiative to remove litter and graffiti, plant trees and wildflowers, and clear vegetation along over 15,000 shoulder miles of roadside, and notes the view that such a scheme could be successfully piloted in North Ayrshire and other local authorities across Scotland.

17:21

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank everyone who signed my motion to secure debating time in the chamber. I also thank colleagues who will speak in the debate this evening.

There is no denying that Scotland has a massive societal problem when it comes to fly-tipping and littering—sadly, probably more so than most other countries in north-west Europe. Unsurprisingly, the majority of Scots believe that litter is in some way a huge problem in their own community. The negative impact of litter is well known. It is not only bad for the health of the environment but is proven to adversely affect people's mental health.

Although we have seen promising measures delivered by the Scottish Government in recent years, such as the ban on single-use plastic items, which came into force on 1 June, it is obvious that littering remains a challenge as long as some people—a lot of people, unfortunately—thoughtlessly and selfishly throw things away

without regard for others or the environment. According to Keep Scotland Beautiful, 50 tonnes of litter are abandoned on Scotland's roadsides each month, and litter was recorded as being present on 83 per cent of motorways and A roads.

A high level of littering tends to lead to a vicious circle, with the detriment to the cleanliness of an area also having a significant and lasting impact. A landmark 1990 study showed that littering more than doubles in areas that already have litter, and some people who are usually inclined to bin their waste consider it acceptable to leave rubbish in areas that appear rundown and dirty.

I welcome recent cross-party efforts to reduce littering. I was glad to read that Murdo Fraser's proposed member's bill to reduce the incidence of fly-tipping is expected to be incorporated into a Government bill following a meeting with the minister.

Littering can be deterred to a modest degree by the threat and enforcement of fines. However, today I wish to focus on more positive solutions and the factors that Zero Waste Scotland identified as the most important in cutting the problem: a sense of personal responsibility; awareness of environmental consequences; and feelings of community.

The strategy is well tested in areas across the world. For instance, Rwanda has the national holiday of Umuganda, which takes place on the last Saturday of every month for nationwide community work from 8 am to 11 am, resulting in a notable improvement in the cleanliness of the country. In North America, the adopt-a-highway concept, which began in 1980s Texas, has been another huge success and has become national practice across much of the US and Canada.

The adopt-a-highway scheme started when volunteers rallied to keep the state's highways clear of litter, with community service clubs adopting a 2-mile stretch of motorway and taking responsibility for its clean-up. As the idea spread, companies started taking responsibility for clean-ups in return for small advertising signs along the road to recognise their efforts. As of 2021, more than 120,000 California residents have participated in the initiative, removing litter and graffiti, planting trees and wildflowers and clearing vegetation along more than 15,000 shoulder miles of roadside.

That example shows that mobilising communities, community organisations and local businesses is a most powerful remedy to the social factors driving littering, along with anti-litter education and legislation. Such initiatives are more than just a temporary fix; they encourage respect for the environment by building a sense of civic pride and belonging.

I have supported and encouraged the road adoption locally for years, but sadly with little success. I was delighted, therefore, when in November last year, after I contacted North Ayrshire Council about road adoption—not for the first time—the council approved a similar adopt-a-spot initiative as part of its streetscene volunteering strategy, which followed the evaluation of an initial pilot involving a volunteer group in Irvine that was shown to have significant benefits.

Similar to schemes in North America, the programme has been designed to encourage and support individuals, local businesses, schools and other groups. Each carries out voluntary litter picks in a community space of their choice, as part of a sustained effort to engage local communities and bring about environmental improvements. The chosen spot will be in a mutually agreeable area within council ownership, such as a street, park, beach, path, business frontage or route to a local school. A simple application form is supplied electronically or by post for the volunteers to complete. It is then up to the council to review the spot and assess its appropriateness and safety. Once that has been agreed, volunteers informally adopt the spot while the local authority provides them with the appropriate equipment such as litter pickers, plastic bags, gloves and high-vis vests.

North Ayrshire Council also envisages using its mapping portal to record areas that are still available for adoption to help to co-ordinate the existing network of volunteers who regularly collect litter. The litter-picking work is recognised by the council through social media and an appropriate sign in the spot where the litter was picked to highlight that partnership work. The scheme will hopefully improve civic pride and empowerment in our communities and gradually lead to a change in littering behaviour. Businesses and charities can also participate and gain recognition by taking ownership of a spot.

I believe that similar initiatives could be piloted in other local authorities across Scotland, and it would be helpful if the Scottish Government could encourage them, not least by including provisions for such schemes in its national litter and fly-tipping strategy. I urge every member present to write to their respective councils and encourage them to pilot their own adopt-a-road initiatives.

It is clear that a range of actions will be necessary to tackle Scotland's shameful litter problem. The adopt-a-road initiative has been trialled across North America for decades and has proven to be hugely successful in removing countless tonnes of roadside rubbish. Public acknowledgment of volunteers' contributions helps to invoke people's civic pride and creates a greater sense of personal responsibility, which are

concepts that are found to be among the most effective ways of changing littering behaviours.

I hope that the successful pilot of adopt a spot in North Ayrshire will inspire more local authorities across Scotland to successfully take forward similar schemes.

I look forward to hearing other contributions to the debate.

17:26

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I start by thanking my colleague Kenneth Gibson for bringing the debate to Parliament.

Fans of the hit TV show “Seinfeld” may recall the episode when the eccentric Kramer announces with great delight that he has become the proud father of a 1-mile stretch of road and that he is part of the solution. In typical fashion, he decides that he will do everything himself and will even bring the roadside home to clean in the sink. Unfortunately, the episode ends in disaster after he decides to widen the lanes and spills flammable paint thinner everywhere. Civic pride is important, although perhaps not in that instance.

Prior to being elected as an MSP, I was a councillor at South Ayrshire Council. I was always extremely frustrated by the litter that was left on the side of the roads, our beaches and our streets, the anger created by and, sometimes, the public perception of litter.

As a councillor, I received many angry emails from constituents who walked past litter, got their phones out and took a photo, emailing a complaint to me about the lack of council litter services. I genuinely believe that some people have an expectation that, because they pay council tax and therefore pay people to lift the litter for them, they do not need to lift litter and have no responsibility themselves. The blame seems to be put on the council instead of the real culprits.

South Ayrshire Council covers close to 400 square miles, and in my constituency Barassie, Troon, Prestwick and Ayr all have a large beach. In the summer, our beaches are destination points for thousands to flock to and enjoy the sun. Our beaches have wooden footprint signs that say “Leave nothing here but footprints”, but unfortunately that is never what happens.

I remember one extremely sunny day when my daughter was at the beach with my mother while I was working. I went down after 5 pm and there were thousands of people on the beach and in the water. The entire beach was littered with empty drink cartons, soiled nappies and discarded towels, buckets and spades. I was a councillor at the time and knew only too well that we had issues with water quality at Ayr beach and that, if that

litter was not collected, it would all be washed out to sea that night.

I put out a call on my social media and thankfully around 40 volunteers turned up with under an hour’s notice to meet at 6 pm at the beach, once most of the crowds had gone. We removed the rubbish so that it did not go out to sea. It would have been impossible for the council workers to remove all the litter from every beach in South Ayrshire that evening.

As a ward councillor, I also held Ayr town centre blitzes once a month to highlight the problem with litter on private property, which is outwith the council’s responsibility. A group of volunteers and I committed just one hour on a Saturday when we would go to private properties, such as tracks to the train station and private car parks, which many people walk through, and remove litter. In some months, depending on how many volunteers turned up, we collected more than 40 bags of rubbish in one hour. We left Ayr a better place, and we felt better about it.

Many of us have civic pride and want to clean the world, but it should not be left for just a few to do. We must all have civic pride, and the desire and responsibility, to look after not only our communities but our nation, other countries that we visit and, collectively, our world.

Kenneth Gibson has already explained how the scheme works. An individual organisation adopts a small stretch of road, taking responsibility for picking up the litter and keeping it clean. Those organisations can contribute to the community and businesses can get promotion and advertising out of it.

There has been huge uptake of the scheme in the USA, with every state having an adopt-a-road programme. The state of Texas led the way with its slogan “Don’t mess with Texas”, encouraging people to put their litter in the bin and take pride in their area. As Kenneth Gibson said, 120,000 people in California have taken part, removing litter and graffiti and planting trees and wildflowers along more than 15,000 miles of roadside.

As I have said, it is not realistic to expect the council to clean up every bit of litter across its area. I think that the adopt-a-road programme would prove successful in South Ayrshire because it would allow individuals and groups to split up what is a large area, caring for a small part of it. It is a sad sight to drive along a road with plastic bottles and crisp packets lying everywhere. It reflects badly on our area and on the country as a whole when visitors see that.

The people of Scotland have already shown that they will engage with moves to address the problem. In my constituency, Alloway Rotary, the Rotary Club of Ayr, Prestwick Community Council

and the friends of Troon have been doing such work for many years. That demonstrates the community spirit that the people of Scotland have.

I conclude with this quote:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

17:31

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Kenneth Gibson on securing the debate. I have to confess that I was surprised to see Mr Gibson’s name against a motion because he, like me, is not a great user of the parliamentary motions procedure, but this one is really worth it, I think. I was amused to be chosen by my whips’ office to take part in the debate. I think it says something about the whips. They must have just looked at the title “Adopt a Road”, seen the word “Road” and thought, “That’s one for our transport spokesman”. Of course, the motion is not about roads; it is about litter.

The motion—the very long motion, I have to say—concentrates on a scheme in America. After looking up some details about that particular scheme, I would issue a word of caution should we roll it out across Scotland. In an early part of the scheme’s roll-out, the KKK adopted part of a highway. Fortunately, that did not last, and I do not think that we will have that problem here.

I am not convinced that we have to replicate what exists in America because we already have a number of very good schemes that are run by volunteers in various parts of Scotland. I agree with what Siobhian Brown said about the beaches in Ayrshire. My family likes to visit Troon beach so I have been down there quite a lot, when I have often seen litter pickers wearing yellow jackets picking up litter. Such littering is a real shame, because it is a wonderful part of the world.

In my patch of the region that I represent, we have a number of local groups. I have been out a few times with East Kilbride community litter pickers. It was formed during the pandemic in March 2021 and its Facebook group now has 1,700 members. That is a lot of people and they are out every single week, several times a week, in various parts of the town. South Lanarkshire Council supplies them with rubbish bags and they then tell the council where the bags are and it comes and picks them up. It really works.

When I have been out with the group, I have come across all kinds of odd things. It is mainly drink-related—cans and bottles; something called Dragon Soop features quite a lot. Once I saw a sofa that had been dumped, but I could not get that in a litter bag. The group has found some

really odd things, such as a 1970 crisp packet and an inflatable pink flamingo.

Kenneth Gibson: Graham Simpson reminds me of when I was first elected in 2007 and asked the council to clear up the Haylie Brae in Largs. No one had mentioned it to me, but I had noticed that there was a lot of rubbish there, including, I found out, some cans displaying what were called Tennent’s lager lovelies from the 1980s, meaning that the area had not been cleared for some 20 years. It is now kept clean by the local authority.

The point that I want to make is that the scheme is not about being the only scheme; it is about being additional to other schemes. It gives people a sense of ownership over a wee part of the road. I have organised and participated in many beach cleans—I imagine that most if not all members have done so. The scheme is about giving a wee bit more pride to a specific community in a specific area and trying to ensure that a bit more long-term work is carried out to clear up a specific location.

Graham Simpson: Kenneth Gibson makes a good point. This is not one size fits all. I am merely saying that there are already schemes out there. There are a lot of people who want to clean up their area, and they are doing it with council support. In my patch, North Lanarkshire Council helps a number of local groups. Time does not allow me to name them, but good work is going on. If there is a council out there that wants to set up such a scheme, and if it works, good.

I can go litter picking to an area or a road that has been done—I know that because I have been out there a couple of weeks earlier—and it is just full of rubbish. I find that frustrating. I think, “Why do people do this? Why do people mess up the areas that they live in?” That is the problem; the problem is not the community-minded people who clear it up. We have to tackle the problem at source.

I say well done to Kenneth Gibson for bringing the debate, and I look forward to hearing from other members.

17:37

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Before I proceed, I have to say that I am disappointed that the previous speaker had to be whipped to speak in this delightful debate—he made such a delightful contribution. Members’ business debates should be free and easy and should not require whipping. I just wanted to raise that with the member, knowing that he is an experienced politician.

I thank my colleague Kenneth Gibson for bringing forward this motion for debate, particularly

as it has introduced me—and I suspect other members—to the adopt-a-road concept, which is completely new to me. I am aware of the adopt-a-station programme; indeed, I am the sponsor of a planter at Gorebridge station. That arrangement, which is of some years' standing, took a substantial effort by local residents and negotiations with Network Rail, including on issues of safety, a matter that I will return to with regard to the adopt-a-road scheme.

I also endorse everything that has been said about littering. It infuriates me—and I have to say that is not always caused by local people. People just drop stuff out of car windows and then drive on. Of course, for some people in society, leaving sofas by the side of the road is almost essential. I do not know why.

I have noted the experience in North America; in particular, I have taken California, Texas and British Columbia as random samples. Their programmes are not identical, but they are similar. In the Californian adopt-a-highway programme, individuals can donate materials, equipment and services, and they can also help prevent pollutants. Seventy-three per cent of the people involved are volunteers and 27 per cent are sponsors.

In Texas—only in Texas—they have the wonderful motto, “Don't mess with Texas”. Any group can apply to their local co-ordinators, where they are provided with—and here I come back to the safety issue that I mentioned earlier—safety vests, which they call “trash bags”, and safety training. There are also signposts that identify the adopters, so the people involved get a bit of credit for what they are doing.

The rules in British Columbia are different. Participants between the ages of 12 and 16 must be supervised, which just seems common sense, but you also have to give a 10-year commitment, which is a lot to ask of volunteers. As we know, people can be dead keen at the beginning and then they start to drift away like the melting snow.

In principle, I think that the programme is a good idea. I can think of several communities in Midlothian, South Tweeddale and Lauderdale that would express an interest in it; of course, I am not going to name them and land them in it, but I know that they already take good pride in their communities. Such a move might also encourage motorists to attend to the 20mph speed limit through many of those communities, particularly if there are signs identifying community engagement and the need to keep the area tidy.

I want to take the idea to both councils in my constituency—Midlothian Council and the Borders Council—but I also come back to what for me is the key issue: safety. It is why I find the

requirements in Texas of particular interest. It is one matter picking up litter in a park, but doing so beside a busy road is another matter entirely. Moreover, such a scheme must neither supplant nor replace the duties that it is incumbent upon the local authority to carry out as a result of the council tax that we pay. It is an add-on.

With that caveat about safety, I will, as I have said, be contacting both my councils. Indeed, I have already thought of slogans like “Don't mess with Texas”. Please bear with me, as they are only works in progress, but the ones that I would suggest are “Don't blight Borders” and “Don't mess up Midlothian”.

17:41

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I thank and congratulate Kenneth Gibson for bringing this debate to Parliament. This is a great idea, and I hope that members will take it on board with their councils, as Mr Gibson has asked us to do.

The scheme focuses on the important single issue of adopting a road to promote and encourage civic pride in how our communities look, but it also comes at a good time, as the Government puts the finishing touches to its national planning framework. We hope that the NPF will contain some detail on how we better deal with the wider problem of dereliction in our cities, towns and villages: the derelict empty buildings—mostly empty shops—and the derelict and long abandoned parcels of land. I am sure that all of us will recognise the problem in our own communities, and it extends beyond the litter issue. Kenneth Gibson's proposal therefore fits neatly, in my view, with the ideas coming down the line via NPF4 as we consider what our communities could look like in the future.

This stretches back many years now, but one of the most frustrating things that I have had to put up with in my term of office is our ability—or lack of it—to take effective action against owners so that they make an effort to clean up what they own in our town centres. Empty shops are often left to deteriorate; the signs fall off; graffiti and posters get stuck to the windows; and weeds abound. A little bit of effort might have prevented that sort of thing from happening.

I also know of many vacant parcels of land, especially in the urban setting, that are simply abandoned and left to rot. Inevitably we turn to the council to step in and try to help, but I think that it is unfair to expect the public purse to continually bail out the private sector. After all, it has the responsibility of maintaining its own properties and land. The amenity powers under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 simply do

not do the job, because the burden can still fall on the public purse even if cases are successfully pursued.

One of the biggest issues is that we do not know who the owners actually are. They can be local people, but often they can be fund management companies that, frankly, do not give a jot whether our towns and villages look nice. I think that it is time that they did.

Something needs to change. Perhaps we need stronger legislation, but the initiative that we are talking about might be the beginning of a new process that can turn these problems around voluntarily. We can start with the adopt-a-road idea, but what about going a little bit further if it is a success? What about adopting a street, an unused piece of land, a roundabout and even the “Welcome” signage for our towns? The list could grow, and we could engage the business sector to sponsor these sites in return for advertising space in the areas that are being adopted.

Over the summer, I travelled around Ireland and Scotland from Dingle in county Kerry to Dingwall in Ross-shire, and I was struck by the cleanliness of many of the features in the towns and villages through which I passed. Clearly local pride was to the fore, with businesses often working in partnership as key sponsors. Streets were clean and litter free; the signage coming into the towns was attractive; and even the roundabouts as we entered were landscaped and had some public artwork installed. It was all very impressive.

I recently put some of these ideas to my own council, East Ayrshire, and I think that it is fair to say that I have a job of work on my hands to persuade it to embrace some of this approach, particularly the elements involving the local road network. However, I will keep at it until it sees the light.

This initiative that Kenneth Gibson has brought to our attention is a great opportunity for our communities to play a direct part in making their areas look as good as possible. Local businesses must play their part, too, and I hope that the idea will take root and that we will see continual year-on-year improvements that will make us all proud of the cities, towns and villages that we call home.

17:45

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): I am sorry that I have shifted to a different seat, Presiding Officer; my card did not work at the desk where I was sitting, which I will note.

I congratulate Kenny Gibson on securing this members’ business debate. I also thank the members who contributed; I welcome their views.

Littering is unacceptable, whatever the circumstances, and there is no excuse for such behaviour anywhere in Scotland. Cleaning up litter costs public bodies £53 million a year, so any suggestion about how to tackle this scourge on our local communities is welcome. The issue is incredibly important for our citizens and for our environmental goals.

From listening to the views that were expressed, it is clear that tackling litter—particularly roadside litter—is an important issue for constituencies across the country. Litter can be tackled only through a shared approach and through collaboration between all stakeholders across Scotland to encourage litter prevention and behaviour change. Exploring the use of flexible and innovative interventions in support of litter prevention and removal is vital, and so is sharing best practice from within Scotland and internationally, as we have heard.

The enthusiasm that has been shown in the debate is testament to the strength of collaboration, volunteering and the empowerment of communities. In my speech, I will make clear the Scottish Government’s views on litter, as well as reiterating the value and importance of innovative approaches and volunteering.

Countless individuals and community groups clear up our beautiful country all year round, and I take the opportunity to thank them for their efforts and commitment to preserving our national environmental quality. The Scottish Government values the massive contribution that volunteers make to people’s lives. We recognise that they give their time to volunteer and make things better for others. Volunteering is good for the volunteer too, as it builds skills, enhances employability and supports mental wellbeing. Across Scotland, volunteers make vital contributions every day to their families, communities and society as a whole. They do it because they care and want to help and support others.

Throughout Scotland, people are volunteering and contributing on the issues that matter to them. “Scotland’s Volunteering Action Plan” will increase awareness of volunteers’ vital role in the delivery of services across Scotland in health and social care, services for children and families, and sport. Volunteering is powerful and it matters.

As the debate is focused on roadside litter, I clarify that the trunk road network is maintained on behalf of the Scottish ministers by Transport Scotland through contracts with a number of operating companies and design, build, finance and operate concessionaires. Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, litter collection is the local authority’s responsibility even when the road is a trunk road, with the exception of motorways. It is for locally elected representatives

to decide how best to deliver services in their communities and to respond to litter on public land.

However, I understand the important role that stakeholder collaboration and awareness raising can play in the battle against littering. Since 2016, Keep Scotland Beautiful has co-ordinated a roadside litter campaign called “Give your litter a lift, take it home”—I do not know how that sits with Christine Grahame’s slogans—which raises awareness of the scale and impact of roadside litter and encourages road users to do the right thing. It is rolling out new materials to deliver its key message.

The Scottish Government is committed to doing its bit to tackle litter. Scotland’s deposit return scheme will launch next August. By giving plastic and glass bottles and other containers—as identified by members—a value of 20p, we expect to see a big reduction in littering of such items.

That is not all that we are doing. Earlier this year, I launched two important consultations. The first was on our waste route map to 2025, which is a strategic plan to deliver Scotland’s zero waste and circular economy ambitions. It sets out how we intend to deliver our system-wide, comprehensive vision for Scotland’s circular economy. The second was on our proposals for legislation—for a circular economy bill—to give us the powers that we need to deliver on our ambitions.

The circular economy bill proposes to introduce a new penalty for littering from vehicles. Respondents to the recent consultation were asked whether they agreed with the introduction of a new system that stipulates that the registered keeper of a vehicle is ultimately responsible for criminal offences such as littering from or in relation to their vehicle. Such an enabling power would help to reduce the tonnes of litter that need to be cleared from our roads each month.

Of course, legislation is only part of our toolkit; we need to consider all the policies and levers that we have at our disposal. We will publish a new national litter and fly-tipping strategy later this year, which will group key actions under three key themes of behaviour change, services and infrastructure, and enforcement. A key objective of the strategy will be to develop and adopt a shared approach by stakeholders to litter prevention and behaviour change across Scotland. The new strategy will also aim to empower community groups to take action to tackle littering behaviour at a local level.

I recognise the amazing contribution of volunteers. We want to ensure that everyone who wishes to can contribute to their local community and beyond through volunteering. Volunteering

can help us with some of the biggest challenges that we are facing, and it brings benefits for volunteers who experience disadvantage and exclusion.

It is also important to note that the new national litter and fly-tipping strategy will frame the dialogue around littered or fly-tipped materials within the context of a leakage to the circular economy, which is a loss to Scotland’s wider economy.

While we recognise the importance of litter picks and other valuable citizen-led activity, such as the one that is suggested at the heart of the motion, we are striving to create a Scotland where the need for such activity in the future is eliminated.

Meeting closed at 17:52.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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